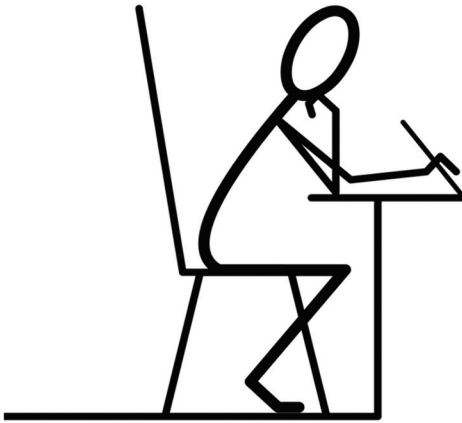


USING WRITING IN TEACHING AND LEARNING

CONNIE BUSKIST
AUBURN UNIVERSITY MONTGOMERY



BOOKLET

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عمادة تطوير المهارات
إنجاز متميز .. والتزام بالتطوير





Using Writing in Teaching and Learning

Connie Buskist

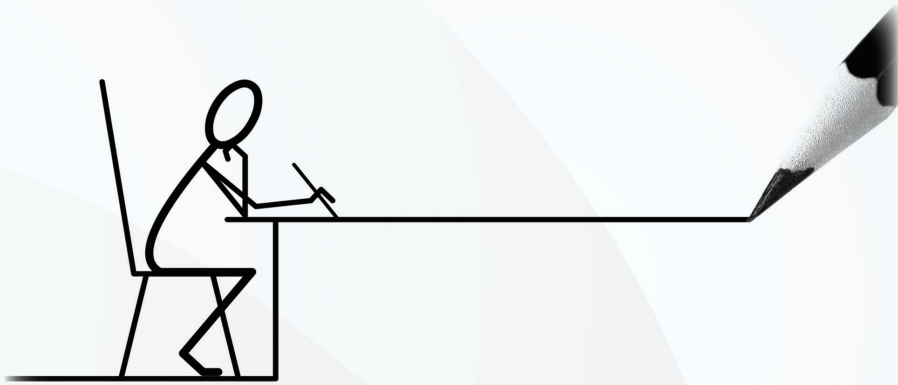
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عمادة تطوير المهارات
Deanship of Skills Development

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Using Writing in Teaching and Learning



Many of us who teach in higher education did very little writing as we went through our undergraduate programs. Except for the occasional research paper or essay test the only writing that we did was the writing of class notes. Some of us may have considered ourselves lucky if a paper was not required for the course because producing them was such a painful process for which we could see little purpose and for which we were not well prepared. Our instructors used writing primarily as a way for us to demonstrate our understanding of the subject matter that we acquired through reading or listening to lectures. When our instructors did assign us a paper, it often carried a large weight in our final grade, making the writing even more daunting.

Now that we stand on the other side of the lectern, we may find reading the written papers our students produce as painful as the writing we did when we were students. Although we may be committed to the idea that demonstrating understanding of subject matter in writing is important, most faculty face several obstacles in respect to having our students write:

- **Time**—Reading student work takes a great deal of time and few of us have an abundance of it. Time is an even greater problem when you teach large classes or if your students are novices who require more mentoring in writing. Instructors may also worry about giving up class time to do writing when we have so much content to cover in our courses.
- **Knowledge**—Many of us may not feel that we have adequate background in how best to support students as they learn to write. Although we may be excellent writers within our own discipline, understanding how to help students gain the necessary skills to be good writers in that discipline may not be our

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strength. In addition, we may not know what types of assignments should be used to best meet our goals.

- Fear—Uneasiness in whether we are grading fairly, how to grade, what type of feedback to give students is another reason that we may shy away from writing assignments. When student writing does not meet our expectations and is heavily weighted, we might question whether the assignment was adequately designed and explained or whether students had the background knowledge to complete the task. We may struggle with how heavily writing mechanics should be weighted or whether students were truly engaged in worthwhile thinking or simply regurgitated what they have heard or read. Faced with a stack of papers to read and grade, we may feel queasy, or even angry, and wonder to ourselves, “Why did I give this assignment?”

Although we may find many reasons not to include writing in our courses, the evidence is clear that writing is important to helping our students reach the academic goals we set for them.

Why is Writing Important?

Whereas learning theorists recognize that learning is an active rather than passive endeavor, many university instructors rely solely on lecture as a method of teaching, positioning the students in the passive role of receiver of knowledge. Although most of us probably include goals for our students to develop the ability to apply or engage in critical thinking about the concepts we cover in our courses, sitting in lectures alone rarely develops these competencies. Teaching our students to think critically about the content of our discipline takes effort because many of them are novices in this type of intellectual endeavor (Bean, 2001). However, when instructors support and encourage activities such as problem solving, questioning, divergent thinking, and asking questions that can have multiple answers, students can be guided to higher level cognition.

There are many ways that instructors can promote active engagement in their courses and develop students' abilities to think at higher levels. Writing is one method that can be used alone or within other types of active learning approaches such as problem-based learning. The process of writing is closely related to thinking and many authors and great thinkers have realized the potential of writing for generating and clarifying knowledge and understanding (Cooper & Patton, 1997). Writing is

“both a process of doing critical thinking and a product of communicating the results of the critical thinking” (Bean, 2001, p. 3). Discussions also provide a vehicle through which students can practice critical thinking skills, and writing can prepare students to bring more depth to classroom discussions. Leist (2006) offered that good writing assignments are short, numerous, require higher order reasoning, focus on key course concepts, and have more than one correct answer. Writing used in classes generally falls into one of two categories, informal or formal.

Informal Writing

Informal writing activities are one way to engage students and enhance their learning (Bean, 2001). Informal writing can be described as exploratory or generative writing because it encourages students to explore their own thinking and/or to generate ideas about a given topic. Infusing informal writing throughout a course requires students to purposefully engage in a conversation—whether that conversation is private (done only for their eyes) or public (shared with peers or the instructor). Informal writing can be completed during class time or outside of class, can take many forms, and can be used in any discipline.

Svinicki and McKeachie (2011) described informal writing as low stakes writing because it is not graded or is not graded as heavily as more formal writing assignments might be. We often mistakenly believe that we must grade everything we assign students to do in our courses or that we must read all written work from every student. Whether we choose to grade or read student writing really depends more on our purpose for assigning the writing and the type of assignment. It is important to decide in advance and let students know what the expectations are for your informal writing assignments. How often will you read their work? How will it be assessed? What will you be looking for when you read their work? How will the writing assignment figure in to their final grade?

In-Class Writing

In-class writing can be done at any point during the class period and need only take a few minutes of time. It is the easiest way to incorporate writing into a course, takes little preparation, can be done with any size class, and can take little instructor time outside of class. These writing opportunities can provide students with time to think about a topic before listening to a lecture or before taking part in a discussion, whether it be with the person sitting next to them, a small group, or whole class discussions.

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When used before lecture or discussion, student writing helps prepare students for what will happen next. It can activate students' prior knowledge, get them to express or clarify their ideas, write down questions they have, or make predictions about the topic, among other things. Used at the end of class period, students can write to summarize the lecture or discussion or to ask questions not answered during the lecture. Providing writing opportunities can also serve the purpose of refocusing students' attention, which may begin to decline after 10-15 minutes of listening to a lecture. Generally, in-class writing is not graded although it can be collected and read. If you plan to read the responses, it is a good idea to let students know this in advance.

Quick (free or focused) writes. Quick writes are exactly that. Students are given 1-5 minutes of class time in which to respond to a question or probe that is presented by the instructor. These assignments can be done anytime during the class period and often proceed partner or small group discussion. Allowing students to first think about the topic, write their thoughts, and then share their thinking (called Think-Pair-Share) is one way to help encourage involvement and leads to better classroom discussion. You might begin the class by asking all students to take 5 minutes to think about a particular topic and then write their thoughts on paper or you may stop occasionally throughout a lecture and ask students to do this type of writing. Free writes generally are more open, giving students more liberty as to the topic of their writing. For example, an instructor in a creative writing class might start the class by asking students to spend 3 minutes writing about anything that has happened to them in the last 24 hours. A focused write, on the other hand, asks students to respond to specific prompts. Examples might include:

- Thinking about the health risks that we discussed in class yesterday, spend 3 minutes writing about the food that you have eaten over the last 24 hours, and how these foods affect your risk for health problems.
- Think about the most significant news event that you have heard about in the last 24 hours. In what ways can you connect that event to the historical trends that we discussed in class yesterday?
- Now that we have discussed these five principles, apply them to the types of activities you participated in during the last 24 hours.

Exit slips Asking students to write briefly on a topic (answering or asking a question or responding to a probe) right before the end of class and then turning their responses in to the instructor as they exit the room is a useful way of gathering data

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from your students. By randomly reading part of the exit slips, you may get a good feel for which concepts students understand, what questions they still have, and whether they are actively thinking about the subject matter in correct ways. Some examples include:

- Thinking about what we discussed today, which concepts would be most appropriate for use in developing new energy sources?
- Which principles that were discussed today stand out the most for you? Why?
- In what ways will you be able to incorporate the concepts discussed today into the paper you are writing for this course?

Partner and small group writing. Writing opportunities in which students must work together to craft a response encourages them to listen to each other's ideas and then negotiate the writing related to the topic. This type of writing works well when asking students to use concepts that have just been discussed to solve real life problems. For example, after discussing the interconnectedness of economic and human development, an instructor might provide a scenario of a small, impoverished country and ask a group of students to identify two problems that might be holding the country back economically and provide plausible solutions. Students would be given a specified length of time to craft a one-page response. These responses might be handed in to the instructor or read aloud to the entire class or both.

When students know before a lecture that they will be expected to engage in a group writing activity, they can prepare to perform certain roles as they listen to the lecture. For example, one student may be expected to give examples of the key concepts that the instructor presented, one student may be ready to provide two questions about the lecture, one student may be expected to provide examples of using the concepts in their own lives, etc. When they meet together after a lecture, they can share their ideas and quickly contribute to the written assignment. Knowing that they will be expected to participate in this group work can help students stay more focused during a lecture.

Partner or small group writing can also be completed outside of class. Technology, which is discussed below, allows students to work together easily without having to meet on campus.

Peer response to writing. Both in-class and out-of-class writing can be shared with peers in order for them to receive feedback or to expand on their thinking by

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reading what others have written. In one peer response activity, “The Pass-Around” (University of Delaware Writing Center, 2011) students bring to class a 5 x 8 note-card on which they have written a response to a writing assignment. These cards are passed across the rows to other students who read five different cards. After reading the fifth card, students write a comment (evaluation, a question, helpful suggestion, etc.) and then score the card on a Likert scale that has been provided for them. They then pass the cards back in the opposite direction completing the evaluative process and ranking on each card until it returns to the original owner. This assignment allows students to see how others have handled the assignment so that they can compare their own work to others and to receive feedback on their work. You can also collect the cards and share some of the strong examples with the entire class.

Out-of-Class Writing

Having students complete informal writing assignments outside of class has a couple of advantages. First, it doesn’t take away from class time and second, it allows students to devote more time to thinking about the topic before writing and to spend more time writing. It may give them the opportunity to confer with other people or read texts about the topic to better prepare themselves for writing a response. Out-of-class writing is usually collected and assessed in some way—which means it might not be appropriate in extremely large classes. It is important that an instructor develop a manageable structure so as not to become overwhelmed with trying to keep up with students’ writing (Bean, 2001). There are many possibilities for managing the task of reading student work and each instructor must find what works in his or her particular situation. Writing from the entire class could be collected, read, and assessed at the same time or an instructor may choose to randomly read a few students’ work at one time and other students’ work another time. You do not necessarily need to read every word of every notebook or log. Instead, look through most of the writing quickly, choosing to read some entries more carefully. When reading this work you should be both assessing whether students are doing the assignments correctly and whether their work shows evidence of clear thinking. Your written comments in response to their work can encourage them to keep up the good thinking or let them know that you have expectations for them to move to the next level of thinking.

Reading logs. Reading logs are ways for students to respond to what they are reading. On one side of a notebook page they write down the focus of the assigned reading. They might summarize or make lists of key ideas, depending on the instructors expectations. On the other side of the page, students respond to the reading.

These responses may include questions they have, connections they make to other readings or their own experiences, or things they want to discuss with their group in class. Reading journals require students to actually do the reading and to think purposefully about the content as opposed to just highlighting text (which does not necessarily involve thinking). The actual process of writing forces students to engage in the learning process rather than being passive. Students may require more structure and support to get their thinking to higher levels when they begin doing a reading log. Providing them with prompts or questions can lead them in the direction you want them to take in their responses to their reading. For example, you may ask students to respond to questions such as the following when writing in the log:

- What connections can you make between what you read and your own life?
- What were your thoughts about __ before reading this chapter? How have your thoughts on this topic changed as a result of this reading?
- How does the information in this chapter support/not support the discussion we had in class yesterday?
- In what ways will the information you learned in this chapter be helpful to you in your job (life, completing a certain task, writing a report, etc.).

Learning logs. Learning logs are simply notebooks in which students write each day. Learning logs can be combined with reading logs or daily quick writes or they can be a separate task altogether. They can be completed in- or out-of-class. Whether kept separately or combined with other writing, they provide a record of what students are learning in class. Generally, instructors ask students to write in their logs after each lecture. They may require students to summarize the main ideas or key points that were covered that day or they may ask them to respond to prompts or questions that they provide for students. When students know there is an expectation to write in their learning logs after a lecture, they may listen and take notes more carefully than they would otherwise. Some examples of prompts that might be used in learning logs include:

- Thinking about the concepts we discussed in class today, which one really stands out to you as the most important as far as your future as a (engineer, teacher, medical doctor)?
- How do the points that were made in class today connect to what the guest lecturer discussed yesterday?

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- What questions do you have about the way that (this concept) follows (this principle)?

Reading the logs occasionally can give instructors an idea of how well students' thinking is developing or where misconceptions may lie. Instructors may choose to pick up the entire class's logs and read them all every few weeks, or alternatively, they may choose to pick up a few logs each week to read making sure to read all student logs over a given period of time. Taking the time to make written responses to students' writing can provide feedback and motivate students to continue working if done carefully. When thinking about giving feedback to informal writing assignments, it is important to keep the purpose of the writing in mind.

Letter writing. Another approach to out-of-class writing is to ask students to write letters to each other or to you about ideas and issues related to course content. Letter writing can help students feel more at ease with the writing task because most of us have some experience with this type of writing. Letter writing can be especially effective when asking students to engage in more personal writing as opposed to the professional writing that they usually expect to complete in school. Bean (2001) suggested that students need a mix of personal and professional writing because the personal writing can be the foundation for better professional writing.

Using technology for writing to learn. Technology gives us multiple ways to have students complete and submit writing assignments and to interact with each other through writing. These technologies can be especially useful in writing-to-learn assignments. E-mail is the form of electronic technology that has been around the longest and still remains the way that some instructors collect student work. Discussion boards and blogs allow students to demonstrate their understanding of course materials while interacting with their classmates and the instructor. These tools provide students with a forum in which they can share their thinking, provide feedback to peers, and receive feedback from peers and instructor. In some ways discussion boards can be better than face-to-face discussion because the participants have time to really think about what they want to say. It also provides the instructor with a permanent record of what has been said. Students can respond to their reading or to prompts or questions that the instructor provides just as when doing a reading or learning log.

Wikis are useful collaboration tools for partner or small group work because rather than taking time out of class for students to work on a group writing assignment or having to get together outside of class, students can work together from anywhere.

Wikis also allow the instructor to see exactly what contributions each student has made in the construction of the final project. Designing wiki assignments that take advantage of wiki features that allow true collaboration and an understanding of how this collaboration and writing affect the construction of knowledge (Cummings & Barton, 2008).

Technology allows for easier peer-review or peer-response. Whether students e-mail writing to each other, share it in a wiki or some other technology tool, instructors don't have to give up class time for students to respond to each other's writing. Setting up protocols and specific tasks for peer-review is still necessary, however. Several of the online resources listed below can provide you with more information on preparing your students to do peer-review.

Formal Writing

Deciding whether to include one or more formal writing assignments in your course will depend on many factors including the number of students in your class because you will need to read and assess all formal writing assignments. Unlike informal writing assignments, formal writing assignments usually carry with them the expectation that certain writing conventions will be followed and assessed. Formal writing assignments can fit well into any subject area or discipline, but may look completely different in each one. Well designed and thoughtful assignments will lead to better writing than poorly designed assignments (Leist, 2006), so putting careful thought into assignments can pay off when you begin reading student submissions.

What Kind of Formal Assignments?

The best types of formal writing assignments ask students to think and apply what they have learned rather than just regurgitating facts and information. Assignments for upper-division students should be designed to help students use the language of the discipline. Formal writing assignments need not always be long research or term papers although these approaches can certainly be appropriate in certain courses. It is useful to explore alternative types of formal writing assignments to find ones that support the learning goals you have for your students. An example of a short formal writing assignment that can be limited to one or two pages would be ask students to support or refute a controversial topic within your discipline such as, "Global warming is or is not a result of human action". Or you might consider asking your students to write one page supporting one side and another page supporting the opposite view.

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Another example of a short formal writing assignment would be to have students write a letter to the editor in response to a newspaper article that misrepresents a concept in your discipline

Supporting Students' Writing

For longer writing assignments, providing support and feedback during the process of writing a paper may be helpful, but it may not be a manageable possibility for all instructors. If the choice of a topic is left up to students, asking them to turn in topic choices or to provide their thesis statements for your approval can eliminate the possibility of a poor topic choice resulting in a poor paper. Instructors may choose to have students turn in drafts that they read and return to the students with comments for making improvements. Bean (2001) takes a different approach, however, by reading only the final paper but inviting students to rewrite for a higher grade if the paper falls short of his expectations. This strategy eliminates having to read multiple drafts from all students—only poorly written papers have to be read more than once.

Asking students to read each other's and provide feedback (call peer feedback or peer review) can provide support for students as they work through the writing process. The WAC Clearinghouse (2011) provides detailed information on how to successfully incorporate peer review of writing into a classroom. It is important to set up a structure for this assignment that students will follow and to meet your expectations are for the peer-review process.

Grading

Grading students' writing is surely one of the most difficult tasks a university instructor must do. Bean (2001) made several recommendations for streamlining the grading process beginning with making sure that you have a well-designed assignment and then clearly defining your criteria for grading when the assignment is given. Providing students with scoring guides, check sheets, or rubrics helps students know what you value in the finished product and can help you stay focused on that when you read and grade the papers. Bean (2001) advised caution when writing comments on student papers. It is best to limit comments and whenever possible make positive comments first. Focus on ideas and organization first since these are probably more aligned with your goals for your students than are the mechanics of the paper.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Using Writing in Learning and Teaching

Advantages:

- Writing encourages students' active involvement in their learning.
- Writing develops students' ability to think critically within a discipline.
- Writing allows instructors to see more clearly what students do and do not know.
- Writing prepares students for real world work.

Disadvantages and Suggestions for Addressing Them

- Preparing writing assignments and then grading them can take a great deal of time:
 - In class writing-to-learn assignments require little preparation and do not have to be read. They can be used in any size class.
 - Instructors can choose to randomly read students' out of class informal writing assignments rather than reading all students' work every time students return assignments.
- Students may resist writing assignments:
 - Instructors can help students learn to appreciate the benefits of writing by sharing their own writing with students and showing them how writing can be used throughout their lives.
 - Bringing in experts from their field to discuss how writing is used in the real world may be beneficial for helping students understand the importance of learning to write well.

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Summary

Writing can be a powerful way to help students engage in critical thinking and become more active learners. Although integrating writing into courses can be challenging, there are many resources available to help instructors learn how to design and manage writing assignments. Many universities now have writing centers with websites that provide support to faculty who are interested in including writing in their courses. The Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and Writing in the Disciplines (WID) movements (The WAC Clearing House, 2011) highlight the need for students to not only learn basic writing skills, but also that they be encouraged to use writing within the different disciplines to demonstrate and develop their abilities to think. In addition:

- Writing to learn activities encourage active participation and critical thinking.
- Informal writing assignments can take place in and outside of class.
- Instructors do not need to read all of students' informal writing.
- Technology provides new ways of having students write and think. Technology can be used when it appropriately supports the goals of the course.
- Formal writing activities help develop students' abilities to write within a discipline.

References

- Bean, J. C. (2001). *Engaging ideas: The professors guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom*.
- Bean's book is a thorough and engaging text on why to include writing, examples of assignments, and ways to handle grading of assignments. It provides information on how to structure assignments and class time to promote critical thinking as well as how to critique student writing. Bean also includes chapters on how to help students read difficult texts, how to prepare good essay exam questions, and how to scaffold students through writing research papers.
- Cooper, S., & Patton, R. (1997). *Writing logically, thinking critically*. New York, NY: Longman.

Cooper and Patton expound on the idea that good writing follows good thinking. They provide writing assignment examples that help students to understand making inferences, providing arguments, and using deductive and inductive reasoning.
- Cummings, R. E., & Barton, M. (Eds.). (2008). *Wiki writing: Collaborative learning in the college classroom*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- *Wiki Writing* provides examples and suggestions of how wikis can be used in the college classroom to maximize student writing and learning. Faculty who have used wikis in their courses share their experiences and give advice on pitfalls to avoid.
- Leist, S. M. (2006). *Writing to teach; Writing to learn in higher education*. New York, NY: University Press of America.
- Leist explores theory and practice as she offers advice on how to integrate writing across the curriculum. Examples of how to construct writing assignments and advice on how to assess writing are both provided in this text.
- Svinicki, M., & McKeachie, W. J. (2011). *Teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- *Teaching Tips* has long provided instructors with ways to optimize their teaching and the learning of their students. It offers advice on all aspects of college teaching including how to use writing to promote student learning.

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- The WAC Clearinghouse (2011), Colorado State University. Retrieved from <http://wac.colostate.edu/> .
- University of Delaware Writing Center (2011), University of Delaware. Retrieved from <http://www.english.udel.edu/wc/faculty/index.html>.
- These links are to two different university writing center web sites and each provides numerous resources for writing-to-learn and writing-within-disciplines. Each site provides examples of writing assignments and activities and provides rationale for using writing across the curriculum. They also offer advice on how to assess writing and how to manage using writing within a course.

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King Fahd National Library Cataloging-in- Publication Data

L.D. no. 1434/ 7332

ISBN: 978- 603- 507- 138- 3



عمادة تطوير المهارات
Deanship of Skills Development

King Saud University - Deanship of Skills Development

P.O. Box 85500 Riyadh 11691

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