



Writing Matters

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Informal Writing: What is it? How do we use it? Why do we use it?

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Many of you have been asking me all year to do something on INFORMAL WRITING—a workshop, an article, a brown bagger. The idea of informal writing seems alien; we are unsure how to use it. Perhaps the discomfort comes from the word “informal” itself. Shouldn’t writing at the college level be polished and scholarly—formal? Informal writing is, by definition, unrehearsed writing, and therefore not polished or scholarly. It is writing to learn something, not necessarily writing to present information. This kind of writing is effective and appropriate, perhaps even crucial, at any level and in any course.

Writing as Discovery

Writer Julia Alvarez has said, “I write to find out what I’m thinking. I write to find out who I am. I write to understand things.” Writing as a means of learning, thinking, discovering, and seeing can be a messy generation of ideas before we discover what we really have to say or really think. And that is precisely why informal writing is a requirement in writing-intensive courses. Informal, writing-to-learn assignments enable students to think about and learn course content, perhaps even more than production of a polished paper does. It requires them to engage immediately—or at least to pay attention and think—in class or as they read. It gives our students opportunity to experience the phenomenon that Toni Morrison describes: “I’ve always thought best when I wrote.” We want to give students the opportunity to do their best thinking.

Examples of Informal Writing

Informal writing can take many forms: It may be the attempt to list ideas or to outline a plan before we begin writing a longer paper. It may be an electronic posting answering your question on the discussion board of the D2L site for your classroom. It may be an in-class five-minute short writing that proposes an application of a theory presented in lecture that day. Your making room for the writing-to-learn activities in your course gives students the space or time for reflection about the content that they might not ordinarily have. Those writing activities can serve as a bridge between exploring and understanding content, and again, that’s one reason it’s a required component in writ-

ing-intensive courses.

Pamela Flash, Director of Writing Across the Curriculum and Associate Director of the University of Minnesota’s Center for Writing, gives an annotated listing of some of the more common writing-to-learn assignments:

- Freewriting
- One-Minute Papers,
- Scenarios
- Logbooks,
- Microthemes (<http://writing.umn.edu/tww/assignments/in-class.htm>)

Her annotations not only define the activity but also give discipline or topic specific examples of how that activity might be applied. For example, a one-minute paper in any area might ask students to “create a bumper sticker that would summarize yesterday’s lecture.” Or a scenario in an economics class might be the following: “You are Adam Smith. You have an intercom connection to WorldCom. What do you say?” Such writing assignments, whether the course is writing-intensive or not, require students to articulate their level of understanding of the material immediately.

Evaluation of Informal Writing

The Writing Matters website elaborates on our response to informal writing:

The professor uses the writing to gain an immediate sense of students’ understanding, to focus and facilitate class discussion, to help students learn the material, to facilitate the scaffolding from one assignment to the next, or to learn more about the students. Response to the writing is informal: it facilitates students’ understanding of content, rather than evaluating students’ performance. Response may be an oral response in class, answering questions revealed in an in-class writing assignment. Any written response is usually done quickly, a checking off that the writing has been completed, rather than the giving of a lengthy written response. (<http://www.mnstate.edu/acadaff/writingmatters/DefGuidelines.htm>)

In other words, in addition to giving students room to think

about and apply content, informal writing can also serve as a formative evaluation for the class itself. Such knowledge informs future lectures, pacing, or class planning before too much time has passed to make changes:

Imagine you have just given a detailed writing assignment that you've not tried before. In the five minutes of class remaining, you ask students to write their understanding of the assignment on a 3 x 5 card and leave it on your desk as they leave the class. Scanning the cards, you have an immediate indication of their understanding of what they're to do. If they need further clarifi-

cation, if they're totally confused, if they have questions—that need should be apparent. You have time to clarify in the next class.

Whether a class is writing-intensive or not, informal writing can support course content, rather than interfere or detract from it. It gives students an opportunity to process what they're studying without worrying too much about format, grammar, and punctuation, and thereby it facilitates learning. Likewise, we can form a sense of our students' work and understanding without a writing assignment being too labor intensive for us. Informal writing is writing for the sake of learning on both the students' and our part.

Teaching with Informal Writing Assignments: Some Notes on Procedure

Retrieved 3/20/07 from: (<http://writing.umn.edu/tww/assignments/in-class.htm>)

- When introducing the activity, give students your rationale for assigning it. Avoid characterizing it as a “fun little writing activity” if you want them to take it seriously.
 - If you're using a prompt, present it both orally and visually by writing it on the board or projecting it on the screen. Exceptions include disciplines where response to oral instructions is valued.
 - Whenever possible, do the activity your self before presenting it to students and/or do it along with them in the class. This makes a significant impact on student motivation.
 - Before students write, describe next steps. Will the writing be collected? Discussed? Included in an assignment portfolio? Graded? If students are going to be able to be truly informal, they need to know that they aren't going to be judged on the quality of their exploratory writing.
 - Be clear about time limits (“I'll stop you in 5 minutes”) and when time is almost over, give a one-minute or 30-second warning.
 - At the completion of the assignment, ask students to reflect (either orally with a neighbor/in large group or in writing below their assignment) on insights and developments. Meta cognitive analysis can work best when it's modeled.
- If you collect student writing, summarize, or at least highlight and comment on your findings during a subsequent class or later in the same class. Your having read and commented on their writing lets them know you take it seriously and you expect them to.

Effective write-to-learn assignments...

1. Are short (3-15 minutes)
2. Ask students to write a word, a sentence, question, or a paragraph or two
3. Are integrated (explicitly) into class content, objectives, and activity, and, are optimally, utilized in subsequent writing projects
4. Elicit multiple responses
5. Where appropriate, receive some content-focused (versus mechanics-focused) response
6. Aren't formally graded, but count toward a portion of the grade

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Writers on the importance of writing and the writing process

“Don't tear up the page and start over again when you write a bad line—try to write your way out of it. Make mistakes and plunge on . . . Writing is a means of discovery, always.”

—*Garrison Keilor*

“Inspiration usually comes during work, rather than before it.”

—*Madeleine L'Engle*

“Writing and rewriting are a constant search for what one is saying.”

—*John Updike*

“I have rewritten—often several times—every word I have ever published. My pencils outlast their erasers.”

—*Vladimir Nabokov*

Where is The Write Site?

Located in Lommen 95, the Write Site provides an informal, friendly and private atmosphere for students to share their writing and writing questions.

Hours are:

Monday-Thursday 9 a.m. - 4 p.m.

Friday 9 a.m. - Noon

Selected Evenings at Livingston Lord Library, room 208, 8 p.m - 10 p.m.

Your students may either make an appointment to visit with a tutor, or just drop in. Since we cannot guarantee that a tutor will be free at that time, scheduled appointments are encouraged. Services are offered free of charge to the MSUM community.

This is also where you'll find SuEllen Shaw if you want to consult with her about writing plans for your classes.

477-5937 (Appointment)

477-5938 (Director)