

## The Power of Writing for Learning: Short Assignments in Large-Enrollment Classes

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*Caption: Researchers write-to-learn in a CETL workshop (photo by Chris Thaiss)*

The power of writing to deepen thinking and learning has been known by scholars for many centuries. Every researcher, regardless of discipline, knows how the act of trying to turn fleeting perceptions and elusive thoughts into words on a page (or screen) focuses the mind--- and causes both frustration because of the challenge and joy when the right words are found. For at least the past fifty years, researchers have studied this process of “writing as a tool of learning” (Emig, 1977; Light, 2004; Reynolds et al., 2012); assignments that require students to write in order to learn, understand, and apply data and ideas are routinely made in schools at all levels and across all subject areas.

But often university teachers neglect this powerful tool in classes that rise above a certain enrollment—often because of two mistaken assumptions: (1) that the instructor or TA needs to grade and respond to “all that” writing, and (2) that response to writing, when it does occur, must be tedious and time consuming.

*One irony of this neglect in large classes is that in these very environments, where students are less likely to be engaged in their learning because of the impersonality of the setting, the power of writing to focus the mind can be most needed.*

Here are two time-tested ways to introduce writing in large classes *on a regular basis*. Both methods have been applied in many universities. Neither of them requires extensive (or any) feedback from a teacher, although the benefits of both could be enhanced if some feedback is given.

1. **Session Starter**—Before a class begins, ask students to write (for no more than 2-3 minutes) an answer to a question that is relevant to the topic of the lecture or discussion, or that the class session proposes to answer. The goal here is not

a “right answer,” but each student’s focusing on the question and thus priming attention to the content of the class. If you want to increase the value of the exercise, have *each student spend an additional minute reading the response to another student and listening in return.*



*Caption: Writing-to-learn in a large lecture setting (photo by Chris Thaiss)*

2. Class Closer—At the end of the class period, in the final 2-3 minutes, ask students to (a) write the two or three most important ideas that they have learned from the class or (b) write an answer to a question that comes out of the lecture or other activities, perhaps to apply the content to another context, or (c) write a new answer to the question you posed as the “session starter.” The learning goal of any of these tasks is to help students summarize and to use *their own words* to understand what they have heard or participated in. Again, focus is intensified and, therefore, engagement increased.

You (and TAs) can gain insight into your students’ learning if you occasionally collect the “Class Closer” responses and briefly skim some of the responses. Students can do these on paper, but electronic methods are also possible. If you have students post these responses to a Forum on SmartSite (or other LMS platform), all will be there for easy viewing, and you might also ask students on occasion to read what fellow students have written.

Skimming “Class Closer” responses will help you see how students have understood course content and concepts. If there is a pattern of misunderstandings (or, conversely, interesting insights) in the responses, you can use these quick readings to help prepare items to address—or student successes to note—in upcoming classes.

Certainly there are many other ways to assign writing in large classes, and thus use writing’s power as a tool of thinking. I will explore some of these other assignments in later blog posts.

For further information, I recommend John Bean’s excellent *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom* (Jossey Bass, 2011) and the University Writing Program website for

Writing across the Curriculum: <http://writing.ucdavis.edu/programs-and-services/the-workshop-program/>

#### Works Cited

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