

Writing-to-Learn Activities (text-based & multimodal)

Main takeaway

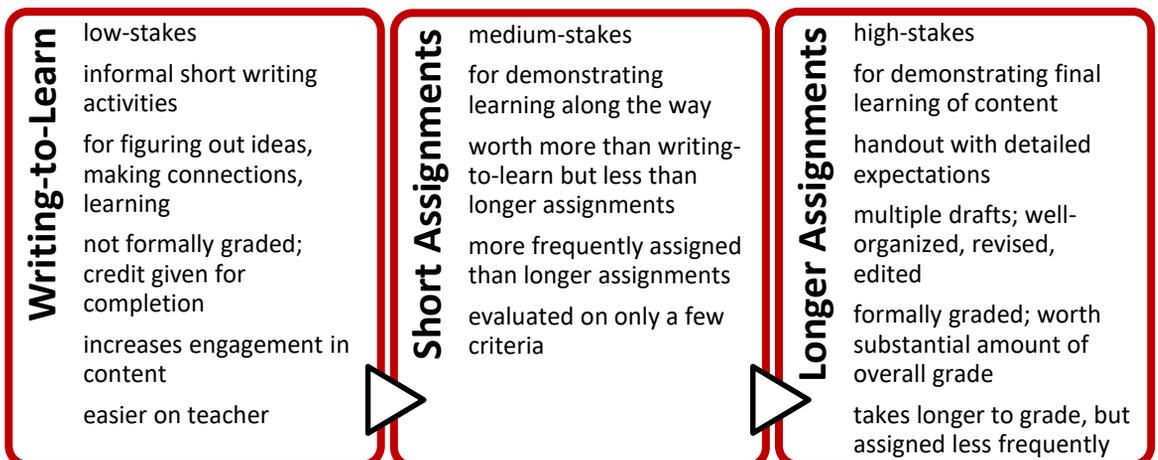
Providing students with frequent, informal writing-to-learn opportunities can increase student engagement in course content, deepen student learning, and give faculty a way to gauge student understanding and provide quick clarifications. While all writing is multimodal, for our purposes we can distinguish between primarily text-based writing (such as typed short responses and reflections, or hand-written brainstorming and exit notes) and multimodal writing that integrates text, images, visuals, and sounds (like informal audio responses, short video reflections, or blog posts).

Writing-to-learn activities are a best practice in writing pedagogy because when students write about a topic, they think through complex issues, make connections, and ask questions in a low-stakes, non-threatening environment. These activities can be integrated as isolated activities throughout the term or be used to build up to a longer writing assignment. Note that writing-to-learn activities are not the same as short assignments, which may receive instructor comments and have grading criteria.

You may find these types of writing activities especially resilient if you need to shift between physically-distanced, hybrid, or online spaces. Students may find them more achievable and less stressful (since they are short, take less time to complete, and aren't formally evaluated) and they're an efficient use of faculty time (since students receive credit/no credit or points for completing them and they help faculty clarify confusions early on) and are often enjoyable to read.

You can also use informal writing to facilitate student conversations and interaction in face-to-face or distanced environments. By thinking through ideas first in writing, students are often more willing to participate in discussions, and in physically-distanced, hybrid, or online situations students can share their writing and give comments to each other using digital documents. Even in online contexts, if students prefer to do some writing-to-learn on paper, they can easily take pictures of their work on their phones and share these digital versions.

Continuum of Writing Assignments from Low- to High-Stakes



Writing-to-learn activities are appropriate for disciplines across the curriculum. For example, math students could keep a journal to work through problems; science students could reflect on the limitations of an experiment’s methodology or results; humanities students could freewrite about gaps in scholarship or possible thesis statements.

Writing-to-learn opportunities are usually assigned credit for completion, on a credit/no credit basis, or based on a simple point system. This type of writing isn’t formally graded (with evaluation criteria) because it’s a way for students to experiment with ideas and work through thoughts without concern for grades. While any single writing-to-learn opportunity might not be worth much by itself, together they could represent a more substantial part of a student’s grade.

Example writing-to-learn activities

See Bean’s list of 22 different kinds of exploratory writing ideas (in the Resources of Moodle).

Ask students to respond to prompts you compose:

- Talk through where/why you get lost when understanding an article or solving a math equation.
 - Brainstorm possible thesis statements you might for your next paper. List sources you might use to prove each thesis.
 - Explain something that is unclear to you, or the most important takeaways, after completing this course unit.
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Develop “Reading Worksheets” that ask students to answer questions you pose, identify an article’s main thesis, or list and reflect on key quotes. Students can carry on distance conversations by sharing and responding to these worksheets.

Writing-to-learn activities can be text-based or multimodal, such as podcasts, voice memos, blogs, or short informal videos

- Multimodal writing-to-learn activities add variety (for both students and instructors)
- Students can use their phones to record audio or video responses or use simple free video software like flipgrid. Students are often already creating such multimodal texts in their everyday lives, and so instructors don’t need to teach them how to do it.
- Multimodal texts can be easily shared with peers and instructors in distanced situations (via Moodle, Google Docs, a blog, or private YouTube channels).

Example multimodal writing-to-learn activities

- Brainstorm ideas or respond to prompts via audio or video.
- Respond informally (such as in bullet points) or collect thoughts (like an informal transcript) before recording audio or video.
- Create a blog that can contain all three modes (written, audio, video); students can then share all of their writing-to-learn in one online space and you can collect a list of all student blog addresses for easy access.
- See free blog software such as Squarespace, Wix, Weebly, or Wordpress (free versions are available).