

## SAMPLE LOW-STAKES AND SCAFFOLDED WRITING ACTIVITIES

### Effective Writing Pedagogies in Public Affairs Seminar

Bernard L. Schwartz Communication Institute

---

The ideas presented here are highly adaptable versions of common low- and lower-stakes writing activities.

#### Informal Writing Activities (for in and outside of class)

**Focused Freewriting.** In focused freewriting, students are given a specific objective to complete and a fixed amount of time to write (as little as three minutes); the nature of these prompts is virtually limitless, but here are some examples, clustered around some common purposes:

- **To review or summarize** (e.g., “Summarize the main idea of the reading for today,” “in your own words, write an intuitive explanation of the term or concept we’ve just covered”)
- **To ground discussion** (e.g., “Describe something that confused you in the reading for today,” “Identify the most convincing evidence the writer uses to support their claim in this article”)
- **To practice disciplinary skills** (e.g., “Write a few sentences to explain what this data tells us” or “describe both a benefit and a drawback of the proposed policy”)
- **To generate ideas** (e.g., “List as many potential applications of this concept as you can,” “Brainstorm responses the fundraising team could have to this problem”)
- **To prepare for next steps** (e.g., “Name one thing from today’s class you should review before the exam,” “Document two takeaways that could apply to your upcoming papers”)

**Index Card Temperature Taking.** Distributing an index card to each student and collecting them is a simple way to assess learning in progress, particularly in large classes. For instance, you might prompt students to write a single question they have at the close of a lecture. A quick flip through the cards then offers a broad assessment of the class.

**Thesis Statement Drafting.** In just a few minutes, students can practice generating and articulating an argument. Ask them to respond to a reading or make a recommendation based on a case presented in class. Drafted thesis statements can be briefly shared and reflected on in small groups and then further developed and revised outside of class.

**Dialogue writing.** Assigning dialogue writing is a lively way to encourage students to inhabit multiple positions and perspectives while bypasses the formality of academic prose, even allowing them to express and work through doubt and confusion. For example, students might write dialogues between

- two theorists trying to convince each other of their positions or looking for common ground
- themselves and a friend in the course who is struggling to understand a concept for an upcoming exam
- two policymakers debating the merits of a piece of legislation

**Coding and Seeking.** Students can be directed to purposefully extract salient material from a text with coding and seeking activities. For example, you might ask them to highlight all use of evidence, different ways an author introduces sources, or all transition language. Alternately, students might do a similar activity with a draft of their own writing or that of a classmate.

**Online posts.** Many teachers assign short weekly or bi-weekly responses that target not only specific content but also specific rhetorical and analytic skills. For example, a weekly response to course reading might ask students to summarize an intriguing argument from one of the readings and assess the evidence and reasoning used by the author to make it.

**Discipline specific “autobiographies.”** In or outside of class, students can complete informal writing about their experience in the discipline or field your course deals with, reflecting not only on what material they’ve covered how and in what contexts, but how they felt about these experiences and what their current goals are. This is especially useful when students are likely to be anxious about a course, helping them ease into the material and encouraging self-reflective learning practices.

### Deliverables in Preparation for High-Stakes Assignments

**Evidence, analysis, and claims map.** For argument-based writing, students can draft maps of each step of their argument, indicating in a non-prose format (such as bullet points in a chart or keywords in a diagram) what pieces of evidence they plan to use to support each sub-claim and what analysis or reasoning is needed to explain the evidence’s relevance to the claim.

**Thesis statement and outline.** Similarly, it can be productive to ask students to submit a draft thesis statement and tentative outline to receive feedback from you, each other, or even a structured self-review process. Thesis statement drafting is most effective once students have already conducted some relevant research and engaged in prewriting to develop their thinking.

**Mock conference organization.** This activity helps prepare students to write an effective literature review. Students imagine themselves as the organizers of a conference that will be attended by all the authors on their source list. They must create a seating chart, placing attendees at tables with a specified number of chairs and ensuring that each table will have shared interests and concerns—enough to stimulate conversation. The student must describe the logic behind the seating arrangement, including what discussions and even disagreements are likely to arise at each, and ultimately justify their own placement at one particular table.

**Annotated bibliography.** For assignments with a substantial research component, assigning an annotated bibliography as a preliminary deliverable can give students structure in digesting their sources and beginning to develop their own claims in relation to those sources. To be effective, the assignment should include specific directives about how to discuss each source (e.g. “summarize the most relevant claims and describe how you might use this source in your paper”).

**Drafts or partial drafts.** Assigning drafts can be an effective way of underscoring the processual nature of writing. Drafts do not always have to be graded or responded to with extensive individual feedback in order to be productive.