

Developing writing capabilities: Assigning in-class writing activities

ASK STUDENTS TO WRITE WHAT THEY KNOW ABOUT A TOPIC BEFORE YOU DISCUSS IT.

Ask your students to write a brief summary of what they already know or what opinions they hold regarding the subject you are about to discuss. The purpose of this is to focus the students' attention, there is no need to collect the summaries.

ASK STUDENTS TO RESPOND IN WRITING TO QUESTIONS YOU POSE DURING CLASS.

Prior to class starting, list two or three short-answer questions on the board and ask your students to write down their responses. Your questions might call for a review of material you have already discussed or recalling information from assigned readings.

ASK STUDENTS TO WRITE FROM A PRO OR CON POSITION.

When presenting an argument, stop and ask your students to write down all the reasons and evidence they can think of that supports one side or the other. These statements can be used as the basis for discussion.

DURING CLASS, PAUSE FOR A THREE-MINUTE WRITE.

Periodically ask students to write freely for three minutes on a specific question or topic. They should write whatever pops into their mind without worrying about grammar, spelling, phrasing, or organization. This kind of free writing, according to writing experts, helps students synthesize diverse ideas and identify points they may not understand. There is no need to collect these exercises.

HAVE STUDENTS WRITE A BRIEF SUMMARY AT THE END OF CLASS.

At the end of the class period, give your students index cards to jot down the key themes, major points, or general principles of the day's discussion. You can easily collect the index cards and review them to see whether the class understood the discussion.

HAVE ONE STUDENT KEEP MINUTES TO BE READ AT THE NEXT CLASS MEETING.

By taking minutes, students get a chance to develop their listening, synthesizing, and writing skills. Boris (1983) suggests the following:

- Prepare your students by having everyone take careful notes for the class period, go home and rework them into minutes, and hand them in for comments. It can be the students' discretion whether the minutes are in outline or narrative form.
- Decide on one to two good models to read or distribute to the class.
- At the beginning of each of the following classes, assign one student to take minutes for the period.

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- Give a piece of carbon paper to the student who is taking minutes so that you can have a rough copy. The student then takes the original home and revises it in time to read it aloud at the next class meeting.
- After the student has read their minutes, ask other students to comment on their accuracy and quality. If necessary, the student will revise the minutes and turn in two copies, one for grading and one for your files.

STRUCTURE SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION AROUND A WRITING TASK.

For example, have your students pick three words that are of major importance to the day's session. Ask your class to write freely for two to three minutes on just one of the words. Next, give the students five to ten minutes to meet in groups to share what they have written and generate questions to ask in class.

USE PEER RESPONSE GROUPS.

Divide your class into groups of three or four, no larger. Ask your students to bring to class enough copies of a rough draft of a paper for each person in their group. Give your students guidelines for critiquing the drafts. In any response task, the most important step is for the reader to note the part of the paper that is the strongest and describe to the writer why it worked so well. The following instructions can also be given to the reader:

- State the main point of the paper in a single sentence
- List the major subtopics
- Identify confusing sections of the paper
- Decide whether each section of the paper has enough detail, evidence, and information
- Indicate whether the paper's points follow one another in sequence
- Judge the appropriateness of the opening and concluding paragraphs
- Identify the strengths of the paper

USE READ-AROUND GROUPS.

Read-around groups are a technique used with short assignments (two to four pages) which allows everyone to read everyone else's paper. Divide the class into groups no larger than four students and divide the papers (coded for anonymity) into as many sets as there are groups. Give each group a set and ask the students to read each paper silently and decide on the best paper in the set. Each group should discuss their choices and come to a consensus on the best paper. The paper's code number is recorded by the group, and the same process is repeated with a new set of papers. After all the groups have read all the sets of papers, someone from each group writes on the board the code number from the best paper in each set. The recurring numbers are circled. Generally, one to three papers stand out.

ASK STUDENTS TO IDENTIFY THE CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE WRITING.

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After completing the read-around activity, ask your students to reconsider those papers which were voted as excellent by the entire class and to write down features that made each paper outstanding. Write their comments on the board, asking for elaboration and probing vague generalities. In pairs, the students discuss the comments on the board and try to put them into categories such as organization, awareness of audience, thoroughness of detail, etc. You might need to help your students arrange the characteristics into meaningful categories.

(University of Wisconsin, 2016)