

Developing a Range of Writing Assignments

Kinds of Writing

A range of kinds of writing opportunities supports student learning best. Formal writing assignments tend to demonstrate what students know at the end of the semester; informal writing assignments offer many moments where students discover, explore, synthesize, and reflect on the course materials and their learning processes.

Formal Writing

Formal writing is often used to assess whether students have been able to synthesize and understand large amounts of classroom material, and it often introduces students to the kinds of professional writing done in their discipline. Traditional academic essays, reports, and proposals are all kinds of formal writing. The key characteristics of formal writing are explicit genre conventions, explicit and external purposes and audiences, and a less personal, more objective tone.

Freewriting

Freewriting refers to writing informally for a set amount of time, ranging from a couple of minutes to twenty minutes. The aim is to keep writing to generate ideas or explore thoughts without concern for grammar, spelling, or sentence boundaries. If a person can't think of more to write, it's appropriate to switch to another point, to write about not having anything to write about, or to cast about for something new to write about.

Reading Responses

Asking students to write in response to course readings gives them opportunities to think more critically about what they've read. Reading responses may be written in class or for homework and tend to be more formal than freewriting. These kinds of responses may ask students to summarize key points, analyze content, explore structure, critique ideas, or make personal connections.

Journals

Journals offer students a forum for exploratory writing in reaction to readings, classroom activities or projects, and related personal or academic experiences. Journals offer students an avenue for considering course-related concepts in an informal, but often regular, writing assignment. Journals tend to range from 1-3 pages in length and tend to emphasize exploration of course-related material.

Reflection

Asking students to reflect, or look back on, daily classroom activities and their work with course concepts offers them opportunities to explicitly consider their work on an assignment or in a course as a whole. This kind of writing helps students consider what it means to be a learner in the course because students describe their process of doing an activity or learning about an aspect of the course.

Genre Writings

Asking students to write in different genres, from memos to letters and from poems to dialogues, creates a variety of avenues that lend themselves to teacher-student communication and to new perspectives on course material. A memo assignment may invite students to indicate their progress on a larger project to the teacher while a math poem may help students consider course materials from a different perspective.

Checking-in Writing

Checking-in writing is just what it sounds like: kinds of writing that permit teachers and students to communicate briefly and informally with one another about class concepts and/or class business. This form of writing may take place in class as a way for teachers to see if students understand the course material under discussion, but it may also happen electronically before or after class through email, a listserv, or a bulletin board.