

Writing Matters

Writing Across the Curriculum
Southwestern Community College

Volume VI
Number 4

WAC Office Summer Hours

The WAC Coordinator is available for meetings, in-class workshops, etc. during the second summer session, June 23 – July 29, 2014.

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Writing, Thought, and Memory

As mentioned before in this newsletter, writing is unique in our uses of language in the ways that it accesses varied areas of our brains. Because it is neurologically complex, it is a powerful tool for the creation of thought and memory.

Because of this complexity and power, writing is the perfect tool to use in our classrooms. **Writing doesn't have to be essays or research papers.** In fact, you don't even have to grade grammar or format or spelling if you don't want to! The key issue to keep in mind is how the very act of writing is creating thought and memory for your students.

Have a "key concept" that students need to grasp in order to be successful in your class? Have them write about it—in a letter to their grandmother, in a journal, in notes taken on a chapter of reading, in a pretend "dialogue" between two people—whatever you can dream up! It's the act of writing itself that is key.

Write What You Know...or What You Need to Know

Advice to beginning or struggling authors nearly always begins with the well-worn advice, "Write what you know!" However, in our classes, we may indeed change that nugget of wisdom into "Write what you need to know!"

Because the very act of writing creates meaningful cognitive connections deep within our brains, it only makes sense that we use writing as a tool in our classrooms. Our students benefit from it by learning content more deeply and

more completely. For instructors, reading student writing simply for the feedback can be enlightening and informative, showing us what our students are thinking and how they are processing (or not!) the information we are teaching.

Below are three short assignments that may help you to integrate writing into your classroom.

Letters to....

A simple writing assignment that is a great example of "teach it to know it" comes from physics

instructor, Matt Cass who assigns "Letters to Grandma." In these pieces, Cass has students explain physics concepts to their grandmothers (or little brothers, or cousins, or whomever). The shift in audience forces students to take apart complex concepts and then use "everyday" language to communicate them. This thought process helps students grasp the information meaningfully by making it their own, and that is the very definition of learning.

Notecard Exit Slip

At the end of a long day of lecture, especially if you are covering new material, hand your students notecards. Ask them to summarize the new material and then ask two questions to either analyze/critique the new material or to ask you to clarify any confusing bits. Once they finish, they hand them in. For you, these illuminate whether or not students are processing what you're teaching.

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Writing and learning and thinking are the same process.

—William Zinsser

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Write to Know (cont'd)

Journals

Journals are informal pieces of writing about loosely directed subjects (though you can guide journal writing with questions and prompts). Journaling can be an easy way to use writing in seat-based or online classes.

Journal entries are especially useful in long projects if you have students document along the way. Have students write about what they did, how they did it, why, etc. This works in a bit of reflective practice into your classroom, something that is proven to help students transfer knowledge from one context to another.

Journals are useful, too, when doing large amounts of reading as a class, whether it is from the textbook or from a class novel or book. One useful technique is to have students respond to various passages or chapters, then use those responses to enhance classroom discussion. You can direct those responses with specific prompts or questions, or you can choose to leave it open-ended and simply have a minimum word count requirement.

Writing is a key component to learning. It creates new pathways of thought, new connections in meaning, and new questions for further exploration. It is a powerful tool that our students deserve to use as they create their educations in our classrooms.

Congratulations

2014 WAC Essay Winners

RESEARCH CATEGORY

First place: Michael Bruce
Second place: Corey Smolik
Third place: Kellie Willcox

NON-RESEARCH CATEGORY

First place: Karleigh Reeves
Second place: Brianna Adams
Third place: Dani Greenberg



Writing is an exploration. You start from nothing and learn as you go.

—E.L. Doctorow