

# Writing to Learn: Rationale and Activities

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# Overview

## What is Writing to Learn (WTL)?

The premise of WTL is that ALL writing promotes active learning. Courses which regularly give students opportunities for ungraded, impromptu, low-stakes writing give them opportunities to rephrase course content in their own words, to make tentative connections, to hypothesize, to inventory current knowledge, to make ultimately useful mistakes, and to articulate questions. Ungraded writing also temporarily relieves student obsession with surface correctness. Students therefore begin to see writing as a tool they can use, rather than as just an occasion for numerous small failures.

There are two key factors for using WTL successfully:

- Regular opportunities to write (at least once a week), and
- Regular use of some in-class time devoted to this writing

Note: Virtually all of the examples in this handout lend themselves to brief, in-class writing, as well as to longer discussions written out of class.

## Traditional writing assignments vs. Writing-to-Learn activities

Traditional Assignments:	Writing-to-Learn Activities:
Assigned as homework (often a relatively lengthy paper or report)	Assigned impromptu, often completed in class, may also be homework, often short (less than a page)
Process → product (student's intellectual work finished when the product is turned in)	Process → more process (writing = thinking = more thought)
Grade in A/B/C/D/F basis by teacher (i.e. heavy investment of teacher's time)	Ungraded, but credit is given or not given based on clear criteria (i.e. less formal grading by teachers)
Writing to test (students writing/thinking is right or wrong)	Writing to think (intellectual engagement is a goal; errors are a natural part of learning)
Students should be sure about what they write ("What's your thesis?")	Allows students to voice and explore questions

Students see writing assignments as testing or penalty situations

Students see writing as a tool, a way to help them think about new material

## WTL activities for use in class

### Opening and closing class with a question

#### *Opening class*

At the beginning of class, pose a question related to a topic you have planned for the class to discuss.

For example, ask the class to write the following question: "How would you evaluate the evidence used to support argument X?" or "How would you describe the tone of essay X?"

The five-minute writing will serve as a warm-up and provoke students to do some thinking, even if they only discover that they don't quite know what "tone" means. You can develop the discussion from there.

#### *Closing class*

At the end of class, ask a question that can provide a starting place for the next class. For example, "What did you learn today about theatrical elements in act III of Hamlet?" or "What questions were left unanswered for you in our class discussion of the kinds of tissue in the human body?"

### Three points and question (during or at the end of class)

During or at the end of a lecture, have students write down three things they understand and one question they have.

If you use this during lecture, responses can be used to start a discussion and help you check for understanding.

### Interruptions

Ask students to stop and write when you feel they need a moment to focus attention, assimilate information, or articulate a question. Use these short writings to refocus class discussion.

### Anticipations

Give students the beginning or the end of a paragraph, story, case study or problem.

Give them fifteen minutes to write what follows or what leads up to the statements.

This brief exercise, which can be used for in-class group work, helps students do practice the kind of goal-directed predicting and planning that skilled writers do.

## **Write and Pass**

Students record their response to a certain question.

They then pass the response to the next person in the row or circle.

The next person revises, critiques, or responds in some specific way to what the first student wrote.

The response sheet is then passed to a third student, who responds. Eventually the first student gets their paper back with all the responses or revisions.

The teacher may or may not collect the sheets.

This exercise is ungraded.

## **Class Minutes**

Assign a class scribe for the day who will be responsible for summarizing class discussion and activities during the first five minutes of the next day's class.

## **Short answer quizzes**

Ask students to write a short answer question from their own reading or class discussion. You may ask the students to explain a process, summarize a point, define a term, or apply a concept.

## **Essay exams**

Give students the opportunity to learn how to synthesize and organize information quickly by administering essay exams. Students need to learn how to take these exams, just as they learn how to write other forms—such as the lab report or an editorial. You may take time to discuss successful essay exam strategies. Before the exam, provide students with the sample question and discuss the characteristics of a good paper.

# WTL activities for use in or outside of class

## Journals

Students may be asked to respond to assigned readings, class discussions, or clinical experiences in a journal format.

The teacher identifies the goals of the journal assignment, the appropriate way of approaching the entries (how often, how long, what format), and the criteria for evaluation. Journal entries are often minimally graded during the term (check, check plus, check minus), and then at the end of the term the student writes as a cover letter assessing the journal according to the specified criteria. Students may be asked to suggest a grade for their own journals and identify their best entries. This self-assessment not only encourages students to take stock of their own learning but also assists the teacher in assigning a final evaluation grade for the journal. (See WIC handout on journals and logs.)

## Microthemes

A microtheme is an essay so short it can be typed on a 5x8 note card. Microtheme developers John C. Bean, Dean Drenk, and F.D. Lee note the advantages of the assignment: "Capable of being graded rapidly and thus adaptable to large classes, microthemes can be designed to promote growth in specific thinking skills."

Microthemes may be graded (quickly!) for individual credit or used as a step in the process toward a larger project. The teacher might give feedback by photocopying several of the best and distributing them to the class. (Assignment adapted from "Microtheme Strategies for Developing Cognitive Skills" in *Teaching Writing in All Disciplines*, ed. C. Williams Griffin. Jossey-Bass, 1982.)

Types of microthemes include: Summary Microtheme; Thesis-Support Microtheme; Data-Provided Microtheme; and Quandary-Posing Microtheme.

### *Summary Microtheme*

Students write a 100-200 word summary of an article or other piece of writing. The student must identify the structure of the article, identify the hierarchical relationships of ideas and details, and condense the whole, eliminating details and retaining main ideas.

This exercise gives them practice in identifying claims and main ideas, in writing concisely, and in writing objectively.

### *Thesis-Support Microtheme*

Students take a position on a topic, making an assertion about the topic and supporting the assertions concisely with appropriate details, empirical evidence, reasoning, and/or appeals to authority.

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

### *Data-Provided Microtheme*

Students are provided with a data set and are asked 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.

### *Quandary-Posing Microtheme*

Students use scientific, social scientific, or humanities principles to explain a problematic situation or occurrence, writing in language that someone outside the field could understand.

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

## **Cubing**

Cubing is a form of directed freewrite in which students consider a topic from six different aspects or perspectives, each representing the face of a cube. Students write for a minute or so on each perspective:

- Describe X.
- Analyze X. What are its parts? Where did it come from? What is its purpose?
- Compare X to something else. What is it similar to or different from?
- Associate X with other things. What does it make you think of?
- Apply X. What are its uses?
- Argue for or against X.

## **Looping**

Looping is a form of directed freewriting designed to improve focus on a topic.



Students are told: Write for 2 minutes on your topic (or a question selected by the teacher). Stop. Review what you wrote and underline the most interesting or surprising word or thought or sentence you wrote. Copy what you underlined and start your next 2 minute freewrite with the selected word, thought, or sentence and write from there. This can be repeated four or five times.

## **Rogierian Argument**

Have students write a Rogierian argument that seeks common ground and accurately describes the opposing view.

## **Concept metaphors, models, and definitions**

Ask students to think through a concept by creating a metaphor, building a model, or creating a definition for it. For example, in a dentistry class, students may create a metaphor for "teeth" (teeth are crystal castles). Build a conceptual model for the structures of caries and write a definition for decay. Students may use the metaphor to build a theory about their experience.

## **Study/exam questions**

Ask students to write their own study question, "exam" question or word problem on the material being covered and to work together to answer them.

Alternately, collect exam questions and give extra credit to any students whose questions are good enough that you use them in a test.

## **Reading responses**

Ask students to respond to readings. For example:

1. Summarize, as briefly as possible, what you have read
2. Describe how the reading has made you feel, and explain *\*why\** whenever possible.
3. What are your other responses to what you have read?
4. What has this reading made you think about?
5. What has the reading suggested you might want to write about?

## **Observation reports**

Ask students to do a bit of field research, taking careful field notes on whatever they choose to observe: a physical object,

person, animal, process, event or phenomenon. Students can then compare these notes and question one another about what may be missing.

## WTL prompts for students

The prompts are meant as a resource for students who are struggling with open-ended or recurring writing-to-learn activities and would benefit from more guidelines or suggestions. Additionally, these suggestions could serve as inspiration for designing in-class writing-to-learn activities.

### To understand course materials

#### *Write what you know*

Based on your reading or in this lecture, write one thing (notion, concept, idea, or part) which you are sure about right now.

Continuation: Talk about what makes you sure of this one thing.

#### *Ask question and how you might answer it*

Write one question that you still have. Continuation:

Write one way/process/procedure that you could follow to try to answer this question.

#### *Write all your questions*

Write all the questions you have at this point.

Continuation: Talk about which one(s) you should answer first.

#### *Write the story of your thinking*

Write the story of your thinking on this particular concept or idea or paradox. What did you first think when exposed to this notion? Then what did you think? Then what? Try to get everything down here—your confusions as well as your understandings.

#### *Compare things*

Explain how X is different from (or similar to) Y.

#### *Create a visual*

Draw some visual picture or representation (a graph or diagram or flow chart or ?) of a concept or notion or process.

Continuation: Explain how the visual should be “read.”

### *Teach a peer*

Explain concept A to a student who missed class or couldn't do the reading due to illness.

### *Write a letter*

Choose a real person to write a letter to about your subject. Experiment with audiences of varying backgrounds and levels of expertise in your subject area. Try writing to a precocious five-year-old who would need an especially clear and simple, yet not condescending, explanation.

Write as you'd talk, and try not to be long-winded.

### *Create an audience*

Pick a fictional or historical character or imagine a person to whom you might want to explain a difficult concept, someone who might be anything from your worst possible to your best possible audience. Begin by describing the person in detail. Include the person's background, values, and habitual way of thinking. Briefly explain why it would be useful or helpful for that person to understand the concept. Then, with this portrait of your audience in mind, explain the concept.

### *Predict a result*

Predict the results of a process or procedure. Explain what goes into your educated guess.

Continuation: Explain what could throw off your educated guess.

### *Create a test*

Read over your notes and design a difficult test for yourself. Several hours or days later, take the test. Include an essay question.

### *Create a tree*

Put a topic at the top or bottom of the page and branch into subtopics.

### *Define a key concept or term*

Pick a key concept or term in your course, and try to define it fully, giving illustrations.

### *Show off a topic*

Pick any topic, and write down everything you know about it, no matter how obscure or irrelevant. This is a good way to get started on assigned papers or to study for a test.

## **To remember and reflect on classes/labs**

### *Condense your notes*

Read over your notes from a class; write down what you think were truly the main ideas, the organizing ideas in that lecture or discussion.

### *Write an end-of-class observation*

Immediately after class, jot down your impressions of what went on and why the instructor organized the class that way. If you have any confusion, try to explain why or to pinpoint in writing the moment at which your confusion began.

### *Write a lab reflection*

Immediately after lab session, sit down and write about what you did and what the point of it was.

## **To remember and reflect on readings**

### *Predict a reading*

Predict what a reading might say based on its title and your previous experience.

### *Try pre-guessing a chapter*

Before you read a chapter in a text, write about what you imagine the chapter might be about, guessing from its title or from material covered in the preceding chapter. You might also pre-guess a lecture, discussion, or lab.

### *Write a summary*

Write a summary of a lecture, class discussion, seminar, or chapter.

### *Zero in*

Look closely at important passages/details or key concepts

### *Focus on a key word*

Choose a word that seems important to your reading (one that you do not understand or is repeated or otherwise emphasized), and write about all of its associations with anything else in the text or from your experience. Look it up on a dictionary and puzzle over the possible implications of its different meanings.

### *Use mapping with a key word*

Write a key word from the text or lecture in the middle of the page, then build upon it by association, jotting down related words and indicating relations with arrows. Continue until you reach terra incognita.

### *Extract significance*

Take a statement from your reading or a lecture and exhaust its possible meanings.

### *Write a double-entry reading response*

Draw a vertical line down the center of a blank page. In the left column, write interesting quotes from the text or lecture. In the right column, respond positively or negatively to the quote to write a related idea, something you wish to add, or a question raised by the quote or paraphrase.

### *Create a character study*

Begin your analysis of a fictional or historical character by reviewing two or three key passages in the text, then write every detail you can think of about that character, puzzling over which details are the most important or revealing. Pay attention to the way the character is described, what the character says or does, and what other characters say about the character.

### *Use a literary term to aid literary reading*

Choose a literary term (like "point of view" or "foreshadowing") that seems to offer a way into the text. Write a brief definition of the term to see what it can reveal to you about the material you have read.

## **To make connections and push your thinking further**

### *Think in terms of particle, wave, and field*

Look at your subject from three different perspectives. First, consider it as an entity in itself (particle) and describe its essential characteristics. Next, consider it as a part of a process that takes place in time (wave). For example, you might

describes it causes or effects; you might also explain what is required to keep it going. Finally, consider the subject as part of a whole system that affects things around it (field). What are the other components of the system? How are they related?

### *Check your knowledge*

What is a term or concept you don't feel confident of? Write as much as you can. What do you know? What don't you know? Push for clarity.

### *Narrow down your topic*

Write about an idea for two minutes. Stop. Pick a topic sentence from that paragraph and write for another two minutes about that. Again, pick another topic sentence from the second paragraph and write for two more minutes. The longer you do this, the more specific you become about the topic.

### *Grow a problem*

Raise all the questions you have pertaining to a particular concept or assignment. Jot down all the thoughts on it, no matter how disordered and fragmented.

### *Make connections*

Write on every possible way in which new information can be connected to ideas, beliefs, and information you already have.

### *Build contradictions*

State all the oppositions and contradictions in the material you are reading or studying. Argue the pros and cons. Have a debate with yourself.

### *Play the doubting and believing games*

Take an idea that is very hard to accept or believe and pretend to be someone who believes it. What would it be like to believe it? What would you notice? Now take an idea that is comfortable for you, that you really believe, and pretend to be someone who doubts it. Write out as many doubts and arguments against it as you can.

### *Create a metaphor*

Compare something else, and then elaborate on the similarities and differences between the two things, Make it an extreme comparison. Unpacking wild comparisons can yield surprising insights.