

Writing Matters



Great Beginnings

A wise governess in Austria once sang on the silver screen to her charges, “Let’s start at the very beginning, a very good place to start.”* But, we all know that beginnings can often be difficult. Beginning an important piece of writing may leave us staring for hours at a blank screen, the cursor continuously blinking in one spot. Beginning a home improvement project may involve endless hours of measuring and planning, but no actual “improvement” happening. Starting a new semester of classes often feels the same. We plan, we read, we write a syllabus, but on the first day of classes, we aren’t sure what to do or say. Our students feel the same way—unsure, nervous, as if they are about to step off a ledge into black space. We want our students to learn and to be engaged with our content. A great way to achieve that level of engagement is to have them write—even on day one. It’s the beginning of learning, and the beginning is a very good place to start.

Using Writing to Increase Student Engagement

We all know that education is not simply a process of dumping our knowledge into the students’ minds. Our students must make meaning for themselves, taking the information we offer and forming it into their own words, their own ideas, their own education. Without that appropriation of meaning, education has not occurred.

One of the central issues for educators, then, is *how* to engage students so that they will take hold of the class material and make it their own. What can we offer to our students to foster the engagement they need in

our classes?

One of the foundational principles of WAC is that writing encourages students to actively engage with class content. Writing tasks access critical thinking skills in ways that our other uses of language do not. Therefore, incorporating brief, informal writing tasks into the classroom can help students make their own meaning out of the content you’re teaching.

Writing also encourages students to use higher order thinking skills such as analysis and synthesis. Something as simple as having students summarize a class lecture before

walking out the door can solidify concepts, make connections to other classes or other lectures, and increase recall ability on tests or exams.

Another relatively painless way to use writing is to have students explain a concept as though they are writing to a little brother, or mother, or friend outside of class. As the students begin to dissect the concept in order to explain it in simple terms, they engage with the material in a meaningful way. By writing down that explanation (versus simply sharing it verbally in class), abstract thought is made

concrete. Through this process, students are engaging with your class content on levels that are much deeper than can be accessed through lecture alone.

It is very easy for students to switch to “zone out” or “auto pilot” mode when they come into our classrooms. They can end up sleeping, texting on their phones, or doodling in the margins of their notebooks while our carefully prepared lecture notes fall on deaf ears. Engaging students through brief writing exercises can break through the auto pilot and awaken their brains to a new level of engagement and learning.

The beginning is the most important part of the work.
—Plato