

Writing Assignments for Large Classes

Large lecture sections taught by a single instructor present practical barriers to the extensive use of writing. But incorporating writing, both as a learning tool and as a way for students to communicate their knowledge, is possible in such settings. One approach involves the single, longer assignment, parts of which are sequenced over the course of the semester. Another is the incorporation of several short writings, especially of the “write-to-learn” variety. This handout focuses on short writings for large-section classes by highlighting three issues: (1) goals for writing, (2) assignments themselves, and (3) responding to, evaluating, and grading writing. Each of these deserves much fuller treatment, but they’re offered briefly together below because they should all come into play when planning the writing for a course.

Goals

Writing assignments should be coordinated with course content and learning goals. Inventory your course goals by asking

1. what are the main units in the course?
2. what are the main learning objectives for each of the units and for the whole course?
what thinking skills are you trying to develop: ways of observing, questioning strategies, use of evidence, etc.?
3. what do you anticipate will be the most difficult parts of the course for the students, both in terms of content and thinking skills?
4. if you could change your students’ study habits, what would you most like to change?
(e.g., reading assigned texts more carefully for main ideas and vocabulary, key cases or examples, ways of reasoning; reviewing lecture notes in between classes; framing questions about content)
5. what difference do you want the course to make in students’ lives—their ways of thinking, their values, their sense of self?

Writing assignments should be selected to coordinate with these goals.

Assignments

Here are examples of short writing assignments connected with course goals. Some of these are write-to-learn tasks: i.e., assignments in which the point is not to create a polished writing product but to use writing in the process of learning disciplinary knowledge. As such, they suggest different methods of response, evaluation, and grading from those appropriate to a long research paper, case study, or lab report. Other short writing assignments offer practice in various stages of longer or more developed assignments. Modes of response are suggested for each and discussed further below.

In-class writing

1. If you want to foster habits of attentive and critical listening to lectures, and attempts to connect readings to lectures, have students **write briefly at the beginning of a class**. They can be asked to respond to open-ended questions, such as “What questions do you want to ask about last night’s reading?” or specific ones, “What are the three metaphors Lewis Thomas offers for humans’ perception of their relation to the earth?” You can then ask one or two students to read their responses aloud and have others respond. Or you can collect them all and read a random sample. Your response is an oral one worked into the lecture that day or the next. This assignment might work well at the beginning of the term; it could then be repeated periodically to remind students of these habits.
2. After you lecture on a difficult concept, ask the students to **write a one or two-sentence summary of a key idea during the last five minutes of class**. Or you can ask them to write about what questions the day’s lecture raises for them. You may select a representative sample to read before the next class to determine how well the students are listening and understanding and to discover common points of confusion. Or you may find that the students are absorbing the information easily and well, allowing you to move on to more complex issues.

Journal-entry assignments

Journal entry-type assignments are particularly useful in leading students **to apply concepts to their own life experiences, to reflect on (rather than regurgitate) new knowledge, and to chart their own learning in the course** (among other things). Journals can be open-ended, semi-structured or guided by the instructor; the topics suggested here would be characteristic of a guided journal. Students could be asked to

3. catalogue their encounters with the subject over the course of a day (e.g., conversations, physical activities, consuming or media practices, transportation, or work experiences related to the content of the course)
4. find current news articles and editorials about issues related to the course and write brief responses to them;
5. write their memories of attending an event related to the subject of the course, reflecting on the way their thinking about the subject was affected by the experience;

6. reflect (near the end of the course) on how they think differently about X (your subject) than they did at the beginning, and about what changes their new knowledge might make in their daily life habits and choices.

These one-page writings can be read quickly and impressionistically without attention to form. Or a set of them might be turned in at the end of the course in a mini-portfolio to be graded on a pass/fail basis.

Parts of larger writing tasks

These are short writing assignments that extract (or mimic) phases in longer, more formal assignments.

7. If a principle learning goal of the course is to foster students' abilities to observe or read carefully, employ an observation or reading assignment: a **two-page description** of a designated object or a **one-page summary** of a reading.
8. If you'd like to have students in a large-section class gain experience in reading research materials without the whole apparatus of the research paper, employ a directed research assignment: **two-page summary or analysis of pre-selected research materials** (subject librarians are eager to help you select such materials).
9. If you believe that this course is one in which students need to practice supporting an argumentative thesis with evidence, you could assign a **microtheme**: one-two page argument providing evidence (from lectures, readings, reflections and information collected in short writings, or from guided research analysis) in support of a specific proposition stated in the assignment. Themes can be written by collaborative groups or individuals. Garnering and selecting evidence in a focused way can also serve as good preparation for essay exams.

These assignments will require more reading time than the other two categories, but response, evaluation, and grading can be stream-lined by using the minus/check/plus and models feedback practices described below.

Responding, Evaluating, and Grading

Responding to student writing means using your comments to communicate your perceptions as a reader. Evaluation is the process of determining the value of the student's work. It usually involves responding with words. [To grasp this distinction, consider the difference between writing, "I'm not following your line of thought here" and "illogical" as marginal comments.] Grading is the distillation of that process in a single symbol that, by itself, doesn't communicate very much (or very well). Distinguishing among these processes for yourself and for students may enable them to learn more from your comments and may help you to communicate better with them.

With writing to learn assignments, the instructor is responding primarily to the students' grasp of knowledge rather than to the form or style of writing (although the two, of course, cannot be completely separated). Marginal comments will focus on content ("the science," as you say). Even in the more formal short assignments, it's important to resist the temptation to concentrate on student errors (esp. "lower-order" errors such as spelling and punctuation) or comment on every aspect of the paper. We'll work more extensively with response to student papers next spring. For now, consider the options below.

Three forms of time-saving response/evaluation

1. **In-class, student-participant response** – Students can learn from each other. One of the principal goals of first-year composition at UCI is training students in peer response. By the time they get to your class, they will have read and responded to a number of pieces of writing by their peers. Of course, they're not all great at evaluating their own or others' work, but the more practice they get, the better able they will be to read their own writing critically. Consider having short writings read and evaluated (orally or in writing) in small groups in or out of class. A general discussion after the evaluation process can bring out questions, problems, differences in perspective among students and give the instructor the opportunity to respond to the whole group on issues that come up with many students—more efficient than writing the same observation on 75 of 90 papers.
2. **Minus/check/plus grading** – These symbols indicate that an assignment was done, give a rough estimation of its quality, and take far less time than calculating and defending letter grades. The features characteristic of papers earning each mark can be covered in class.
3. **Models feedback** -- With this form of evaluation/grading, you do not make any comments on the papers, so you can grade them very rapidly. You provide feedback through in-class discussion of selected essays. Select an exemplary "A" response and put it on the overhead projector (or make copies for the class). The "models feedback" comes from a discussion of what constitutes an "A" response as well as a discussion of typical problem areas found in weaker papers. This discussion accomplishes two purposes: it clarifies for students the writing and thinking skills exhibited in strong papers, and it reviews and clarifies recent course material (the content part of your assignment) (Bean 236).

Work Cited

Bean, John C. Engaging Ideas. The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996.