

Active Learning Through Writing

Engaging Students with Quick,
Effective Writing Assignments

STUDENTS LEARN A GREAT DEAL more from classes when they are actively learning and participating. One way to engage students is with relevant writing assignments that truly help them grasp course material. Writing doesn't necessarily mean a term paper and a few essays throughout the semester; assignments that involve writing can be short but powerful.

Below are the descriptions of four different assignment types that can be applied in any classroom. You will find that while they might seem simple, each type encourages student learning and information retention, and at the same time, gives you, the instructor, a way to evaluate student learning and provide the necessary help when needed.

One Minute Paper

Prep Time: 1 minute

Execution Time: 3 minutes

Objective: To assess whether or not students grasp concepts presented in class.

Execution: Before the class period begins, think of a question or two that you would like to pose to your students, either specific or open-ended. At the end of a lecture or during a natural pause, ask students to pull out a blank sheet of paper and present one of your questions, such as “What was the point of today’s lecture?”, “What is the most important information to take away from that segment of today’s lecture?”, or “What is the difference between convergent thinking and divergent thinking?”. Give students one minute to respond then collect the papers.

Apply: This exercise allows instructors to see how well students are soaking up information, along with whether or not they are learning the material that you intended. With this feedback, you can determine which points need further explanation or discussion and which students could use help in different areas.

Muddiest/Clearest Point

Prep Time: 1 minute

Execution Time: 5 minutes

Objective: To determine which concepts are particularly understood or misunderstood by students, and where help or further instruction may be needed.

Execution: At the end of a class period, ask students to take a few minutes to write about a concept or topic they are confused about or don't fully understand – what he or she feels is the “muddiest point”. Encourage them to mention what they do understand and ask specific questions about what they do not. You could also ask which topics were especially clear and understood and have your students respond. Collect the papers.

Apply: As an instructor, you can use these student responses to assist students individually in areas they may need help in, determine what you should focus on or review in following class periods, or follow trends for future classes all together. Or, simply do all three! This also helps students define areas in which they need to do more studying outside of the classroom or help form questions they can ask during class time.

Daily Journal or Log

Prep Time: 5 minutes

Execution Time: 10-15 minutes

Objective: To immerse students in course content and current global trends through discovery and writing. To encourage students to ask more complex questions, provide in-depth responses and generate discussion.

Execution: Before class begins, prepare student objectives for this particular journal assignment. Set aside 10 to 15 minutes of class time for this activity or assign each entry as a homework assignment. Ask one to three questions that require a significant amount of thought or multiple questions at one time, and ask students to find resources outside of class and report on them. For instance, a marketing professor might ask her students to write about the main topics discussed in class, respond to prompts such as “Describe the four P’s of marketing in detail and how a company would apply them to one of its products” or ask them to find two examples of guerilla marketing used by businesses or nonprofit organizations and the results of each. Journal entries can be turned into you, shared with other students, or just kept for use and reference by the students.

Apply: This routine exercise gets students into the process of thinking deeply about topics discussed in class. When they know they will be asked to comment on issues in the future, they are more likely to pay attention during class and make note of important points, or areas in which they are unclear.

Summary of a Summary

Prep Time: 5 minutes

Execution Time: 10-20+ min.

Objective: To solidify lecture or course content, provide student feedback, promote active listening and active reading, and strengthen critiquing skills.

Execution: Have each of your students write a summary of a lecture, unit or selected reading. Length can vary but each should point out specific ideas and topics from the course material. When the summaries are completed, ask students to swap papers with their peers and analyze each other's writing, focusing on the content. Ask them to further summarize the main topics mentioned in the summary, comment on ideas that are missing, and include suggestions for where the paper could be improved and which ideas need to be expanded.

Apply: This exercise helps students in multiple ways. By writing the original summary, students are able to review course materials that help reiterate course content. When assessing other student summaries, students are able to make note of areas they may have missed in their own summaries and help other students in areas they might know more about.

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