

Microthemes

A microtheme is “a very short piece of formal, closed- form writing usually less than 250 words” (Bean, p. 111)

Microthemes:

- Help students learn and practice particular ways of thinking and writing
- Can be read and responded to quickly (especially if they are ungraded, or credit/half/no credit)
- Are short enough that you can share good examples (with student permission) via Canvas, or in class.

Microthemes can support specific skills, either on their own or as practice for aspects larger pieces. Bean, Drenk, and Lee describe four kinds of microthemes:

- **Summary Microtheme:** Students write a 100-200 word summary of an article or other texts.

They identify the structure of the article, identify the relationships of ideas and details, and condense the whole, eliminating details and retaining main ideas.

- **Data-Provided Microtheme:** You give students a data set and ask them to discover a general thesis or observation on the data set.

This exercise improves deductive reasoning and may prepare them to write the discussion section of a scientific paper.

- **Thesis-Support Microtheme:** Students take a position on a topic, make an assertion about the topic and support the assertion concisely with appropriate details, empirical evidence, reasoning, and/or appeals.

This exercise not only promotes critical thinking but also reminds students of what is and is not known in the discipline.

- **Quandary-Posing Microtheme:** Students use scientific, social scientific, or humanities principles to explain a problematic situation or occurrence, writing in language that an ordinary person could understand.

This exercise gives them practice in communicating with non-specialist audiences while putting abstract or complex concepts into everyday language.

References:

Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. 2nd ed., Jossey-Bass, 2011.

Bean, John C., et al. “Microtheme Strategies for Developing Cognitive Skills.” *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, vol. 12, 1982, pp. 27–38.