

Using Writing to Learn in Your Classes

In-Class Writing-to-Learn Activities

Think, Pair, Share: Ask a question relevant to the day's lecture, have students write a short response, then give them a few minutes to talk to a partner about their response.

Priming the Pump (start of class): Ask students to write down a question they would like to ask you about the material from the last class or about the reading for the day. Collect the questions and pick one or two to discuss at the end of class or at the start of the next class.

Clarification pauses: About 15-20 minutes into the class, ask students to write down any questions they have at that point. Or ask them to summarize what they've heard so far. You can respond to one or more, or they can share their questions/summaries with a partner.

Think, Pair, Share (end of class): Ask students to summarize in 3-5 sentences the key points of the lecture and then to discuss their summary with the person next to them. You may want to collect their summaries and choose one or more to read in the next class.

Minute Paper (end of class): At the end of class, ask a question about the day's material for students to answer in short essay form. Some useful minute paper questions:

- Describe the most important point from today's class and why it's important.
- Give an example of a specific thing the professor does that helps you (or makes it more difficult) to learn [insert appropriate topic for your course].
- Describe the most difficult or confusing thing in today's lecture and why it's confusing or difficult.
- Give an example of how _____ can be used to explain _____.

Outside-of-Class Writing-to-Learn Activities

Practice essay exams:

- Give students a sample question with clear directions and criteria. Ask them to read the question in class and mark any parts that are unclear or that they are unsure about. They can complete the essay outside of class and then meet in groups to compare their responses. Ask them to select one essay from each group to turn in to you. (You may want to give the student who wrote the selected essay extra credit.)
- Use the best practice essay(s) of those submitted as a model with the class, explaining what makes the essay(s) good.

Microthemes:

- Have students write 200-250 words (on the reading or lecture) with a thesis and evidence.
- Collect and choose a random number of these to score each time. Give a number score and tell students the criteria for each score. Use the best themes to teach course concepts.

Journals: Journals work best if you give students specific prompts, e.g.:

- Connect a course concept with personal or observed experiences.
- Describe material you're having trouble understanding: what's difficult about the lesson?
- Explain a course concept/a reading/an experiment to a peer.