

Using Micro-themes to Promote Learning

Micro-themes are short writings on 5" x 8" note cards or papers. The micro-theme is brief, but this form requires a small amount of writing after a great deal of thinking. Because micro-theme writing is rigorous writing in restricted space, the student must plan carefully to argue successfully.

Micro-themes are useful in both large and small classes because they involve limited writing (and, therefore, less grading) while forcing maximum thinking, thus placing responsibility with the student. Refer to *Microtheme Strategies for Developing Cognitive Skills* by John C. Bean, Dean Drenk, and F.D. Lee (Griffin, C. Williams, ed. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning: Teaching Writing in All Disciplines*, no. 12, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1982) for an explanation of how micro-themes expand cognitive development.

Common Types Of Micro-themes

Summary-Writing micro-themes ask students to summarize a topic, argument, or theme, a task which helps students understand and state objectively other points of view.

Sample Assignment: Describe Luther's argument for why God's knowledge is necessary rather than contingent.

Thesis-Support micro-themes ask students to generate effective support for a thesis the instructor presents. This demands active thinking and possibly research.

Sample Assignment: Individual liberty (is/is not) detrimental to the social order.

Data-Provided micro-themes challenge students to generate the controlling idea from given data. This requires that students think logically and abstractly as well as see connections between different facts.

Sample Assignment: [list of ten statements provided about economics] Using all of the data supplied, write a brief essay on the topic, are economic conditions the propelling force of society?

Quandary-Posing micro-themes demand that students solve and then explain a puzzle. This type exercises abstract reasoning skills.

Sample Assignment: A couple has been told that their newborn baby died; another couple legally adopts this baby. Three years later, the natural parents discover that their baby lives and has been adopted. They sue for custody. Decide who should raise the baby, and explain your reasoning.

Working with Micro-themes

Clarifying Expectations

Since many students have operated from the maxim that more is better, they may be reluctant to believe that less is what you are expecting. Establishing the format for micro-themes is important. The students need to understand that the size restrictions are not negotiable. Micro-themes are typically written on 5" x 8" note cards or half sheets of paper for a computer-generated document.

Designing Assignments

Obviously, space constraints necessitate focused assignments. This is a chance for students to delve into a single concept or issue. But the narrowness of focus doesn't mean that intellectual rigor is sacrificed. On the contrary, these writings can promote intellectual growth.

Evaluating Themes

Micro-themes place responsibility for learning with the student. You can keep it that way when you evaluate the writing by maximizing them as a tool for student learning while minimizing your written responses. Here are some ways people have used micro-themes to promote learning while lessening paper load:

- Use these as practice for major assignments; therefore, there is no need to comment extensively on them.
- Mark the paper according to a criteria sheet, assigning a number or letter grade only (the sheet already contains the comments). People who use this method report that they can grade 30-50 micro themes in an hour.
- Use in-class discussions instead of responding to individual papers.
- Start discussions with topics from micro themes.
- Duplicate representative micro themes for class discussion.
- Combine responding techniques: respond to some by in-class discussion and some by commenting on individual papers.

For more information on Short Writing Assignments, please see [Evaluating Short Writings](#)

Reference:

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