

Writing to Learn

“Writing to Learn” is a key concept in Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) pedagogy. One way to think of how it works in the classroom is as the inverse of “learning to write”: instead of focusing on grammar and mechanics—or even higher-order writing skills like structure and argument development—instructors in any field can use a variety of writing assignments to foster deeper learning of disciplinary content. Writing to Learn assignments are usually short skill-based or problem-solving activities that students use to explore and apply the concepts, ideas, and methods presented in the course.

When developing Writing to Learn assignments:

- Identify the specific course content or learning objective the assignment seeks to enrich.
- Privilege brief, **low-stakes** tasks, and when using more formal, **high-stakes** assignments, always include opportunities for revision.
- **Scaffold** assignments by sequencing them in order of progressive intellectual demand or application of skills.

Examples of Writing to Learn assignments

- **Reading Journals** ask students to summarize, quote, or paraphrase from an assigned text on the left-hand page, then respond with questions, reactions, or counterarguments on the right. (Reading Journals are also sometimes called Double-entry Journals or Dialogic Journals.)
- **Summaries and Abstracts** ask students to identify main ideas and arguments, key concepts and terms in journal articles or longer texts for use in discussion or in more formal writing.
- **Response Papers** are short responses that analyze specified features of a reading (the quality of data, the effectiveness of an argument, the use of literary devices, etc.). You might also assign Response Papers that ask students to identify a counterargument to that of the reading.
- **Quotation Sandwiches** are short responses in which students introduce a reading passage, quote it, and then respond to it analytically.
- **Synthesis Assignments** are more complex responses to assigned readings, asking students to work with several readings, putting them into conversation with one another.
- **Learning Logs** can provide continuity from class to class by asking students to begin and/or end each class summarizing key points and generating questions.

References

- Bean, John C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011, pp. 120-145.
- Colorado State University, “The WAC Clearinghouse.” Digital.
- Herrington, Anne J. “Writing to Learn: Writing Across the Disciplines.” *Writing Across the Curriculum*, edited by Terry Myers Zawacki and Paul M. Rogers. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012.

See also

Formative and Summative Feedback
High-Stakes and Low-Stakes Assignments
In-class Writing