

# Writing Matters

Writing Across the Curriculum  
Southwestern Community College

Volume IV  
Number 6

## WAC Roundtable Discussion!

Join us for a discussion of “what works” when it comes to assigning writing in your class.

If you have an assignment that works well, come share! If you have questions about designing assignments, come listen!

**Time and location TBA by email.**

## Importance of the “Low Stakes” Writing Assignment

It is easy to assume that all writing assigned in a college classroom must be “high stakes” — worth a grade that is often a significant portion of the final course grade. However, we must not overlook the importance of “low stakes” writing—assignments that are given for the sake of thinking and learning, not necessarily for a grade.

Low stakes writing not only helps students access critical thinking skills necessary for learning, but it also decreases the enormous anxiety most of our students experience when asked to write in class. Once that burden is lifted from their shoulders, our students are freed up to think creatively and deeply about the content we are emphasizing in our classes.

## Informal Assignments = Deep Learning of Content

Writing about an idea or concept changes the way we think about it. Writing forces us to use areas of our brains that we normally wouldn’t engage if we were simply reading about, listening about, or talking about that same concept.

If we consider the above statement as we design the assignments we use in class, it makes sense that we should consider using writing in ways that encourages this critical

thinking and deep connections. Informal writing assignments can play that role in our classrooms.

“Informal writing” can be understood as short, loosely-structured assignments that ask students to perform “thinking on paper.”

These pieces of writing are often exploratory in nature, written in response to lectures, readings, and specific disciplinary issues that you cover in your

classes. This kind of writing is equivalent to a piano student practicing at home—a place to rehearse, think about, and perhaps mess up. However, there’s always a larger purpose to both the writing and the piano practice.

It may seem that it would be easy to become overwhelmed by paper work if you ask students to write in class frequently. While many informal writing assignments may

not need to “count” as a significant grade, they can make up a portion of a student’s participation grade in a class. Therefore, you may read the pieces students produce, but you might not need to respond to or grade them all. The purpose of this kind of writing isn’t necessarily the grade—it’s the thought process behind the writing.

### **Sample Assignments**

Important Questions:  
After students have  
*(continued on page 2)*

I am never so clear about a matter as when I have just finished writing about it.

—James Van Allen

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## Informal Assignments (cont'd)

completed an assigned reading, have them write in class two or three important questions they have about the topic at hand. This can often be the beginning of lively classroom discussion.

Lecture Summary/Response: At the end of class, reserve three minutes to have students write a summary or response to the day's lecture. You can leave this open-ended, or you

can guide students with a prompt that asks them to write about a central point you were trying to make.

Discussion boards: In both seat-based and online courses, the use of a discussion board can expand the time your students spend thinking about the content of your course. Begin a thread with a question, and then ask each student to respond to your question AND to another student's

response as well.

Explanation: We all know that if you teach a concept, you truly learn it. One informal assignment to use is to have students explain an important course concept to a new learner (or any other audience of your choice). A favorite used in a physics class: Explain to your mother why water stays in a pail when you swing that pail in a circle around her head.

There are many more

ways that informal writing can be incorporated into nearly every class. You can design your own assignments to fit your needs!

Be explicit with your students as to why they are writing and what you expect. Then, you can read the products, have access to how your students are learning, and then rest assured that they have started to make the content their own.

### Food for Thought: Excerpt from John Bean's *Engaging Ideas*, 2nd ed.

"The evidence from both research and instructor testimony seems irrefutable: exploratory writing, focusing on the process rather than the product of thinking, deepens most students' engagement with course material while enhancing learning and developing critical thinking. Many teachers who try exploratory writing in their courses testify that they would never go back to their old way of teaching. The payoff of exploratory writing is students' enhanced preparation for class, richer class discussions, and better final-product writing. From in-class freewrites to reflective thought letters to extended bulletin board discussions, exploratory writing can help most students become more active and engaged learners" (144-145).

Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011. Print.

