



## Informal Writing: Uses and Kinds

### Uses

**Informal Writing** is done both in preparation for, and quite independently of, formal writing assignments in a course. It is freewriting, unconstrained by any need to appear correctly in public. It is not yet arranging, asserting, arguing. It is still reflecting and questioning. This is probative, speculative, generative thinking that is written in class or at home to develop the language of learning. It may not always be read by a teacher. Generally, it is not graded. Parts of it are often heard in class, but as a means of collaborative learning, not of individual testing. Its basic purpose is to help students to become independent, active learners by creating for themselves the language essential to their personal understanding. Specifically, informal written language serves:

1. **To develop abilities:** the abilities to define, classify, summarize for example; to question; to deconstruct complex patterns; to generate evaluation criteria; to establish inferences; to imagine hypotheses; to analyze problems; to identify procedures.
2. **To develop methods:** for example, methods of close, inquisitive, reactive reading; of recording and reporting data (observing); of organizing and structuring data into generalizations; of formulating theories; and, most importantly, of recognizing and applying the “methods” themselves.
3. **To develop knowledge:** knowledge about central concepts in a course, but also, for example, knowledge about one’s own problem-solving, thinking, learning, language, about knowledge itself (“metacognition”), about the broad aims and exact methods of a discipline.
4. **To develop attitudes:** for example, attitudes toward learning, knowing, oneself, one’s work; toward mistakes and errors; toward the knowledge and opinions of others; the attitudes that affect behaviors and, therefore, aptitudes.
5. **To develop communal learning:** encouraging, for example, open exploration and discovery in a community of inquiry, rather than isolated competition; to promote “connected,” not separated, teaching and learning; to develop active listening; to teach through tasks, rather than just through data; and, finally, to locate the motivation for learning not in the “relevance” of the subject or in the performance of the teacher but in the social dynamic of the learning community.
6. **To develop, in summary, general capacities for learning:** the ability to question; to create problems (as well as solutions); to wonder; to think for oneself while working with others for example.

## Kinds

1. **Freewriting.** To become centered, present for the learning that is about to begin, grounding out the static we bring to class. Time to breathe, hear oneself think. What's on your mind that needs acknowledgement, to be set aside for the moment?
2. **Focused freewriting.** All reflective, probative, speculative writing, freewritten yet focused, that explores a term, problem, issue, question openendedly. First thoughts on a subject, casting a wide net of inquiry. May be used to initiate or conclude a class discussion or, mid-class, to focus a discussion that is confused or lacks energy: What are we learning?
3. **Attitudinal writing.** Focused freewriting expressing the attitudes that influence aptitudes for learning. How do you feel about...? What do you bring to this reading, issue, or subject? What difficulties did you have with the last assignment? Where are you stuck? What is most difficult for you at this point? What questions do you have? What have you valued most in the course? What more or different to you need to now or do?
4. **Metacognitive, process writing.** Examining how and why you acted (or will act) in a situation — done after (or before) reading an assignment, taking an exam, working on a problem, writing a paper, thinking about an issue. Anticipating and observing one's own learning behaviors, in order to become more autonomous, less passively reliant on the information and authority of teachers and texts.
5. **Narrative writing.** Stories, related to what is thinking about or of one's own thinking itself. Collecting all that one thinks — thoughts, feelings, memories, associations, biases. Personal, subjective, particular writing & holistic thinking, done prior to organizing linear discourse.
6. **Explaining errors.** On a test or homework — a form of “process writing” [#4] that helps students and teachers recognize where learning went wrong, and how and why.
7. **Listing questions.** Another form of “process writing” [#4] that helps students and teacher recognize where learning went wrong, and how and why.
8. **Creating problems.** Rather than solutions; defining problems and issues of one's own in the class.
9. **Quotation, paraphrase, summary.** What was noticeable in a reading or class?
10. **Defining.** One's own definitions, however imprecise initially, used to develop conceptual understanding in a way that memorization of textbook terms does not attempt.
11. **Writing to read.** Double-entry notebook, recording and reporting what a reading says and, in a facing column or page, responding to the text. Convergent and divergent thinking. Noticing what both the reader and the author the text think. Dialectical notebooks integrate attitudinal writing, questioning, summarizing, and process writing.
12. **Learning logs, microthemes, collaborative problem solving...** This list only begins to suggest possibilities.