

Writing to Learn: 28 Ways to Use a Notebook

Writing is not just a language art: it is also a teaching method. Certain writing activities can help students to engage and explore subject matter more effectively than other instructional approaches. The best of these “writing-to-learn” activities reach across many subject fields and teaching styles, helping students to move ...

→ INTO → THROUGH → BEYOND →
the content of the curriculum.

Writing-to-learn activities differ from formal expository or creative writing assignments in a number of very important ways. Eight key contrasts are:

SPONTANEOUS vs. planned
SHORT vs. lengthy
EXPLORATORY vs. authoritative
EXPRESSIVE vs. transactional
INFORMAL vs. formal
PERSONAL vs. audience-centered
UNEDITED vs. polished
UNGRADED vs. graded

To use writing as a tool of learning means using writing much like a crescent wrench of the mind, as a device which organizes, manipulates, channels, and gives extra leverage to thinking. This tool-like kind of writing works best when it's personalized: when students use language that is informal, colloquial, loose and personal – as close as possible to everyday speech; when experimentation and risk-taking are invited; when demands for proofreading and the risks of grading are eliminated; and when the results of writing-to-learn activities are frequently **used** in class, as contributions to an ongoing exploration of content.

SAMPLE WRITING TO LEARN ACTIVITIES

1. **START-UP or WARM-UP**

The first 3-5 minutes of class time each day are regularly set aside for students to do a quick segment of writing on the topic of the upcoming lesson. This can be the same question each day (reflections on my reading, questions I have this morning, highlights from the homework, etc.) or may be in response to a specific daily question or quote put on the board by the teacher. This activity works especially well to begin a class, since it causes students to break social contact, look down at their writing, tune in to the lesson, gather thoughts and get centered. The “investment” of a few minutes class time helps students to clear their minds of previous issues, activate their prior knowledge, and prepare to join in the upcoming topic.

Four kinds of brainstorming writes, good for beginning new units



2. **FREE WRITING**

In “focused free write writing,” students simply write as fast as they can on a given topic for a few 2-3 minutes, to tune in to what they know, to surface their knowledge. The teacher’s instructions must expressively invite “sentences, phrases, notes, jottings – whatever helps you get thoughts down quickly.” Because the goal is spontaneous, quick, free-association writing, do not say, “write a paragraph.” For many kids, this command is rooted in detached, unengaged writing.

3. **LISTING or LIST-STORMING**

The written version of brainstorming. Here, the student quickly jots a list of words or phrases reflecting whatever they know – or think they know – about a given subject, without editing or second-guessing themselves. Later, lists can be used in many ways: pairs or teams can compare and discuss their lists; frequency tallies for certain items can be totaled and announced, etc.

4. **FACTS/VALUES LISTS**

When a new topic with a strong values dimensions (e.g., AIDS, nuclear war, slavery) is being introduced, students begin by making two lists side-by-side; on the left, facts about the topic, and on the right, attitudes, beliefs, values, or opinions they have about it. As the lesson proceeds, students can validate their facts and explore their values.

5. “K-W-L”

When a topic is being introduced and investigated, students make and use three lists which guide the inquiry. At the start of the unit, each kid divides a piece of paper into three columns, sideways. In the left column, each kid lists all the things they **K**now about the topic. Then these are shared aloud a whole-group list of “Knows” is compiled. Next, in the middle column, everyone writes down some things they **W**ant to know. Then these are shared aloud and while group list of “Want to Knows” is also compiled. Then the class pursues its questions as the unit unfolds. Toward the end of the unit (perhaps days later) kids return to fill in their third columns with things they **L**earned, and these are again the subject of a wider class discussion and review.

6. ART ‘N WRITING MIX

Drawing and writing are branches of the same cognitive tree, and for many students the graphic mode better fits their learning style. There’s always room for doodling ideas, cartooning about the subject being studied, making posters which advertise important concepts. Below are a batch of graphic/drawing strategies, all of which combine words with pictures.

CLUSTERING

A special form of writing-to-learn using a kind of right-brained outlining developed by Gabrielle Rico in her book *Writing the Natural Way* (Tarcher, 1985). Students put key concept, term, or name in a circle at the center of a page and then free-associate, jotting down all the ideas which occur to them in circles arrayed around the kernel term, in whatever pattern “seems right.” Often clustering reveals unrecognized connections and relationships, and is great for surfacing prior knowledge.

SEMANTIC MAPS

Maps or diagrams or ideas that help us to remember terms, concepts, ingredients or relationships. These maps help kids to chart content or knowledge to plug it into their brain, or memorize it. Clustering (above) is helpful for retrieving the map later on.

MINDMAPPING

This raises the idea of mapping to the level of art. The principle: if you really want to remember something – like a set of terminology or a complex concept – it helps to make a careful, craftsmanlike, artful illustration of it. This strategy involves spending considerable TIME making a unique and personal map.

STORY MAPS

Diagrams or maps of the events in a story or narrative, often done chronologically. This can apply to both literature or to historical narrative.

VENN DIAGRAMS

When subjects – books, concepts, people, countries, etc. – have certain attributes that are **alike** and others that are **different**, kids can use two or three interlocking circles to indicate the contrasts and similarities.

TIMELINES

Another familiar combination of graphics and writing, applied to chronology. Works best when cartoons or other illustrations are added.

DRAWING / ILLUSTRATION

Students do original drawings to illustrate ideas found in their reading, discussion, inquiry. This works nicely when tied to specific quotations in reading materials.

CARTOONS

A combination of words and drawings. Often a key strategy for getting reluctant writers to get words on a page – in balloons or captions.

7. WRITTEN CONVERSATION, CORRESPONDENCE, DIALOGUE JOURNALS, LITERATURE LETTERS

Talking informally in writing about the content of the course with the teacher and/or other students in the class. This provides a private, two-way channel of communication, typically developing into an exchange of information about both academic and interpersonal issues. If this is going to stand alone as a regular class activity, the teacher will have to make significant efforts to institutionalize it (perhaps by initiating the first notes, by installing a mail box, by doing much modeling, and responding promptly and fully, etc.). As this gets to be a regular activity, it blends into Learning Logs (see below). Either the teacher or another student must respond to each letter/entry; “Post-It Notes” limit the burden and also save the surface for students’ work from markings.

Note: This next item could appear anywhere on the list, and in a sense is the natural culmination of doing lots of WTL activities. You’ve gotta save the stuff somewhere!



8. LEARNING LOG

As teachers become committed to writing-to-learn, they want to make it an official, regular, consistent, and predictable part of their courses. They also need a place for students to store all their lists, clusters, admit slips, free-writes. Many

teachers have formalized this approach by asking each student to keep a continuous learning log or journal throughout the class. While some specific individual topics may be set by the teacher, the essential idea is for students to be making regular journal entries on a variety of class-related topics – three, four, or five entries per week, some in school and some at home. This document becomes a special place where the subject matter learning working of the course is both accomplished and reflected. We prefer a loose leaf spiral format, so that a student can remove and share one entry without giving up a whole spiral notebook to someone else. Index cards, admit slips, and any other odd-sized writings can simply be pasted or stapled on a loose-leaf page and added to the notebook.

9. EXIT SLIPS

Instead of teaching “bell to bell,” teachers save the last 3-5 minutes of class for students to do a short piece of writing, giving their response, summary or questions about the day’s session. The teacher may collect and read these herself, and use them to plan future lessons. A great diagnostic tool for the teacher, and a natural source of quick review highlights during next class – the teacher can read a few sample exit slips from the previous day aloud (without names, probably) to commence the lesson.

10. ADMIT SLIPS

Upon entering class, students turn in short pieces of writing on a pre-assigned topic, such as: three suggested discussion questions for today’s class, a critical response to a character or historical figure appearing in our reading, or a summary of the previous night’s reading assignment. To begin class, teacher may read some or all aloud (with or without names attached) or cards may be passed out randomly among students to be read aloud and discussed in small pairs or groups.

11. “STOP-N-WRITE”

Too often in presentations, teachers feel a need to plunge on and “cover the material,” when in fact students would benefit greatly from an occasional pause for them to write and reflect upon their thoughts. Some possible focusing questions: what I’m thinking right now; what I grasp up to this moment; questions that are bugging me. This provides kids a chance to consolidate what’s been learned so far, and prepare to go on.

12. POETRY

Many different genres of verse are adaptable to quick-draft, content area writing: haiku, limericks, bio-poems, diamantes, and the like. The ones with simple and clear-cut formulas seem to work best.

13. DIALOGUES

Dramatic dialogues between opposing characters, personages, historical figures, points of view, scientific traditions, etc.

14. FACTION

Students can create pieces of fiction that depend upon a solid understanding of facts studied in a course. Examples: writing imaginary scenes from history or from novels. You cannot create a “missing chapter” from *Huckleberry Finn* or write a plausible corridor gossip from the Constitutional Convention unless you know the material. Roving reporters can interview Pythagoras, Madam Curie, Hitler, etc.

15. KEY WORD / DEFINITION

A variety of ways to focus on certain key words in vocabulary-heavy content areas. Some basic approaches: free writing on the key word or key term; writing definitions of the central vocabulary of a lesson. Alternative: concrete poetry with key words in the subject matter. Helps to consolidate knowledge of concepts.

16. PARAPHRASES

Writing précis or summaries of key ideas, concepts, procedures, processes, events, quotations, demonstrations, scenes, etc. Yes, you can even have kids write summaries of textbook sections. Though this activity is a bit dry, it can be more palatable and useful if done in pairs or teams, rather than solo. The “side talk” that goes on while kids try to boil a chunk of text down to its elements is often worthwhile. One teacher has each student create their own cartoon character (e.g., “Biology Baby”) who “writes” each summary.

17. DATA / PREDICTING WRITES

Teacher stops students at key points in a reading, an activity, or a lecture and invites them to write briefly what they think will happen next, and discuss it a bit in a small or whole-group setting.

18. DIALECTICS

Divide a page in half. Left side is used for note-taking during reading, lecture, or activity – the right half is used for reactions and questions. In math, one side can be used for doing problems and the other for telling words how kids attacked them. Many math teachers tell us that if students can explain a concept in two languages – symbolic and English – this shows that they really grasp the ideas.

19. METACOGNITIVE ANALYSIS

The student writes to describe his/her own thinking process in the subject, perhaps up to the point where difficulties are encountered. For example, showing how a math problem is tackled and worked through up to the point where the student

becomes stumped. One teacher we know gives full credit if the student can explain clearly in English “what I would need to be able to do to complete this problem successfully.”

20. INSTRUCTIONS / DIRECTIONS

The “how-to” is one of the most primitive and inherently engaging forms of writing. Classroom possibilities: how to conduct a science experiment, how to build a birdhouse, how to hem a skirt, how to plan a battle strategy, how to solve a quadratic equation. Notice the natural audience possibilities. Notice also that evaluation means: can the reader do the task based upon instructions?

21. OBSERVATION REPORTS

Science labs have always offered a special and valuable kind of composing experience: reporting data from the close observation of physical objects, processes, phenomena, and events. This sort of writing can be extended to data-gathering and observational reports in a number of other subject areas and formats. Social observations (ethnography) and interviewing are subtypes useful in social studies classes, for example.

22. CLASS MINUTES

One student is elected (or serves on a rotating schedule) as minute-taker for each daily class sessions, and must produce a set of official “Minutes” by the following class. Minutes are either posted in a regular spot or are copied for distribution to the group. Reading and amending these minutes provides an excellent focusing activity for the start of each day’s class; having everyone’s captive attention gives each student author a chance to shine. In practice, authors usually try to infuse the minutes with as much personality as accuracy will permit.

Variations and Extensions

MAKE IT COLLABORATIVE!

One of the best ways to help students to externalize, verbalize and further organize their thinking is to work with one or two other students in actually drafting pieces of writing together. This may be done by pairs or small teams, and it works especially well on a quick paragraph, short observation report, or response to a reading.

TREAT SOME OF THESE SHORT WRITES AS “PREWRITING”

Writing-to-learn pieces can open the way to longer, more polished writing assignments. Sometimes we call these “Upgrades.” Any piece begun in one of the above writing

activities can be pushed toward a more formal, more transactional, more edited paper. In fact, this program of frequent, exploratory, natural daily writing-to-learn is almost guaranteed to produce ideas which kids will be eager to develop. One nice example of this step is called **MICROTHEMES**, in which students write essays or reports that fit on **one note card** (various sizes), thus encouraging compact, terse writing while shortening grading time. Teachers can use analytic scales along with microthemes both to show students what's called for in advance and to yield a score later.

Daniels & Bizar. (2005) *Teaching the Best Practice Way*. Stenhouse.
