

Other Low-Stakes Writing Activities

Free-writing

The idea is simply to write for ten minutes (later on, perhaps fifteen or twenty). Tell students not to stop for anything, to go quickly, yet without rushing. Instruct them to never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what they are doing. If they can't think of a word or a spelling, tell them to just use a squiggle or else write, "I can't think of it." Encourage them to just put down something, whatever is in their mind. If they get stuck, it's fine to write "I can't think of what to say, I can't think of what to say" as many times as they want; or repeat the last word you wrote over and over again; or anything else. The only requirement is that they never stop.

Focused Free-writing

Apply the free-writing methodology to a particular topic.

Anticipatory Writing & Speaking about an Upcoming Topic/Assignment

Students can explore a topic to estimate the degree of their knowledge or test their assumptions and beliefs.

Writing through Problem Solving

In a hard-science class, the teacher presents students with a problem. Working in pairs, students are asked: one to write down the procedure by which s/he would solve the problem; the other would take the explanation and try to solve the problems following the written instructions.

The letter to an Absent Colleague

Break down a lecture or a discussion after 20-min/ half hour and have students pair up. Each will write a ½ page – 1 page "letter/email" to his/her colleague explaining what has just been taught. They swap "letters" and, when reading, each will have to imagine that s/he was absent and treat the "letter" as the only source about the day's lecture. After reading, both students will talk, asking questions for clarification. The teacher will walk around the class, helping with clarifications.

Minute Papers

Give students 1 minute to reflect on a particular question. The teacher can use the 1-minute paper for various purposes at the beginning or end of class, as well as at any time during the class. The following are examples of ways in which you can use the 1-minute paper.

The main point Students informally write for a minute or two on the main point of a reading or mini-lecture. This will help teachers start a discussion or get a sense of whether the students understood the central issues in the lecture.

The most important thing learned during class Assigned at the end of class, this short assignment will remind students of at least one useful thing they can take from class and give teachers a sense of what lecture/discussion points were most clear and meaningful for students.

Questions remained unanswered or concepts still unclear. A short activity that can be done during or at the end of class. If done during class time, make sure you are ready to answer student questions on the spot.

One word/sentence from readings. A great conversation starter. Ask each student to write down one word that stood out in their readings or find one sentence that they want to explore as a class. Ask them to also jot down the page number where they encountered the word/sentence. This is a great opportunity for them to be specific in their inquiries. **Follow-up:** after the class discussion, ask them to make a flash card and write the sentence/word on one side and the explanation on the other, and keep it for future assignments and exams.

Writing “Translations”

For those readings that are particularly full of jargon, assign students to “translate” those ideas into their own words, or even into a famous person’s words, i.e. Homer Simpson, Larry King, John Stewart.

Circulating the question

Have index-cards and distribute them among students. Ask them to ask a question about the reading that they want more clarification on. Then, in a circle, ask them to pass the card twice to their right. Each student will have to try responding to the question posed by another. Pass them again and ask another student to ask their clarification. Then open the discussion and try to address, as a class, all concepts/questions. You will have had 2 people helping one, and then the whole class contributing.

Based on:

Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Anson, Chris M. and Deanna P. Dannels, “The Heart of the Matter. Writing, Speaking, and Inquiry-Guided Learning,” 219-127. In *Teaching and Learning through Inquiry*. Ed. Virginia S. Lee. Stylus Publishing, 2004.

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