

Informal Writing to Promote Learning

Informal Writing Strategies

Informal writing assignments, which are usually short writings, are useful to teachers and students alike: to assess progress, for informal communication, to collect information, and to prepare for longer projects. They permit teachers to confirm students' understanding of assignments and course material, and they are a means whereby instructors can help students realize the idea-generating potential of writing and its value even when it is not graded. In addition, these strategies will assist students in focusing their ideas as they prepare for more formal writing assignments, and they give them the opportunity to practice the sort of single-draft writing expected of them in exam situations.

Writing Strategies

Many of the more useful informal strategies are written extensions of standard oral and written communication practices. The following strategies increase students' writing opportunities and stimulate class discussion. They also help prepare students for long writings without unduly burdening the instructor because shorter assignments can be evaluated with different strategies from those used for more formal papers.

Brainstorming is frequently an oral strategy. Adding a written component, such as jotting down ideas that arise through brainstorming, will reinforce the concepts being generated. Brainstorming may then be taken an additional step: students can group the ideas and label each group as they move toward reaching a topic for a paper.

Peer response affords students opportunities to receive feedback on their work while learning how to give constructive criticism themselves. If students prepare to give an oral critique by first using writing--either jotted responses to questions or a brief writing--they are likely to be better able to focus their comments and more willing to participate in discussion.

Informal short writings effectively focus a class on a particular topic, help students summarize class work, or cause students to discover where their reasoning breaks down. Students respond to a question or to a prompt from the instructor. Many of these writings need not be graded; instead, the material from them can be used in class discussion.

Journals or logs provide unique opportunities for students to have a structured way to work with course material. Journal entries may follow a single assignment made at the beginning of the semester or may vary throughout the course by teacher and student preferences. In some fields, journal keeping in the form of research logs, field

notebooks, artist notebooks, or laboratory logs provides opportunities for practicing professional management skills.

Outlining often creates anxiety for students. However, if they have the opportunity to outline informally in order to focus on outline functions as well as formally with a focus on form, they may come to value the process as both an organizational tool and an important revision check on drafts.

Paraphrases allow students to explain an argument in their own words, following the line of reasoning and its sequence of ideas. The paraphrase, which is a useful notetaking tool, should give the reader an accurate understanding of the author's position on the topic.

Summaries restate only the author's main ideas, omitting all the examples and evidence used in supporting and illustrating those points. The function of a summary is to represent the scope and emphasis of a relatively large amount of material in an efficient and concise form. A precis is a type of summarizing that insists on an exact reproduction of the logic, organization, and emphasis of the original texts.

Responding to Informal Writing

All writing does not have to be graded. Shorter assignments, such as the ones described above, need not be evaluated as polished products; they simply help students begin to see the value of writing for clarifying and developing their ideas. Out-of-class informal writing can be read for content only: Did students answer the question correctly or understand the main idea of the chapter? The same can be done for in-class short writing: Does it show that students are actually working on the assignment and making progress towards its completion? To check whether students are writing on topic during timed writings, instructors can walk around the room and read over shoulders, ask a few students to read theirs aloud, pick up a few at random each time, or collect all but read them only to see if most students understand the material. Similarly, journals or logs can be checked (a few each day or week) simply to see that work is completed.

Few or no comments need be written on any of these writings; teachers can respond with a simple check, plus, or minus, or with a point system. When students turn in extra credit work, engage in personal response writing, or write in journals, the instructor's response might use + (points), C/NC (credit, no credit), or a letter grade with comments.

Reference:

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