

Dealing with Informal or Writing-to-Learn Assignments

You have many options for dealing with informal writings from students. Practically, of course, you can have students submit them in traditional paper format, or you can have them posted on Blackboard or some like format. The advantage of the latter is that it becomes easier for you to make interesting responses available for viewing by other students in the class. I've often found that when students are able to see the work of classmates who are really performing well, they rise to the occasion and do better work themselves.

In terms of commenting on information writings, you have a range of options. One, of course, is simply to check it off as completed. While you might do this now and then, if you primarily or exclusively just record work as "done," students will understandably get cynical. The good news is that there are quick ways of responding to lots of student writings. Here are a few that you can use individually or in combination:

- 1. Provide a quick comment.** Tell students that you're going to make but one comment on a writing—and then make yourself stick to that commitment. Try to make a specific comment: "The most interesting idea here was. . . ." or "In response to your claim that, I point out. . . ." or "Your response could have been strengthened if you. . . ."
- 2. Use a rubric to provide a quick evaluation.** These evaluations might take the form of "check/plus/minus" or "strong/adequate/weak" or "3/2/1." The important thing is to develop some guidance for students so they know the criteria. I've provided some examples of rubrics previously.
- 3. Randomly select a few student writings for comment.** Especially in larger classes, you might tell students that each time you'll select only a percentage of student writings for detailed comment, with the remaining ones either getting a rubric evaluation or a completion check. This will allow you to concentrate on fewer writings, but students can't be sure if theirs will be chosen. Of course, you'd like all students to receive multiple responses over the course of the term.
- 4. Publish selected responses.** Choose a certain number of writings from each assignment to publish for the whole class, perhaps electronically, perhaps by handout. For the best of these writings, write a few sentences in which you point out the strength of the response. I see little purpose served in commenting on weak responses; it just creates anxiety and ill-will, and students will learn from your remarks on the stronger ones.
- 5. Have peers comment on one another's informal writings.** Focus on their providing a response, not providing a grade, which just gets messy. (You should be the grader, not them.) There are some questions that students can answer for each other with great benefit. Among them are:
 - What did you find most effective/insightful/helpful?
 - What one idea/element might the writer extend further to deepen the writing?
 - If someone were to disagree with or be skeptical of this writing, what might they say?

Evaluating Summaries of Readings

A summary should be directed toward imagined readers who have not read the article being summarized. The purpose of the summary is to give these persons a clear overview of the article's main points. The criteria for a summary include the following: 1) accuracy of content, 2) comprehensiveness and balance, and 3) effectiveness of presentation, including organization, clarity, coherence, correctness, and style. (Adapted from J.C. Bean, D. Drenk, and F.D. Lee. (1982). "Microtheme strategies for developing cognitive skills." In C.W. Griffin (Ed.), Teaching writing in all disciplines. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.)

3 A “strong” summary meets all of the criteria for accuracy, comprehensiveness and balance, and effective presentation. The writer should understand the article thoroughly. The main points in the article should appear correctly in the summary with all main points proportionately developed (i.e., the writer should not spend excessive time on one main point while neglecting other main points). The summary should be as comprehensive as possible and should read smoothly from beginning to end with appropriate transitions between ideas. Paragraphs and sentences should be clear and effective, without vagueness or ambiguity and without grammatical errors.

2 A “competent” summary is one that is good but not excellent. It will reveal a generally accurate reading of the article with a clear sense of the main points, but it will be noticeably weaker than a “three” summary in one of the areas of criteria or somewhat weaker in two areas.

1 A “weak” summary is weak in all areas of competence, either because it is so poorly written that the reader cannot understand the content or because the content is inaccurate or seriously disorganized.

Evaluating Responses to Readings

Your responses to readings or answers to reading questions should be in sentences and full paragraphs. Realize that, while some questions may require you simply to find information in the reading, the majority of them call for your own thinking and interpretation. Think of your response, then, as a miniature essay. This response should reveal your ability accurately to analyze readings, to defend fully your analysis, and to explain your thoughts clearly and effectively to a reader. Three main criteria are important in the evaluation of your answers. They are: 1) accuracy or reasonableness (keeping in mind that many questions do not have single, right answers; the question is whether your answer is plausible); 2) quality of reasoning, argument, and proof; the question is whether your answer is plausible; and 3) fullness, clarity, and general effectiveness. Your answer should supply a context, so that readers can understand the question or task without going back to the book or assignment sheet. Following are descriptions of three levels of performance. The scale may also be used to evaluate more general responses to readings. In this case, instead of “accuracy or reasonableness” your teacher will be concerned with “aptness,” “appropriateness to the reading,” or “quality of your reading.”

3 A “strong” response effectively meets all of the criteria for accuracy, quality of reasoning, and general effectiveness. The writer has given a plausible response to the question or the text. The writer provides evidence, from the text or other appropriate sources or experiences, to defend his or her position. The writer generally interprets this evidence for his or her readers, showing its significance and bearing on the response. The writer may allude to and refute other responses or interpretations or may use the response as a “jumping-off” point to some further, pertinent discussion. In short, the response reveals the writer to have understood the complexity and richness of the question or reading. The “three” response is comprehensive, taking into account readers’ needs and questions. Further, the elements of the response contribute to the effectiveness of the whole, which should read effectively from beginning to end.

2 A “competent” response adequately meets the assignment and all three criteria. It is reasonable, supported, and clear. It reveals less insight or diligence than in a “three.” It may appear perfunctory or safe. A two response will be noticeably weaker than a “three” in one of the criteria or somewhat weaker in two.

1 A “weak” response is perfunctory or unengaged; the student is apparently just going through the motions, simply providing something to hand in. The response may be noticeably weak in two of the three areas of criteria or somewhat weak in all three. “One” may also be awarded to responses written with incomplete sentences or which are missing paragraph organization.