Effective Strategies for Writing about Reading in all Subject Areas

**Workshop Description:** Are you concerned about how well your students are reading in your classes? Increase your students’ literacy skills, not your workload! Participants in this workshop will discover methods of creating short, effective “write-to-learn” activities to help students become closer readers who can more readily comprehend and discuss the texts that you assign. Participants will also practice working with a rubric that was successfully developed and used for a recently published research project in the Rockford schools.

**CWPA/NSSE Survey of Writing to Learn:** “Results suggest that faculty can increase student engagement in deep learning activities and also increase student learning by including interactive activities, assigning meaning-constructing writing projects, and clearly explaining their expectations. The results also suggest that these factors contribute more to the achievement of desirable learning outcomes than does the amount of writing faculty assign.”


**Four Principles of Writing to Learn about Reading Assignments:**

- Get students to plan informal writing at least once for each reading assignment.
- Make students’ writing part of class discussions about reading assignments.
- Have students do some form of redrafting (e.g., recycling an informal prompt as an exam question) to build upon and reinforce what they’ve learned from reading.
- Ask students to collect together their writing in portfolios, so they can review and reflect upon what they’ve learned (Nagin, C. *Because Writing Matters* 44).

**2007-09 Study of Writing to Learn in Jefferson High School:** Scores of pre- and post-course writing samples were compared for students in identical AP English, Economics, and Special Ed Reading classes. Pre-/post-course writing samples were based on general course concepts and content, e.g., special education reading students described their reading processes before and after taking the course. Students in one class did writing-to-learn prompts, while students in the other class didn’t. Scores in pre-course writing samples for all subject areas were very similar. But post-course samples for all WTL classes in each subject area were significantly different, statistically.

(Peters, B. “Lessons about Writing to Learn,” *Writing Program Administration* 34.2: 59-88)

**Instructing Students How to Read:** In the list below, check various materials that you’ll have students read in a course that you teach next year. Choose one important type of reading that students find difficult and write 3-5 simple steps that could help them understand how to do it better, based on how you read/prepare the same material.

- textbook chapter/section
- novel
- magazine or newspaper article
- poster
- report
- chart/graph/table
- warning
- website
- instructions/assignment
- story problem
- rulebook/handbook
- primary document
- syllabus
- review notes
- outline
- exam questions
- electronic message
- written feedback
- footnotes
- play/dialogue
- poem
- Google search results
- play/ dialogue
- diagram
- index/table of contents
- exemplary student writing
- music & notations
- classmate’s work
- equation/formula
- glossary/list of definitions
- introduction
- statistics
- translation
- evaluation
- photo/illustration
- students’ own written work
- summary
- timeline
- budget

**Strategies to Help Students Become Better Readers:** On the next page are common reading problems that students have, alongside helping strategies that you can use to address those problems (adapted from John Bean, *Engaging Ideas*, 147-48). skim through the chart and list 3-4 insights you find potentially useful for teaching, as well as 2 questions.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students’ Problem</th>
<th>Samples of Helping Strategies</th>
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</table>
| **Poor reading process** | • Give tests or writing assignments on reading not covered in class  
• Require students to keep a reading log  
• Model and assign marginal notes, or “highlight and revisit” charts  
• Assign “prove it” questions to students, requiring them to search the text  
• Show your own reading process and get students to do an evaluation of theirs |
| **Failure to recognize main ideas** | • Assign summary writing  
• Have students make outlines/ flowcharts/ diagram of a reading assignment  
• Help students write “gist statements” that list main ideas as reading progresses  
• Go through sample text, asking students to notate “what it says” and “what it does” for each paragraph or section  
• Ask students to create “comic book” or sequential images of reading material |
| **Failure to consider unfamiliar views** | • Have students draw up “multiple perspective charts,” create various characters who have these perspectives, then write a monologue for one of these characters  
• Ask students to create “Why I believe” and “Why I doubt” concept maps  
• Assign students to write dialogues/ debates between characters or sources that express opposing or contrasting points of view  
• Have students write a speculation about why someone favors a different view  
• Give students RAFT assignments (role/ audience/ format/ topic)  
• Get students to draw Venn diagrams and explain what the different views share in common and how they contrast |
| **Limited understanding of rhetorical context** | • Provide a “back story” for the reading assignment and design RAFT to help students to predict what stance different stakeholders might take  
• Design mini-research/ “text set” tasks that set stage for reading, asking students to read short sources/ write and present brief reports to class  
• Cast students as reviewer or author: identify who author is, who is her audience, what situation/ occasion prompted her to write, what purpose she has |
| **Failure to interact with the text** | • Use any of the strategies listed here |
| **Unfamiliarity with cultural codes** | • Introduce students to cultural and/or historical background that differs from theirs and have them list comparisons  
• Give students the background knowledge they need and ask them—after reading—to reflect how that background helped them understand a passage  
• Supply students with cartoons or jokes that reflect cultural codes and get them to explain how they think the humor works |
| **Unfamiliar vocabulary** | • Test students on glossary  
• Assign students “I am” poems that convey meaning of new terms  
• Have students write “speculative definition” based on context of term in sentence  
• Provide students with a pre-reading list of new vocabulary and get them to look up and write the definitions in their own words |
| **Difficulty with complex syntax** | • Have students “translate” hard passages into their own words  
• Get students to break longer sentences into shorter ones |
| **Failure to adapt to different kinds of reading material** | • Provide students with a set of reading questions—mix factual, comprehensive, interpretive, critical, and summative types of questions.  
• Get students to write their own instructions on how to “decode” and interpret an assignment, requiring them afterwards to exchange with a partner who compares  
• Provide an online environment for written discussion among classmates—designate a small group to post good starter questions  
• Set up reading circles, where student groups create a tableau, talk show, newscast, or skit about the reading assignment (interesting even in science and math)  
• Have students create 3 good and 3 bad questions about a reading, evaluating each  
• Design visualization/verbalization exercises to illustrate/ comment on material  
• Cut a reading assignment into parts, ask students to assemble the parts in an order that makes sense, and have them write a justification of the final order |
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Practice in Trying and Designing Writing-to-Learn Prompts:

1. **Writing effective prompts.** Briefly list in writing three important differences that you see between these original and revised writing prompts for students on *Twelve Angry Men*:

   **Original**
   - Discuss any experiences you have witnessed with our jury system (for example, on television).
   - Do you think juries are always fair to the person being tried?

   **Revised**
   - Discuss a time when you worked with a group, explaining trouble, conflicts, and satisfaction. Compare it to a situation early in the play, where the jury does or doesn’t work together. How do such examples affect your opinion of how people work together?
   - After reading the play, discuss why you do or don’t think people are truly granted a fair trial. Why do or don’t you believe our system works?

   Write a prompt that you could use, either at the beginning or end of a reading assignment you’ll give in your class. Share it with a partner and discuss. After that, decide whether or not you’ll make any changes in your prompt and explain why.

2. **Exploring definitions.** Think of a key term, concept, creature, substance, event, condition, or person that students have to read about and understand in your course. Write an “I am” poem about it/ her, following this template (adapted from Angela Peery, *Writing Matters*, 152):

   **Title: ______________________ (Try asking students to exchange poems with a partner who must title it and justify the title.)**
   
   I am __________________ and __________________ (two characteristics)
   I hear ______________________________________ (insert a sound)
   I see _______________________________________ (insert a sight)
   I want ____________________________________ (insert a desire or goal)
   (Repeat first line here)
   I try ________________________________________ (something it/she tries to do or be)
   I feel ______________________________________ (insert an emotion)
   I worry ____________________________________ (something that bothers it/ her)
   (Repeat first line here)
   I believe ____________________________ (a strong opinion it/she has)
   I say _______________________________ (something it/she knows is true)
   I wonder if ___________________________ (something about which it/ she is curious)
   (Repeat first line here)

   You’ll share your poem with a new partner and briefly reflect on how you think this exercise might help students remember the term, concept, creature, substance, event, condition, or person you chose.

3. **Visualizing and verbalizing relationships.** Below are 12 kinds of diagrams that can be used to illustrate relationships among differing terms, concepts, creatures, substances, events, conditions, or people that your students read about.

![Diagram](image-url)
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Sample prompt: Illustrate and comment upon a quotation that you found interesting while reading Manguel’s chapter, “Metaphors of Reading,” in History of Reading.

Sample response:

Here’s a drawing in response to Alberto Manguel’s chapter “Metaphors of Reading” in A History of Reading…. I was struck by Manguel’s short biography of Whitman and Whitman’s use of “reading” as the core metaphor for daily existence: “For Whitman, text, author, reader and world mirrored each other in the act of reading, an act whose meaning he expanded until it served to define every vital human activity, as well as the universe in which it all took place” (168).

Sample prompt: After we discuss Jeffrey Wilhelm’s article, “What does it mean to teach,” draw a Venn diagram or some other visual that analyzes what teachers must do to accommodate the many differences and needs among students.

Sample response:

A = What all students need to learn
B = What some students need to learn
C = What individual students need to learn
D = Where teachers need to start

If (T + P + E) < (A + H),
Then (I + C) = W

T = Time
P = Planning
E = Experience
A = Ability
H = Haste
I = Information
C = Communication
W = Waste

Sample prompt: Read Section 4, Inter-Level Communications,” 118-125, in our textbook and invent a formula that sums up what is problematic when upper-level management and middle-level management do not fully discuss the implementation of new company policies.

Sample response:

1. Model: Teacher does/ students watch
2. Scaffold: Teacher does/ students help
3. Coach: Students do/ teacher helps
4. Peer Coach: Students do/ teacher assesses & helps as needed
5. Explore: Students do/ they’ve learned
6. Reflect: Students write about what they’ve learned

Go to http://www.theillustratedprofessor.com/ to see more of Lawrence Musgrove’s work on drawing and reading. View student examples at http://www.handmadethinking.com/?page_id=45

Write a prompt asking students to comment on or illustrate relationships among terms, concepts, creature, substances, events, conditions, or people, based on reading material in your course. Provide your own response. We’ll share.
4. **Encouraging multiple perspectives.** Read over the sample rubric. Several teachers at Jefferson High School developed this rubric during the 2007-09 study (results are briefly described on the first page of this workshop handout). Once you read the rubric, look at the RAFT assignment below and jot down a few notes on which specific writing task you’d decide to do—and why. How differently do you have to read the rubric to do the task you chose?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CRITERIA</th>
<th>3-exceeds expectations</th>
<th>2-meets expectations</th>
<th>1-misses expectations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comprehension of Task—ability to</td>
<td>Student always understands and follows instructions exactly.</td>
<td>Student usually understands and follows instructions.</td>
<td>Student often misunderstands or disregards instructions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>respond informally to what a writing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prompt asks</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Content—ability to convey knowledge</td>
<td>Student provides information that is accurate and detail that supports it very well.</td>
<td>Student provides information that is mostly accurate and detail that is adequate.</td>
<td>Student provides information that is not accurate and/or detail that is insufficient.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of course content got from reading or</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>listening</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Strategies—ability to apply, analyze,</td>
<td>Student shows clear control over the strategy or strategies that the prompt requires.</td>
<td>Student shows satisfactory evidence of understanding and practicing required strategies.</td>
<td>Student shows little or no evidence of understanding required strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>back up, compare, classify, critique,</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>define, describe, evaluate, explain,</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>exemplify, illustrate, interpret,</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>organize, predict, question, reflect,</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>review, show cause-effect, solve,</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>synthesize, etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Language use—ability to develop a</td>
<td>Student’s response is very articulate, and errors are too minimal to worry about.</td>
<td>Student’s response is easy to read, and errors don’t keep a reader from understanding.</td>
<td>Student’s response is illegible and/or difficult to understand, and errors are confusing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>readable response and use conventions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>of grammar and punctuation</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

** *****

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Audience</th>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Topic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Colleagues in department</td>
<td>Email</td>
<td>Adapt and implement rubric for informal writing in all courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department representative</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>Memo</td>
<td>Principal’s suggestion that all teaching staff use rubric—as is—for all writing in all courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student reporter &amp; you</td>
<td>Student body &amp; staff</td>
<td>Student Newspaper Interview</td>
<td>Students’ concerns about use of rubric</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Phone</td>
<td>Questions about why the rubric is being used</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Conversation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Design a RAFT assignment that would encourage students to write in different formats to different audiences for different purposes.

5. **Note taking to enhance critical thinking.** Read through the passage below, taken from the Council of Writing Program Administrators’ framework for success in writing. Identify 4 ideas that either strike you, puzzle you, cause you to ask questions, or some other response. Then briefly fill in the “Highlight and Revisit Chart” on the next page. After that, jot down what you learned from doing this exercise that you think would be helpful for students to learn as well.

**Developing Critical Thinking through Writing, Reading, and Research**
(Go to [http://www.wpacouncil.org/framework](http://www.wpacouncil.org/framework))

Critical thinking is the ability to analyze a situation or text and make thoughtful decisions based on that analysis.

Writers use critical writing and reading to develop and represent the processes and products of their critical thinking. For example, writers may be asked to write about familiar or unfamiliar texts, examining assumptions about the texts held by different audiences. Through critical writing and reading, writers think through ideas, problems, and issues; identify and challenge assumptions; and explore multiple ways of understanding. This is important in college as writers are asked to move past obvious or surface-level interpretations and use writing to make sense of and respond to written, visual, verbal, and other texts that they encounter.
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Teachers can help writers develop critical thinking by providing opportunities and guidance for students to:

- read texts from multiple points of view (e.g., sympathetic to a writer’s position and critical of it) and in ways that are appropriate to the academic discipline or other contexts where the texts are being used;
- write about texts for multiple purposes including (but not limited to) interpretation, synthesis, response, summary, critique, and analysis;
- craft written responses to texts that put the writer’s ideas in conversation with those in a text in ways that are appropriate to the academic discipline or context;
- create multiple kinds of texts to extend and synthesize their thinking (e.g., analytic essays, scripts, brochures, short stories, graphic narratives);
- evaluate sources for credibility, bias, quality of evidence, and quality of reasoning; conduct primary and secondary research using a variety of print and nonprint sources;
- write texts for various audiences and purposes that are informed by research (e.g., to support ideas or positions, to illustrate alternative perspectives, to provide additional contexts); and
- generate questions to guide research.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Quote Highlighted</th>
<th>Reason for Highlighting</th>
<th>Deeper Thinking after Rereading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example: “Critical thinking is…”</td>
<td>Why this definition—is it too brief or limited? But I like its conciseness.</td>
<td>I believe that the strategies in the rubric on p. 5 also have something to do with critical thinking. CT is very complex.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. **Designing one more**…. (if we have time). Look back at the chart on p. 2. Choose a helping strategy that addresses a student reading problem that concerns you, and design another short prompt that you could use in your class. Be ready to explain why you chose this particular strategy.

7. **Asking Questions**…. (if we have time). Consider the questions you wrote down for our second exercise in this workshop. Did you have your questions answered? If not, let’s discuss. If so, what new questions do you have, in regards to writing about reading?

8. **Evaluating**. Please don’t forget to fill out the workshop evaluation in your folder. Give your evaluations to Portia Downey, and thanks for attending. Have a wonderful year teaching! If you would be interested in a course that focuses on writing-reading to learn, please provide your name and contact information on the “Interested in course” sheet.

Some great sources for summer reading: