



USING WRITING IN LARGE CLASSES

Students develop disciplinary knowledge and become better critical thinkers by engaging in a rich variety of writing and speaking activities throughout their undergraduate experience. Using writing in your classes encourages students to become more active and engaged learners while increasing their learning and retention. Reviewing their writing keeps you in closer touch with the learning of your students. For many who teach large classes, however, the idea of adding writing to their courses is daunting: writing takes time in courses where there is already too much content to cover. And many faculty feel they have too little expertise in grammar or in teaching and grading writing. So, the question arises: How difficult are these obstacles to overcome?

Not terribly difficult. Twenty years of Writing Across the Curriculum and Writing In the Disciplines have created multiple ways to weave writing into large enrollment courses. You can use short, informal in-class assignments such as minute-writes, 5-minute microthemes, or group work to evaluate writing. You can encourage out-of-class writing using email, bulletin boards, chat, or other technology tools. You can tie assignments to teamwork and problem-based learning to take advantage of the power of collaborative learning and writing. All of these can add significant amounts of writing efficiently while not imposing a huge burden on you. If you regularly employ frequent, short writing assignments, your students will see that that writing is important and expected, even in large classes.

WRITING TO LEARN, NOT LEARNING TO WRITE

When you think of adding writing to your class, what comes to mind? Probably research reports, essays, reviews of the literature, term papers or position papers. These formal assignments offer students an opportunity to develop and communicate information and ideas in a traditional high-stakes way that demands a lot of your time in grading. It may be a better use of your time, however, to use an easy-to-implement low-stakes writing activities that also engage students in thinking and writing. As Eric Hobson and Kenneth Schafermeyer remind us in the *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*, “After all, the educational objective . . . is not for the students to learn to write, but for them to learn to use writing as a tool to enhance their learning and their thinking” (424). (In the second half of this tipsheet, we suggest a number of ways you can efficiently employ these kinds of longer assignments.)

At The St. Louis College of Pharmacy, Hobson and Schafermeyer developed a number of low-stakes writing activities for a class of 182 students, based on six criteria. (These criteria also work for oral assignments.)

1. Writing should be easily integrated.
2. Writing should be an efficient learning tool, serving multiple goals concurrently.
3. Writing should be woven into the coursework.
4. Writing should build designated higher-order critical thinking skills.
5. Writing should enhance students’ problem-solving abilities.
6. Writing should not become a burden to evaluate.

LOW-STAKES ASSIGNMENTS

These varied mini-papers can bring considerable writing into the classroom. While writing might typically receive credit, it need not all be graded. Students can use writing to learn content without your grading everything. (See Bean for fuller discussion.)



- **Minute-writes** –On 3x5 note cards, students write a quick response to a question you pose at some point during class. The question might be on the previous night’s reading, or it might ask students to link two recent lecture topics. You might post the question on the board for students who arrive early and want an extra few minutes to consider and write. A minute might seem too short, but with practice, students learn to be concise and on topic. As an added benefit, students are primed and ready to go when you begin your lecture or class discussion. After collecting the cards, you can quickly review a few before launching the day’s lecture or activities to see how well students understand. Additionally, these cards replace the calling of roll.

At the end of the class, pose a minute-write question about the day’s material. If students seem to be confused, you know immediately and can send a clarifying email or begin the next class addressing the issue.

Students, aware that you will be looking over these minute-writes, usually come to class prepared to settle down and focus immediately. They begin think of writing as a crucial form of learning. Finally, knowing that they may be asked to comment on a reading assignment, students are encouraged to keep up with the homework.

- **Microthemes** - If the topic or question is important, you can begin class with something longer—a microtheme of five minutes or so. Used mid-class, a micro-theme serves as a break between activities. After students write, usually on both sides of a large note card (5x8), they turn their responses in, or trade them with a classmate in a think-pair-share activity. You can adapt microthemes to include any of the following:
 - **Quote Responses** – Students write for five minutes about one or two key quotations you post from previous night’s reading. Thus, they focus on the important or difficult parts of the reading. You may ask them to share their responses in pairs or small groups, reporting out the issues that still remain after discussion. This reporting can come as a brief oral activity or the group can create one new note card for you (or your GTAs) to read.
 - **Lecture Summaries** – A bit longer than a 5-minute microtheme, these are assigned at the end of class and turned in the next day. They encourage better listening by making your students accountable for what you’ve raised in lecture. In addition, they become more active in their own learning process—not simply taking notes for a future test, but trying to understand key concepts behind your lecture.
 - **Mid-lecture Feedback** – These work well mid-lecture or near the end of class, especially if the lecture is complex. Students write questions about the lecture or about questions posed during a lecture. This activity helps them zero in on what they may not understand. You can ask a few students to read their comments and allow for some questions and answers or discussion—perhaps by students who might not normally raise their hands in class. Students who have questions or ideas that don’t get aired have nonetheless gained by focusing on the material at hand and writing their questions or comments.
- **Doubting/Believing Game** - Engaging in Peter Elbow’s Doubting/Believing game, students explore two sides of an issue. First, students earnestly doubt a proposition and then summarize their conclusions in writing. Next, they earnestly believe the same position, again summarizing their best reasons or evidence. Doubts and beliefs are then shared in pairs or small groups.
- **Guided Journals or Learning Logs** –In ongoing journals, students write summaries of concepts raised in class. Log entries may be metacognitive (where students reflect on their own learning process). In these, students respond to your prompts such as *What’s been difficult to understand? What problems are most interesting? What areas do you need to review?* The idea is not for students to write sparkling prose, but for them to probe for ideas and reflect productively.



Have students keep their journals in a three-ring binder on loose-leaf paper, then, they turn in only the paper. You can also invite email submissions. You can't read all the journals, but you can collect pages periodically or from a random number of students each time. Silvia and Hom at UC Davis suggest *Journal Roulette*. Students are assigned to one of 12 groups. On a given day, the instructor rolls the dice and collects journals from the group whose number has been rolled.

Grading journals can be simple – use a checkmark system and write one or two comments prompted by what the student has written: *I think your ideas on wind dynamics are a bit unusual, but actually they are supported by some research. You might look at Hartley and Korach.* Such responses show your students that you have read the entries and are engaged, even if briefly, with them. Such personal responses are important and valued by students in large classes.

- **Reading Journals** – You can require reading journal entries as homework, assigning two or three responses a week to the textbook or other readings. You need not collect all of them weekly, but do collect them regularly and give credit for effort. Students know you are reading their work and become more current with the out-of-class reading. Reading journals work best when you generate questions for students. Your prompts should help students go beyond summary early in the semester to higher-order thinking skills such as analysis or synthesis later in the semester.

Summarize the three main points of each of this week's readings, focusing on data embedded in graphs and tables. Does some data weaken the authors' main points?

Our readings argue two sides of globalization. Can you argue a third position?

- **Question/Comment Box** - Keep a shoebox where students can anonymously put note cards with questions at the end of class. Questions can be about lecture content, concerns about how material is covered in class, or outside reading. While their comments are extremely short, students learn that their written comments or questions must be clear in order to be understood.

LONGER HIGH-STAKES ASSIGNMENTS

If you are considering longer research papers or analyses, you can reduce the time you spend grading final drafts and increase the quality of student thinking and writing by applying some of the following principles.

- **Invest Your Time Earlier – When It Counts Most.**
 - **Limit post-mortem grading:** Why spend the bulk of your time writing extensive comments justifying grades on papers that will not be revised? When students get papers back, they generally look at the grade, period. If it's the end of the semester, many do not pick up their final papers. Hours of your time sit on the floor outside your office. Sadly, you have wasted time that you could have spent commenting on early drafts or holding conferences. When students can take your timely suggestions and apply them to required revisions of their papers, they learn more and their papers improve.
 - **Provide good models of the completed paper:** Students see the target. Even better, you can annotate the models, highlighting typical strengths and weaknesses.
 - **Develop and use rubrics** (evaluative guidelines) to guide students in their writing, and you make your job of grading more efficient.
 - **Introduce self-editing techniques** – Provide checklists and teach students to create *after-the-fact outlines* of drafts so they can see their organization more clearly, determine whether paragraphs contain more than one topic, or spot gaps in thesis support. (Also, if they come to office hours with these, you can spot problems without reading the entire paper.)
- **Sequence or Scaffold Longer Assignments:** Break down the assignment into smaller, manageable tasks with deadlines throughout the semester or tasks that build on each other. Students write throughout the semester instead of just at the end, and they get your feedback early, when it counts.



- **Assign More--but Shorter--Papers:** Assign 2 or 3 short papers rather than one long paper. Students get more comments from you on the first paper and are better able to make improvements later.
- **Use Peer Groups:** Create small groups to read and critique each other's drafts in class or electronically using WebCT, for example. Train students what criteria to use and how to respond. You can also develop Problem-Based Learning (PBL) assignments to engage your students collaboratively in discipline-specific problems. Because students share grades for group papers and presentations, there is tremendous incentive to share knowledge and build on each other's best work.
- **Consider Publishing:** Develop ways students can "publish" their work. Having a public forum motivates students to produce stronger work because they see their writing as connected to more than the professor. Students can publish to WebCT, a class book, a bulletin board, or a web log (*blog*). You could also stage a poster session for students with members of your department participating. Beyond having a real audience for their work, students can see the current or previous students' work.
- **Employ Technology Tools:** In addition to WebCT and email, there are sophisticated systems using computers to organize peer review or that give students feedback before the instructor sees the work.
- **Work With Your Writing Center:** Writing Center staff wants to work with faculty. Writing Center instructors could visit your class at the beginning of the term to talk about the Center and effective writing and rewriting practices. Or they could collaborate on handouts tailored to your needs. Or you could arrange group review sessions under the guidance of a Writing tutor.

USEFUL SOURCES:

Bean, J.C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.

Hobson, E. Schafermeyer, K. "Writing and Critical Thinking: Writing to Learn in Large Classes. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education*. 58 pp. 423-7. 1994.

Oswai, S. "Group Oral Presentations as Support for Writing in Large Classes." *Business Communication Quarterly* 65.1. pp. 71-79. 2002.

Towns, M. et al., "Interinstitutional Peer Review on the Internet: Crossing Boundaries Electronically in a Student-Refereed Assignment," *Journal of College Science Teaching* 30.4. pp. 256-260. 1999. (1999 NSTA Gustav Ohaus Award for Innovation in College Science Teaching)

Writing Across the Curriculum: <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/handouts/WAC/>

Writing to learn in large classes and ideas for minute writes, and journals:

<http://www.psu.edu/dept/cew/faculty/informal.htm>

http://www.writing.ku.edu/instructors/docs/large_class.shtml

Tips on grading, using rubrics, breaking down assignments:

<http://depts.washington.edu/pswrite/grading.html> [managing grading](#)

