

# Writing Matters

Writing Across the Curriculum  
Southwestern Community College

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## “I Should Have Made a List”

I can't even count the number of times I've muttered the above words to myself while standing in the middle of the grocery store, a bit bewildered and overwhelmed by all the options in front of me. It's amazing what writing to-do lists or shopping lists can do for our memories. Even if we don't look at them again or if we leave them at home as we head out to the store, we can often remember most, if not all, of the items we need.

One area of study in neuropsychology focuses on how writing changes memory. Studies have shown that writing causes the brain to interact with information in a more complex way than simply thinking about it or talking about it. Writing is more than a singular cognitive function; it is dependent upon multiple brain regions, thus creating memory in a unique way. Evidently that shopping list is doing more than putting items in a tidy arrangement for me to carry around the aisles of the grocery store!

## The Difficulty of Writing is its Gift

Nearly all of us feel that dread, that grip of anxiety deep inside us when we are required to write. This is especially true when that required writing has “high stakes” connected to it—a significant grade, a job, a promotion, etc.

The primary difficulty of writing rests in the fact that there is no specific area of the brain dedicated solely to writing (Ardila, 2004). Writing is a culturally developed skill, dependent on various brain regions that are dedicated to other discrete

skills. Therefore, in order for a person to write, his/her brain has to call upon a wide range of areas in order to produce concrete written material. Consider the act of taking notes. What seems like a simple task actually engages complex skills and brain regions. In very broad, simplistic terms, writing uses listening and language areas, but it also incorporates spatial areas, motor skill areas (particularly fine motor skills), and significant interaction between the brain hemispheres. In this intricate

interplay, memory is created in deeper ways than simply “thinking about” a concept. Therefore, it's not actually the notes themselves that create memory; it's the process of writing the notes that does.

All the above happens just to get ink on the page. Add to that the difficulties of the rules of English grammar and the particular rules that are required within our individual discipline. Writing at school adds all the demands of “academic” writing, demands that typically vary (sometimes

greatly) from discipline to discipline.

This examination of writing and the brain is interesting in itself, but when applied in our daily lives, this knowledge lends us power in designing our courses. After all, it is *precisely* because writing is so difficult that we should incorporate it into our classes, particularly when covering material that is considered crucial or central to the discipline. Because it calls upon so many cognitive functions,

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True alchemists do not turn lead into gold; they change the world into words.

—William H. Gass

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## Difficulty of Writing (cont'd)

and because it creates connections in the brain that aren't automatically there, writing changes the way students learn. It makes sense, then, that we would utilize this tool to give our students the best chance possible to learn content deeply.

We should take advantage of the power of writing, giving students a chance to wrestle with topics we cover, to create new cognitive connections, and to deepen memory and learning.

Incorporating this memory tool can be as simple as requiring students to take notes on assigned reading. For example, if you have on your syllabus that Chapter 2 in the textbook should be read by January 10, you could require students to take notes that you will take up in class on January 10. Skim through them to see how students are doing at picking up main ideas. This will give you invaluable feedback that you can use in the following class period to touch on

missed items, to reinforce particular parts of the chapter, etc.

Knowing why writing is so difficult and powerful helps us see why we should be giving our students many and varied opportunities to write in our courses. We can use this tool to create spaces for students to learn and deeply understand material that other modes of thinking don't allow for.



### Reference

Ardila, A. (2004). There is not any specific brain area for writing: From cave-paintings to computers. *International Journal of Psychology, 39*, 61-67. doi: 10.1080/00207590344000295

## Sample Assessment for Note Taking

Below is a sample rubric for assessing note taking in class. This can be made more elaborate to meet the needs of your class, if needed, or you can keep it short and simple. An assessment like this can save you time when reading student notes, and it gives the students a clear idea of what you're looking for. Simply circle the number that the student has achieved and then staple the slip to the notes when you return them.

Tally up points from all notes at the end of the semester, and you can give yourself a definitive way to give a student a participation grade.

Notes for January 10

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_

- 1 Not clearly engaging with material—too short
- 2 Summarizes material
- 3 Good—clear summary and some questions/engagement with material
- 4 Well done! Summarizes well; engages with material; good questions asked