More Thoughts and Suggestions for Writing Across the Curriculum

FAQs about informal tasks in writing to learn or writing to express knowledge:

Q: How often should I give a writing task in class?
A: Students benefit most if they write at least twice a week. Teachers who know the benefits of informal writing may incorporate it almost every class—but they assign short tasks (3-7 minutes).

Q: Won’t I end up with stacks of journals and papers?
A: If you assign journals, develop a rotation system so you only collect a few at a time. Or collect each writing activity when you assign it, read it quickly, and return it (don’t grade! —you can evaluate with a √, +, or -). Or make a habit of calling on 2-3 students to read what they’ve written each class. Or collect the writing, record a √ for each student’s participation, and select 1-3 good pieces to read aloud, anonymously.

Q: With my class load, how can I read everything my students write?
A: You can’t. Just read some of it. You can tell students which short assignments you want to read—or you can tell them to select a piece every 1-2 weeks to turn in, with a brief explanation of why they think that piece is exemplary. In two-pocket folders, they can file the pieces you’ve seen in one pocket and the pieces you haven’t seen in another pocket. If you use such a system, require students to provide a “continuing” table of contents for all the work they do. This collection becomes a great review tool or the basis of a portfolio. Another idea: set up a system where you only collect from a random number of different students each time you assign a task.

Q: Won’t students think all this writing is just busy work?
A: Some will. But if you make it clear that you use their writing as part of your teaching technique, most will take it seriously. For instance, use writing to start discussions, to demonstrate different ways students think, to integrate students’ ideas or questions into the course, to get students’ help in writing quizzes or exams, to form a basis of group work and interaction, or to feed into more formal writing assignments.

WRITING TO LEARN AND THINK: Following is a list of sample activities to help you see how you can engage students in active learning and critical thinking.

- Write before class begins to develop a subject or review a point from a previous lesson—e.g., Compose a sentence in Spanish using “impersonal expression” and explain what form of the verb follows. How does this rule compare to English?
- Write during class to refocus a discussion that’s drifted away from the main topic or to tone down an over-excited one—e.g., Now that we’ve discussed some of the main concerns—and your opinions—on the idea of cutting taxes to stimulate the
economy, sum up three points that you think are important and explain why. You should
strongly agree with one point, disagree with another, and be undecided about a third.

• **Write during class to raise questions or explain confusion**—e.g., We’ve looked at
several examples of the concept of “enlightened despotism.” Write down questions that
you still have, either about the examples or about the concept. I’ll choose the best ones
for a quiz at the beginning of our next class.

• **Write at the end of class to summarize a lesson, a discussion, a process**—e.g., We
went over the following problem: “If f(x) = 2x + 1 and g(x) = 3x – 2, for what real number k
does f(k) = g(k).” Review the process by which we got the answer. (A variation: What
was the most difficult thing to understand in the equation we went over?)

• **Open-ended journal entries**—e.g., In your learning log for this week, you can “think on
paper” about any point that you find interesting in our discussions and experiments on the
cell. Write at least 3 daily entries, 100 words minimum for each. Initiate and explore a
question, find a connection between what you’re learning and your own experience,
summarize what you’ve learned, identify what you’re having problems understanding,
look up something on the web that interests you, etc.)

• **Semi-structured journal entries**—e.g., You should be thinking about a number of
questions after today’s lab session. What does the chemical equation in our experiment
say in ordinary English? What keeps you from solving it? What further information do you
need? What factors make this problem more difficult than the experiments we’ve recently
done? What concerns will you have when you perform step 6 of the lab experiment?

• **Guided journal entries**—e.g., In your team journal this week, each team member should
answer at least one of the questions below to help prepare you for your in-class essay on
*Hamlet* next Monday. Discuss among your group members how you might work the
answers into an essay:

1. What does the term “tragic flaw” mean?
2. Why do you think Hamlet does (or doesn’t) have a tragic flaw?
3. How does a person with a tragic flaw affect other people? Use an example from
the play or an example of someone you know.
4. What keeps a person with a tragic flaw from realizing how they affect others?
5. What other readings have we done in class—or what movies or TV shows—
feature a character with a tragic flaw, and how does that character compare to
Hamlet?
6. What kind of effective action can be taken with someone who has a tragic flaw?
Speculate about *Hamlet* or another example.

• **Double-entry notebooks**—e.g., Read through sections 5-8 in our textbook. In your
notebook, draw two columns separated by a line. In the left-hand column, write down
what you understand most clearly about the causes of the dissolution of Yugoslavia.
Then, after you read through the 3 articles that you’ll find up on our course website, go
back and reflect on what you wrote. In the right-hand column, explain what you see
differently, what misunderstandings you think you had, or whatever else you notice about
your previous comments.

• **What I observed/what I thought lab notebook entries**—e.g., Choose a species of fish
in our classroom aquarium. Look closely at a male and female of the species. Make
drawings. Write about specific characteristics that you see in each gender of this
particular species. Then write what you think is significant about the gender similarities
and differences you observe.

• **Contemporary-issue journal entries**—e.g., Now that we’ve read about the spectrum of
political categories (fascist, reactionary, radical, conservative, liberal, libertarian, etc.),
please spend the next week searching Rockford and/or Chicago newspapers for stories
on 7-9 different political figures. For each political figure you choose, write a paragraph
on what you think their political category is, why you think so, and how their beliefs might
affect you if they were to influence the formation of new laws.

• **Exam-preparation journal entries**—e.g., On our course website, locate the four
questions prepared for the essay exam next week. In your journal, write notes that could
help you answer each question. You may use your notes during the exam. Your notes will count 40%, and your answer to the actual essay question will count 60%.

- **Marginal notes or focused reading notes**—e.g., On a separate piece of paper, please identify at least 7-9 different passages in your reading assignment on “Setting up your own small business” (give paragraph and page numbers!). Why are the passages you've identified important? Do they provide support, identify strong or weak points, sum up an opposing view? You should also ask questions, summarize, explain why you agree/disagree, or make connections to someone you know who owns a small business.

- **Reading logs or summary/response notebook entries**—e.g., In your reading log, summarize pp. 35-42 of chapter 11 in our health textbook. Explain how the author’s comments on different contraception methods compare with what you, a friend, or an older relative believe about each method.

- **Student responses to reading guides**—e.g., On the attached handout, you have 5 questions that you should answer for the Internet reading assignment you’ve received on comparing car insurance policies for this week. Reflect on how the article helped you understand your policy—or your parents’.

- **Imagined interviews with authors**—e.g., After reading the short story “Silent Snow, Secret Snow,” get into your groups of three. Each one of you is responsible for coming up with two questions for the author of the story. As a group, you should then write an literary interview, where you combine your group’s answers to everyone’s questions, to come up with a better understanding of what the story is about.

- **Dialogues**—e.g., There are at least three ways to get an answer to the equation we've done in class. Imagine that you’ve answered this equation on an exam and you have received no credit for it because you didn’t do it in the preferred way. Write a dialogue with the teacher, anticipating what her objections are. Explain why you think you should receive at least partial, if not full credit. At the same time, acknowledge why the preferred way makes the most sense.

- **Bio-poems**—e.g., Of the many French Impressionists whose techniques we’ve studied, choose one to write a bio-poem on, using the following guidelines:
  1. First name
  2. Four traits that describe his/her character
  3. Relative of (brother of, sister of, child of…)
  4. Lover of (list 2-3 things or people)
  5. Who feels… (2-3 items)
  6. Who needs… (2-3 items)
  7. Who fears… (2-3 items)
  8. Who gives… (2-3 items)
  9. Who would like to… (2-3 items)
  10. Resident of…
  11. Last name

  Then write a similar auto-bio poem, describing yourself as an artist. We’ll talk about differences between what motivates the artist’s work—and yours.

- **Metaphor games/ extended analogies**—e.g., We’re going to use some analogic thinking to start our review of the different kinds of music we’ve covered during these last four weeks. Choose two of the following and respond:
  1. A waltz is like a ____, but a polka is like a ____.
  2. The difference between a madrigal and a chant is like the difference between a ____ and a ____.
  3. How does the scenery change when you go from Beethoven to Gershwin?
  4. If Ella Fitzgerald and Dave Matthews were car designers, how would their vehicles differ?

- **Occasional thought letters**—e.g., For the last twenty minutes of class, please write a letter to me about the different strengths and weaknesses you’ve discovered in designing a website using Mozilla and Microsoft Word. Which would you prefer using to design: (1) your homepage; (2) your resume; and (3) an electronic portfolio displaying your writing
skills in several different courses. What features of your chosen programs would permit the easiest design and reader-friendliness in each document?

- **E-mail and electronic discussions**—e.g., Email an athletic friend who has graduated a year or two ago and is in college or has a job. Find out the differences between his/her exercise routines now and when s/he was in high school. How does your friend account for these differences (or similarities), and what physical effects has s/he noticed?

- **Data-provided prompts**—e.g., Draw a graph with two bell curves—one is tall and thin (T1), the other is shorter and wider (T2). The curves illustrate the distribution of molecular speed for a pure sample at two different temperatures. The vertical axis represents the number of molecules, and the horizontal axis represents speed. The area under each curve represents the percent of molecules at the range of speed. The same number of molecules is present at each temperature. What inferences can you make about the information in the graph?

- **A series of exploration/invention tasks that lead up to a longer project**—e.g., a paper on biology in the news (NOTE: these exercises would probably be done over a number of days, rather than in one class session).
  1. Write out an issue in biology that you find “arguable,” based on the units we’ve covered in reproduction and genetics. Try to word the issue several different ways. (3 minutes)
  2. Why is this issue controversial? (e.g., not enough evidence; conflicts between scientific and religious perspectives; ethical problems; differing definitions of basic terms) (15 minutes)
  3. Why are you personally interested in the issue? How could/does it affect you? What personal experiences do you—or someone you know—have connected to it? (10 minutes)
  4. Pick one opinion on the issue and list as many reasons as you can think of that might support this opinion. When you’ve developed your list, identify which are the best supports and briefly explain why (15 minutes)
  5. Pick another opinion on the issue and do the same thing as in #4. (15 minutes)
  6. Examine your lists and evaluate the best supports. Where do you feel you need more information? What questions must you answer more completely? What research do you have to do? (10 minutes)
  7. Do the research. Take notes and record citation information accurately.
  8. When you’ve researched all sides of the issue, identify which side you support and explain why. (10 minutes)
  9. Look over the writing you’ve done for steps 1-8. Write a draft of your project.

- **Portfolio drafts**—e.g., You have saved several “occasional thought letters” for our units on the settling of the colonies, the Revolutionary War, the western exploration, and the expansion of the states. For mid-semester, please choose one and develop it into a formal paper, based on the format you receive in the attached handout. You will be doing the same with another occasional thought letter for the end of the semester. By the end of this year, you will be expected to assemble a portfolio of four formal papers (letters attached). You’ll reflect on which is best, which is weakest, and what you’ve learned from each—and you’ll receive a grade on the whole portfolio.

- **Practice essay exams**—e.g., Choose one of these two essay prompts. Write out your answer at home. Bring your draft to class tomorrow. You’ll share it with a small group of classmates.
  1. “Of the three concepts we studied this week—finding the hypotenuse of a triangle; calculating the surface area of a triangle; determining the degrees of each angle in a triangle—surface area is the most practical for everyday applications.” To what extent do you agree or disagree, and why?
  2. Below, you have two different procedures for solving the same equation. Argue which procedure is better, and explain why.

- **Thesis statement writing**—e.g., Today in class, we’ll focus on writing a thesis statement for your upcoming paper by going through three additive steps. Here’s an example:
1. **Start with a question:** Why would Karl Marx not accept the idea that a government must always remain strong, to protect workers from exploitation?

2. **Draft a brief thesis:** According to Karl Marx, no government should always remain strong to protect workers because many class-related factors could turn such a government into a system that would oppress those workers instead.

3. **Elaborate on that thesis:** According to Karl Marx, if governments remain forever strong, they do not continue to protect workers because: (a) economic conditions are not stable; (b) capitalists take advantage of workers during economic instability; (c) governments often change in favor of capitalists as these two social classes struggle; and (d) workers eventually have to overthrow both the capitalists and the government that favors the capitalists, if they want their own exploitation to end.

- **Frame paragraphs**—e.g., Use one of the following frames to pull together what we’ve learned about jazz:
  1. Many musicologists say that jazz is… (generalize, then develop this opinion). However, we’ve learned that jazz is… (generalize, then develop the contrasting opinion).
  2. Jazz is not uniquely American because a number of non-American influences have affected it. First,… Second,… Third,… (Fourth,…?)

**Follow-up:**

- Choose two of the “writing to learn & think” exercises that you like the most and explain why.

- Please write one short prompt that you can use in the first week of classes.

- Share your prompt with two other colleagues and decide on one that you all like best. Then share it with the rest of us.