Use Writing as an Alternative to Lecturing

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A BASIC PREMISE

Students resist writing less if you ask them to write frequently and informally. Informal writing provides a “script” that can help create discussions and interaction. Frequent informal writing helps increase fluency and critical thinking, too. Ask students to write for five minutes and then share, so they can:

• Summarize what they got from a reading assignment.
• Review main points of a previous lecture.
• Analyze charts, graphs, or indexes.
• Formulate questions for discussions or exams.
• Assess & critique sources they’ve gathered for projects.
• Report what they did/learned in small-group activities.
• Evaluate or compare/contrast different ideas.
• Imagine stances or interpretations.
• Reflect on how they performed on a major assignment.
• Supplement what they would/should have written on an essay exam.
• Apply theoretical perspectives to actual situations.
• Give you feedback on class!

GIVE STUDENTS A VOICE (AND SAVE YOURS!)

Here are some sample scenarios:

Multiple Perspectives. Ask students to examine an incident from the perspective of a woman, man, different ethnicity or nationality, age, economic status, political or religious ideology, etc. Have them write in first person. When finished writing, have several read “What I saw/what it meant to me.” Have them read aloud and account for their different eye-witness reports.

Leading Questions. For a few lessons, provide students with a list of 3-4 questions that address the day’s reading assignment or topic. Students choose one of the questions to answer. During discussion, they participate by sharing the answers they’ve written. Then set up a schedule for rotating groups of three who must continue to provide the class with 3-4 similar leading questions. They justify why they feel their questions are important, and classmates write responses. Some of these questions might later be used for essay exams. A variation: assign single questions to groups of students. They individually write answers and then consolidate answers to share.

Recaps. 10 minutes before the end of a day’s lesson (or a week’s), ask students to take 5 minutes to sum up what they think are the most important points & why. Then for the 5 remaining minutes, 2 or 3 students can read their replies.

Duets. Ask students to come to class with a paragraph or two, commenting on a reading assignment. In class, students exchange paragraphs. They read their partner’s work and then reply, explaining why they commented on different or similar aspects of the reading. Get a few students to share.

Read informal writing quickly. Give it a +, √, or −. This practice defines participation, identifies student problems, and helps you customize lectures.

ASSIGNMENT DESIGN AND INTERACTIVE LEARNING GO HAND-IN-HAND

Design a major assignment with clear criteria—e.g. “You select appropriate sources and integrate them to support your points”; “You identify and analyze factors that led up to this situation”; “You provide alternatives to the prevailing interpretation of the account.”

At intervals, ask students to prepare to give a 2-minute report on a certain criterion. Students who are struggling with the assignment can hear how other classmates are handling the different parts of the task.

Comment on how 2-minute reports match up—or can be revised—to meet assignment requirements. 2-minute reports need not take more than 10-15 minutes of class time. They can be shared in small groups, too.