

Options for Making Informal Writing-to-Learn Assignments

Informal writing-to-learn assignments can take many forms, but generally they're relatively shorter and the product of a single draft rather than extensively revised over time. With the primary emphasis on student engagement with course materials, the faculty member can make assignments that have students work with key ideas, and faculty can respond accordingly. Here are some possible junctures for making opportunities for making writing to learn assignments.

1. Before class, make an assignment to ensure that students actively engage the reading or material. Give students a question that involves summarizing or critiquing or applying the readings assigned for a particular day. Perhaps they'll write a paragraph or a page. If you'd like, have students post their responses to Blackboard before class; you can then select a few to start the class discussion, or you can incorporate their responses into your lecture.
2. At the start of class, begin with a five-minute writing to attune students to the day's activities. The start of class often has lots of jockeying and settling in. One way to get students' engaged is with a quick writing. You might use this as a quiz, I suppose, to test their preparation. Or you might ask a more provocative question to get their minds going. You can pick these up to check attendance or give a quick analysis of what individuals were thinking. (See below.)
3. During class, use writing to stimulate discussion or thinking or to provide more introspective students with an opportunity to engage the ideas. I've found that interrupting class with a five-minute writing is useful in a couple of situations. One is when the discussion is heated, there are lots of hands in the air, and you're worried that students aren't going to get a chance to contribute. Asking students to take five minutes to make the point they would make, if they had the floor, is a good way to get students involved even if they aren't speaking. Another opportunity is just the opposite: perhaps discussion has flagged, maybe because the issue on the floor is too complicated or threatening. Or perhaps you've detected that student attention to the lecture has waned. Toss out a question for five minutes of writing, then have students gather with one or two classmates to share and discuss their responses with a small number then sharing with the entire class.
4. At the end of class, ask students to summarize main ideas or to answer a specific question or to pose a question. The end of class is often another ragged time, as students start shuffling their stuff in order to get out. You might end class with a short writing in which you ask students questions such as the following: "What was the most important thing we talked about today? The most puzzling? The most interesting? What would you most like to hear more about? What is an application of today's topic? How did today's topic connect to yesterday's?"
5. Use some of the same questions as in #4, but after class, to extend and engage more thoroughly the day's discussion. You might ask students to post responses to Blackboard.

For a host of other ideas about using informal assignments, including extensive examples of specific tasks, please see John Bean's *Engaging Ideas*. There are copies in the Writing Program office.

