**Low-stakes Writing Examples**

<http://writing2.richmond.edu/wac/studqust.html>

<http://nancy-rubin.com/2011/10/11/writing-across-the-curriculum-classroom-activities/>

<https://gustavus.edu/wac/faculty/activities.php>

“Walk-Through” Mini-Research Project, John Bean

<http://wac.colostate.edu/teaching/fullitem.cfm?itemID=20>

**Problem Generating --** Have students generate "problems" from the reading or class discussions. Generating problems is often harder than solving them, and so this activity forces students to articulate key issues or questions. One way to do this might be to have math or physics students take a formula or theorem and create a scenario or word problem which would require using the formula. In a history class, students might write journal entries that consist simply of lists of questions from the outside reading that they would pose to the author of the piece or offer up for class discussion.

**Believing and Doubting** – This activity is a good way to get students to move beyond simple “either/or” binaries in their reading. Ask students in small groups (or as an individual informal writing activity) to identify the main thesis of a course reading and to outline 3 reasons they believe it and 3 reasons they doubt it. In this way, you can jumpstart discussion and encourage students to think more analytically and complexly (rather than just going with their gut reaction).

**Reflective Writing: Applying Key Terms/Concepts to Personal Experience** – To help students understand and apply course concepts, you can have them complete short informal writing assignments…in which they take a key term or idea from their reading and relate it to their personal experience.

**Focused Freewriting**

*Assign a topic for focused freewrite.* Encourage your students to write nonstop for 10-15 minutes (or a time period appropriate for the level of your students), recording all thoughts connected to the topic. Stimulating questions, connections, or misinformation that the students may have about the topic should emerge, so be certain to follow up with small or large group discussion.

**Open Letter Writing**

*Assign students a topic for an open letter.* Encourage them to imagine themselves as that subject while assuming first person point of view to write an open letter to a group (of policy makers; of neighbors; of secondary students) explaining “themselves.” You might choose to assign the entire class the same topic or assign students a variety of topics as review. Follow up with small or large group discussion.

Richard Young, “Taxonomy of Small Genres” <http://wac.colostate.edu/books/young/>

**“Dumb” Question Activity:** Stop after an involved presentation and ask students to imagine that the person next to them was unfamiliar with the material and just walked in. Have the students write down one “dumb” question that this person might ask. (Students often avoid asking questions which appear “dumb”).

**Discussion Tickets:** Tickets: Class discussions of ethical theories are encouraged but restricted to students that bring their points in writing. In other words, points written prior to class and brought to the discussion become a student’s ticket into the discussion.

**Translating Passages**: Ask students to translate crucial passages into their own language as carefully as possible. Be true to meaning, imagery, and tone.

**Three Column Organizers:** On a particular issue, show students how to list in three columns what is interesting, positive, and negative about the idea.

**Third Party Summaries**: As third party observers, students can summarize the major participants’ points of view in a classroom discussion.

**Ethical Hypotheticals**: On my first day with the Business Ethics class, I asked each student to write on a piece of paper their concept of who was responsible for the Union Carbide disaster in India. Asking hypothetical, ethical, questions are an effective way to use writing to ground a class.

**Pause and Write**: According to Elaine Maimon, stopping during an interesting discussion and having everyone, including the instructor, write down what they would say next focuses an argument.

**Writing Out of the Day (WOOD)**: Students will be asked at the end of each class period to summarize what was learned that day. The instructor will also write along with the students. The class will read their summaries to each other and rewrite anything they might have missed in their summary as a homework assignment.

**Pre-test Question Writing**: Before a written test pass out test questions and say that the test will consist of two of the questions randomly selected. Students can be encouraged to write out the answers to all the questions working alone but perhaps more productively in groups since the group might insist that the work not be done in a casual manner.

Angelo and Cross, *Classroom Assessment Techniques*

**Word Journal:** The Word Journal prompts a two-part response. First, the student summarizes a short text in a single word. Second, the student writes a paragraph or two explaining why he or she chose that particular word to summarize the text. The completed response to the Word Journal is an abstract or a synopsis of the focus text. Have students discuss and compare their responses.

The Word Journal can help faculty assess and improve several related skills. First, it focuses on students’ ability to read carefully and deeply. Second, it assesses skill and creativity at summarizing what has been read. And third, it assesses the students’ skill at explaining and defending, in just a few more words, their choice of single summary word. Practice with this CAT helps students develop the ability to write highly condensed abstracts and to “chunk” large amounts of information for more effective storage in long-term memory. These skills are useful in almost any field, particularly the professions.

Kathy Gabriel, *Teaching Unprepared Students*

**Identify at-risk students early**

On the first day ask them to write a paragraph on why they are taking your class, on what they hope to learn, and/or on their background knowledge of the topic. Have them complete a short reading and give them questions about it to answer in one page. You’ll get insight into writing abilities, and you’ll get to know them some with the first exercise. If poorly written, may indicate being unprepared.

**Pamela Flash, The Center for Writing, University of Minnesota**

**Teaching with Informal Writing Assignments: Some Notes on Procedure**

* When introducing the activity, give students your rationale for assigning it. Avoid characterizing it as a “fun, little writing activity.”
  + If you’re using a prompt, present it both orally and visually by writing it on the board or projecting it on the screen. Exceptions include disciplines where response to oral instructions is valued.
    - Whenever possible, do the activity yourself before presenting it to students and/or do it along with them in the class. This makes a significant impact on student motivation.
      * Before students write, describe next steps. Will the writing be collected? discussed? included in an assignment portfolio? graded? If students are going to be able to be truly informal, they need to know that they aren’t going to be judged on the quality of their exploratory writing.
        + Be clear about time limits (“I’ll stop you in 5 minutes”) and when time is almost over, give 1-minute or 30-second warning.

At the completion of the assignment, ask students to reflect on insights and developments.

If you collect student writing, summarize, or at least highlight and comment on your findings during a subsequent class.

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| **Effective write-to-learn assignments...**  Are short (3-15 minutes)  Ask students to write a word, a sentence, question, or a paragraph or two  Are integrated (explicitly) into class content, objectives, and activity, and, are optimally, utilized in subsequent writing projects   * Elicit multiple responses   + Where appropriate, receive some content-focused (versus mechanics-focused) response     - Aren't formally graded, but count toward a portion of the grade |

**Now What?: Responding to Informal Writing**

If the primary purpose of informal writing is learning (rather than communicating what has been learned) and if the intended audience is usually limited to the writer, how are instructors advised to grade or respond to the writing generated by these activities? Unlike finished student work elicited by more formal assignments, informal writing is not assessed for style or grammar; you’ve asked students to formulate and pursue ideas in a creative and potentially messy process. With this in mind, consider the following strategies for working with completed informal assignments:

**For in-class short-writes:**

Do nothing more: continue with the discussion, demonstration, or lecture, confident that the activity succeeded in allowing students to deepen their understanding of the target content.

Follow the activity by giving students class time to voice ideas and/or questions they may have uncovered by writing. In large classes, ask students to discuss ideas from their writing with a peer in order to share or synthesize responses that you then pull into discussion.

Collect the writing with or without student names. You can read them quickly for your own information, and then summarize this information in the next class session, or you can grade them (check, check minus, check plus).

Ask students to keep their writing until the semester’s end, then hand in their five best for grading.

**Grading informal writing assignments**

* Respond with a simple check plus (excellent), check (satisfactory), or check minus (sub-adequate) and, if time is limited, minimal comments:
  + “Your insights on issues relating to privacy in health care reporting are strong and could be developed into a compelling argument!”
  + “You’ve named some of the most important issues involved with privacy and health care, but don’t develop any of them persuasively.”
  + “You’ve summarized the articles and have respond thoughtfully, but don’t answer the assigned question.”

***Three important caveats:***

* Freewriting often results in personal writing that students should not be asked to make public. Make sure that you are clear about audience before the assignment is undertaken.
  + Whether or not their informal writing receives a grade or comment, students should be given credit for doing it. Allocating a percentage of their final course grades to informal assignments and/or class participation can allow you a place to accumulate the minor numbers of points given to these small assignments. You might also ask students to compile and turn in all “process pieces” like drafts and informal writing with a final project, and allocate a percentage of that project’s cumulative grade.
  + Anticipating that students may be as unfamiliar with un-graded assignments as they are with the whole concept of writing-to-learn, expect that their engagement with either aspect may require some discussion of rationale on your part as you introduce the activities