

# Writing Matters



## I Want My Students to LEARN

My exasperated seventh grade math teacher is the first one I remember using the argument, “I’m not up here talking because I like the sound of my voice. I’m telling you this stuff because I want you to learn it.” We all want our students to truly learn the material we cover in our classes. While students may seem to understand, they often stumble when asked to give an explanation for a concept we’ve covered. How can we ensure that they are using the thought processes necessary to our individual disciplines? Writing—and you are the expert in your field. You can direct student writing to probe subjects and engage with material that is important to your discipline. This doesn’t mean that every class needs to assign a research paper. Instead, students can be asked to think critically about a topic by writing brief journal entries, jotting down questions they have after a lecture, or summarizing on a note card what was covered in class. That is the kind of writing that leads to better thinking, more engagement, and, in a word, learning.

## The Writing/Learning Connection

We all recognize that we live in a fast-paced society. It has been said that our students are living in the “now” generation where everyone wants immediate results, immediate response. It’s not surprising that such a culture encourages fragmented thinking. As a result, we are seeing the consequences in writing that happens in short, truncated sentences (think Twitter with its 140-character limit). Are our students losing the ability to sustain critical thought about a subject?

The WAC program seeks to counteract this shortening of our students’ thinking skills and attention spans.

By incorporating writing into our classrooms, we can encourage our students to broaden their thought horizons. However, please know that I’m not simply asking instructors to “take one for the team” and assign a writing assignment for literacy’s sake. Instead, I’m asking that you consider the positive implications of writing within courses that traditionally aren’t writing centered. Writing is relevant simply because of its connection to learning.

Writing is unique among our uses of language (the others being listening, speaking and reading) simply because it taps into

areas of the brain requiring concentration and retention in a way that neurophysiologically integrative. Writing literally takes the abstract and makes it concrete. Because of this, it enhances our students’ abilities to think deeply about the subjects we are teaching.

Through writing assignments, we ask our students to slow down their thought processes. They must make connections between ideas and concepts in ways they may not have thought about before. And, perhaps most importantly, they put our classroom concepts

into their own words—in effect taking ownership of their education.

Writing is not simply a way of checking on our students to see if they’re learning. Writing IS a mode of learning!

Because we would like for our students to truly learn the material from our classes, it behooves us to integrate writing into the multitude of ways we encourage our students to learn. While this does NOT mean that every teacher needs to assign a research paper or formal essays, it does mean that writing can be woven into the fabric of any kind of class in more informal ways. For more, see page two!

**Writing is thinking on paper.**

**—William Zinsser**

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## Writing That Works in ANY Class

Informal writing assignments capitalize on the fact that writing is a mode of learning. Therefore, many in the writing community call these Writing to Learn (WTL) assignments.

The key to these assignments is that they are INFORMAL. Students should feel free to “think on paper,” which means they may use incorrect grammar, misspelled words, or even incomplete sentences. In these assignments, all those issues are perfectly fine, because the emphasis is on THINKING.

A favorite WTL assignment of mine is the mini-theme. At the end

of class, I hand out a 3”x5” notecard and have students summarize the day’s lecture. An alternative would be to have the students ask a question about something that seemed unclear. They leave the cards for me, and I can use the cards to take attendance for the day! The best use, though, is that they show me where the students are in terms of their thinking in my class. I can then adjust my next lecture to address any concerns.

Another WTL assignment is to have students write at the beginning of class based upon a reading assignment or a probing question on

the board. These brief writings can often lead to interesting discussions that take students deep into the material at hand.

Discussion boards on Blackboard are a great way to integrate writing into a class without taking class time. Make sure you direct students with questions and prompts that help keep them on task and exploring the topics important to your field.

Above all, I would encourage you to use writing to give students a chance to engage fully with the material in class. It can be a rewarding experience for you and your students.

### INTRODUCING

# THE THIRD ANNUAL WAC ESSAY AWARDS

Students can enter any essay that they have written for a class during this academic year (Fall 2010-Spring 2011) in one of two categories: Research Essays and Non-research Essays. Cash prizes for first, second and third places in each category!

**Deadline for entries: Thursday, March 31 at 4 pm**

Writing, to me, is simply thinking through my fingers.

—Isaac Asimov