

In Class Writing

to Deepen Student Learning

Five Examples of In-Class Writing

1. Ask students to write about a specific excerpt of text

You can pose any good question – the kind of open and generative question you might ask during a class discussion – and give students 5 minutes to explore it. Emphasize that the point isn't to get the "right answer" but to begin to explore a line of thought

Examples:

"What is this passage saying?" (i.e. ask for a summary)

"What are your first impressions of the Blake's depiction of angels in this poem?"

"Why would Marlowe use this particular word [phrase/metaphor] here?"

"What is the view of causality that is implied in this passage by Benjamin?"

2. Ask students to select an excerpt of the text that they feel is important, confusing, etc.

Examples:

"Pick an excerpt that you feel is central to the overall piece. Summarize your selection, then tell us why it's important/central to the overall reading."

"Find one part of the reading that you found confusing and explore/explain why."

"Find a key piece of evidence that the author uses and explain/explore how she uses it."

"Find a part of the reading where you disagreed and develop your counter-argument."

3. Pose a question about the reading (you should decide and announce whether students can refer to books, notes, etc.)

Examples: [pretty much any question of interpretation works – here, the students are asked to do more work, as they must either remember the text/reading or use it efficiently to respond]

"In the reading for today, what would you say is the central argument and how is it supported?"

4. Ask students to develop a list of questions – questions that they have and/or questions that would be fruitful lines of inquiry. These can become either discussion topics for the whole class or small groups, prompts for writing, or even essay prompts.

Learning to develop good questions is harder than we sometimes think, but it's also incredibly valuable for students to learn to develop and evaluate questions as they progress in a given field. Discussing the results in class – sharing what was written – is essential.

5. Meta writing or process writing: ask students to write about their own thinking, their own difficulties, their own questions, etc. These can be shared or even collected.

Examples:

“After spending this class on Benjamin’s view of translation, what aspects seem clear to you and what aspects remain fuzzy?”

“Between now and next class, what three aspects of Benjamin’s essay do you need to clarify for yourself?” [This then becomes an assignment.]

“If today’s discussion seems clear to you, try to summarize the main points; if you are confused about something, write out the questions that you feel need answering.”

(Notes Toward a Workshop; handout is above, plus use page from Bean)

Three things before we begin

1. assumption underlying this work as well as L&T and the work of the Institute: the process of writing gets you somewhere different than where you might go if you just sat back and thought about the topic – we’ve all had that experience (could do a free write about it)

2. in-class writing doesn’t do just one thing – we’ll see soon that it can be used to set up a class discussion, to salvage a class discussion, to invite / provoke students to reflect more deeply, to change gears, to consider alternate points of view, etc. – we’ll come back to this but I say it at the outset because I want us all to be creative as we think about how to make it work for ourselves in our own classes

3. A lot of good comes of sharing these in class – easier to call on students, easier for students to participate on their own, and good to share questions/insights/ideas/etc.

Five general ways to bring in-class writing into the classroom

1. Give students a part of the text to write about and a question/task
2. Have students select a part of the text to write about
3. Ask a question that requires students to use text(s), a lecture, etc.
4. Have students develop, discuss and present good questions
5. Have students reflect on their own process of learning, writing, or thinking

Using in-class writing

how many of you have done this in a class?

beginning of class – to refresh memories about readings and begin working with text; to set up discussion; etc.

mid-class – either because discussion is flagging or because it has led to a question you want everyone to spend some time with

end-of-class – to get down in writing ideas that have been raised in discussion so that they won't be lost; to get down in writing the main gist of the day's lecture/discussion; to capture ideas while they are fresh that might be useful in homework or for next class; etc.

Coda: Students will go with it – they are positive about L&T and mostly react only later to the gap that some of them experience between L&T and their first-year classes – for most of them, the process of using writing to think something through is a great discovery.