

Writing Matters



Writing to Learn

Our students' writing generally falls into one of three categories. The first is "Learning to Write." This is writing done in order to learn the mechanics, grammar, and structure of writing. We think of this type of writing when we think of students learning how to structure a sentence, a paragraph or an essay. The second category is "Writing to Demonstrate Learning." This is the writing seen on exams and in research papers and scholarly essays that display what the student has learned about a particular subject. The last category is "Writing to Learn," where writing is used as a vehicle or mode of learning. It is this last category of writing that often needs more attention from instructors in today's classrooms.

Writing is **not** merely a reflection of an individual's thought. It is a process that is, in itself, generative—it **creates** thinking. Do you want to help your students think deeper and better about your subject? Have them write about it. This kind of writing is not focused on grammar, fluidity, structure or research. Instead, the emphasis is on helping our students think critically on topics that we are discussing. Writing, because it is neurologically demanding, sustains and deepens thinking as students navigate through the issues at hand. There are *many* ways to incorporate this type of writing into the classroom. This newsletter will focus on one: journals.

Incorporating Journals into the Classroom

Encouraging students to think critically about the topics we teach is a sometimes frustrating task. Journals present an opportunity to place another tool in the tool box for creating space for critical thinking.

One type of journal used in classes is the open-ended journal. Here, you can ask students to write a required number of pages or for a required period of time on any aspect of the course. This gives students a chance to summarize, paraphrase,

condense notes, ask questions, and debate issues in a stress-free way.

Another type of journal with slightly more structure is the guided journal. The instructor poses questions about the course material then asks students to write about the issues that arise in response to the questions.

A type of journal that is often appealing to instructors is a journal exploring contemporary issues. These journals can help prepare students for the real world

by engaging the content they are learning with events and issues that are currently happening around them.

Finally, journals can be used specifically for exam preparation. Early in the course, the instructor hands out essay questions that may appear on the final exam. Throughout the semester, students are asked to write in their journals, responding to these questions as the course material is presented to

them.*

These are very brief descriptions of only a few journal variations. The best journal is one that is tailored to suit your class, and no journal is helpful if it isn't used.

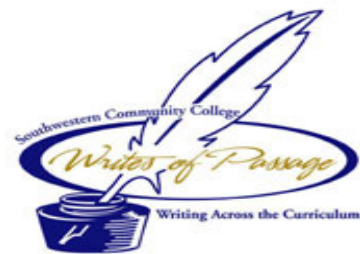
The beauty of journals is that they often can require minimal response from the instructor. You should read them periodically to see how students are thinking about the issues at hand, but they don't require extensive comments like essays do (unless you want to!).

If you're going to be a writer, the first essential is just to write. Do not wait for an idea. Start writing something and the ideas will come. You have to turn the faucet on before the water starts to flow.

Louis L'Amour

*Journal descriptions adapted from Bean, John. *Engaging Ideas*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2001.

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Remembering Our Own Student Selves

As a new semester begins, there's always a feeling of anticipation, a feeling that the slate has been wiped clean and we get a fresh start with new classes. We may see new students, or we may have a class full of familiar faces. Either way, the beginning of the semester is a good time to reflect upon our own experiences as students in order to better understand and prepare for the students we'll get to know in the coming weeks. There are so many things that are easy to forget.

It's easy to forget that we once did not know what we know now.

It's easy to forget that we once struggled with learning to write in our discipline.

It's easy to forget that we once sat where our students are sitting.

The distance between us and our students casts long shadows over our teaching. Strive to remember what it was like, and you may just find yourself changing the way an assignment is worded, altering a comment on a draft of an essay, or giving students better ways to explore the ideas they are encountering for the first time. Our students have to learn how to write for each class—after all, each instructor has different standards and different ideas on what makes “good” writing. Remember what it was like to be that overwhelmed student especially as you now assign writing assignments that seem easy to you but bewildering to them. (see attached essay, “A Conversation Through the Looking Glass”)

2010 WAC ESSAY AWARDS

Once again this year, the WAC Essay Awards will be held during the spring semester, generously sponsored by the Student Life Committee. This contest is open to any currently enrolled SCC student. The awards will be given for any essay written for a class during this academic year—Fall 2009 through Spring 2010. The deadline for entries is Friday, March 26, 2010.

Two categories for entries—Research Essays and Non-Research Essays

Cash prizes in each division:	First Place	\$200
	Second Place	\$100
	Third Place	\$50

More information will be forthcoming on the WAC website, posters and flyers.

Remember to schedule your in-class writing workshops with Jennifer! For a list of available workshops and a workshop request form, please see the WAC website: www.southwesterncc.edu/wac.