Informal Writing & Critical Thinking

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Tuesday 28 September

Writing Across the Curriculum

Sample Scenarios with Informal Writing

**Class Prep:** Ask students to come to class with a two-paragraph precis and commentary on what they read. Tell pairs to exchange and comment on how they got the same—or different views.

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**Small Groups:** Prepare a set of 6 to eight points you want students to cover in a major written project or essay exam. Divide the students into groups (no more than 4 to 5 per group). Assign each group one of the points. Group members all must write their own response to the point, then they share their responses. A recorder synthesizes the group’s collective response. Remember that in small-group activities: 1) Students must know specifically what you expect. 2) Each group member must have a responsibility that contributes to the whole. 3) The group must produce something that you collect, or they share with the class.

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**Lecture Notes:** At the end of a lecture—or at the end of a week’s lectures, ask students to look over their class notes. Then tell them to take five minutes to write down a summary of those notes, taking special care to indicate what they think are the most important concepts (as well as any questions they have). Pairs or small groups can share. This exercise can also be done on a listserv or billboard.

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**A Major Project:** After distributing instructions for a major project, ask students to write a thesis they may use. Collect, read, return with a +, V, or –. Shortly thereafter, ask them to write a short proposal of how they intend to develop the thesis. Collect and respond, same way. Later, ask them to bring in 2 sources & explain how they may incorporate them. Same pattern.

Informal writing increases small-group productivity.

With informal writing, you can:

- Summarize what they got from a reading assignment.
- Review main points of a previous lecture.
- Tell what they found interesting, confusing, or applicable about a key concept.
- Analyze charts, graphs, or indexes.
- Formulate questions for discussion (or for exams).
- Assess & critique sources they gather for projects.
- Report what they did/learned in small-group activities or projects.
- Evaluate how they solved a problem or did a project.
- Respond to a classmate’s work.
- Document progress on a project.
- Contrast/compare different ideas & make connections.
- Create a brief dialogue.

Read it quickly 1
Respond with a +, v, or - 2
Get “discussion scripts” 3
Define participation 4
Identify students’ problems 5
Customize your lectures 6
Promote interaction 7


Give it a Try: Workshop & Interaction

**To Begin:** Take five minutes to describe how you usually:
- check to see if students are reading the assignments or understanding lectures.
- start and sustain discussion.
- prepare students for major projects & exams.

**To Apply:** Take another five minutes to jot down an informal writing activity you could actually do within the next two weeks. During what part of the class would you plan to ask students to write? Specifically, what would you want students to get out of it, or what would you want to learn about them? How would you word the writing prompt? What would you do with the writing they produced?