Purposeful Writing

Sources:
- University of Richmond Writing Center http://writing2.richmond.edu/wac
- WAC Clearinghouse at Colorado State University http://wac.colostate
- John C. Bean, Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom (2e, 2011)
- Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, They Say / I Say: Moves that Matter in Academic Writing (2e, 2010)
- Beth Finch Hendregan, TA’s Guide to Teaching Writing in All Disciplines (2004)
- Brad Hughes, et al., “Informal Writing Assignments,” College of Letters and Sciences, University of Wisconsin – Madison
- Mark Johnson and George Lakoff, Metaphors We Live By (1980, 2003)

Ideas for Purposeful, Informal Writing

Initial Distinctions:
- Low stakes and high stakes writing
- The writing process over the product
- Thesis finding v. thesis supporting writing
- Purposeful writing, not busy-work
- Audience, for whom is it written, who actually reads it
- Peer responses and revision

These kinds of writing-to-learn assignments may be combined or sequenced to become part of more high stakes writing performances. Some of these can be done in-class in a few minutes, while others are more appropriate for homework. They can be adapted to collaborate or group activities. Most of these are easily adaptable to on-line modalities. Numbers are for reference only, no hierarchy intended.

Focused Free-Writing: Unstructured five or ten-minute “putting pen to paper” and letting words flow. While this seems “purposeless,” it can be at least kept to course content generally. Free-writing is often advocated as a “warm-up” to other kinds of writing. It is often done at the beginning of class, and can be followed up by asking students to pick one good idea from the whole or to identify a new insight.
- It can stimulate unexpected ideas.
- It can happen even if a student thinks he or she “has nothing to say.”
- It can help students feel a creative engagement with ideas.

Reading / Lecture Notebook: Students reflect regularly on course readings, lectures, or discussions. Such responses can be left relatively open, or protocols can be prescribed in terms of kinds of questions to consider, connections to be made, or evaluative conclusions, etc.
- Students can read and respond to each other’s journal entries.
- “Double-entry” notebooks include reconsiderations or further speculations added after peer-feedback or additional course content.
Lecture responses: Two or three-minute writings after a lecture, e.g. “What was the most important concept discussed today? Why?” “What question is uppermost in my mind?”
  • Sometimes called “exit tickets,” with the possibility of “entrance tickets” also, or before-lecture questions.

Terminology Log: Students keep lists of essential terms, with their own definitions, and apply them to examples or problems.
  • This can be a continuing exercise, subject to revision as understanding grows.

Experiential Log: Students relate concepts in class to their experiences during the week, or events or examples outside of the scope of the class.
  • Protocols can describe how to keep this focused on class concepts.

Life Lessons: For some kinds of course materials it is appropriate to ask students to reflect on ideas in relation to their prior beliefs. “Am I open to accept this idea?” “How does this conflict with what I believe?” “How does this challenge what I believe?”

Reading / Lecture Summary: Such writings ask students to demonstrate what they understand about a reading or lecture by paraphrase or listing major (and subordinate) concepts.
  • A good way to check on what students are learning as they go.
  • This can include risk-free questions about concepts not well understood.

Annotated reading: Students can be asked to write “in the margins” of the texts they read, talking back, with attention to specific details, such as identifying main points and evidence claims, appeals to authority or expertise, lack of clarity, why an idea is useful or relevant, how ideas relate to each other …
  • Promotes active reading.
  • Helps students comprehend.
  • Creates awareness of writing conventions or “moves.”

Imitate / Translate: In some kinds of courses, students can gain insight into what they read by trying to imitate the style of the author, or by “translating” the writing into another idiom, genre, or style.
  • Helps create awareness of writing-as-writing, or “metalinguistic awareness.”
  • Helps create awareness of the relation of style and content.

The Question Box: Following a reading or lecture, students submit or post questions and then reply with answers.

Discussion Minutes: Students reconstruct in writing a class discussion, including who said what. Students reconstruct in writing a class discussion, including who said what.
After Class Discussion: In or out of class, students can respond to a discussion by writing what they might have said, how the discussion helped them change their minds, or listing questions that remain unresolved or unaddressed.

Position Papers: Brief writings students bring to class that represent their response to the reading.
- These can be read aloud in class as a means of prompting class discussion.
- They can be read and discussed in groups.

In-Class Writing: Five to Ten minute writings on a question derived from discussion or lecture.
- They can be used to recharge or redirect class discussion.
- These are not quizzes.

Think, Pair, Share: After any in-class writing, students exchange writings, add their own thoughts, and discuss the ideas.
- Putting students into written dialogue with each other can be done with different kinds of writing.
- Dialogic responses can also be in the form of raising “counter-arguments,” leading to a written give and take “debate.”

Synthesis Papers: Brief writings intended to discuss commonalities, correspondences, or differences among two or more readings or clusters of concepts.
- These can help students see concepts in terms of an on-going dialogue within the field.

Index-Card Essays or Microthemes. Thesis-and-support structured arguments (on assigned questions or “questions at issue” from the readings or lectures) designed to get at the basic, or nutshell, line of reasoning. More of an “idea outline” than a “draft.”
- This can form the basis of a longer, more developed essay.
- This could be adapted to the idea of a written “proposal” for research or more formal writing.
- Prompts could include a quotation or statement which students are asked to agree or disagree with.

Case Studies: Presented with specific “cases,” students analyze issues and use course concepts to propose solutions.
- This could be adapted to “problem solving” writings.
- Students could be asked to reverse this assignment by finding and discussing cases to which course concepts may be applied.

Event Analysis. Students choose an event in the real world and discuss it in terms of concepts from the course.
- Post hoc analysis: What happened and why did it happen?
- What if analysis: How would the event have been different if a crucial variable were changed?
Letters: Students can write letters to authors, decision-makers, newspapers, blogs, etc., to argue a position or to explain how a concept from the course may be applied or used.

- This is potentially high stakes writing in which the stakes are not the grade.
- This could include in-class brainstorming or out-of-class collaboration about how to write for this audience.

Going Public: Students write to explain a complex course idea to a “general audience,” explaining it without technical language, jargon, or over-simplification.

Inhabiting Another Mind: Students may be asked to write about an issue or problem as if they were someone else, e.g. one of the authors read in the course, a specific expert or politician or advocate, etc.

Dialogues: Students choose authors, experts, or other figures and write dialogues between or among them on issues from the course.

Metaphors We Think By: Students keep a record of the use of central metaphors (or analogies, or “frames”) in the courses readings. What alternative ways of perceiving might be made available by choosing different metaphors or analogies or changing the “frame?”

Process Analysis: Students can be asked describe in their own words the steps in the process by which they (or an author, or experiment) resulted in a conclusion.

Getting Unstuck: In undertaking a process, students can describe the point at which they become “stuck.” Prompts can include: “Why are you stuck?” “Is anything wrong up to that point?” “What specific kind of information do you need to become unstuck?”

Annotated Bibliography. Students find resources and summarize and evaluate their relevance.

- Can be done for its own sake or as part of a sequenced essay-writing process.

Believing and Doubting Game: In parallel passages, students write first in support of an idea (or concept, or methodology, or practice) and then against it. In each case they can be asked to discuss the implications of these positions. They must try to be balanced on unbiased.

- At whatever level of sophistication, students practice open-inquiry, empathy and fairness, and judgment.