

Teaching Thinking with Writing (and Vice Versa)

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...if students are encouraged to try a variety of thought processes in classes, they can, regardless of their ages, develop considerable mental power. Writing is one of the most effective ways to develop thinking. (Forsman, 1985, p. 162)

My long experience teaching writing classes and using writing to teach literature classes has clearly demonstrated to me the synergistic relationship of writing, thinking, and learning. Having used writing-to-learn assignments such as journals and free-writes for decades, I have seen how frequent reflective writing increases students' fluency as writers and enhances their analytical skills.

However, while typical writing-to-learn activities help students to develop habits of reflection and critical reading, these activities are usually rather open-ended and unstructured, allowing students to pursue their own lines of thinking. In my upper-division professional writing classes (business and technical writing), I have noticed how unprepared many students are for writing assignments that require specific skills such as critical and rhetorical thinking, interpretation of source material, persuasion, and problem solving. As a result, I now use more structured writing-to-learn assignments that require specific thinking processes related to upcoming formal writing assignments.

As we guide students through productive **writing** strategies for a new or difficult type of assignment, we should emphasize the necessary **thinking** processes as well. For example, to wean students away from writing simple plot summary in a literary paper, we might first have them practice interpretation and analysis in small, ungraded mini-papers on an excerpt from a literary work.

Like me, have you ever received a narrative paper in response to an analytical assignment? Or a list-like paper of the "first this, then that" variety instead of the evaluative response you expected in a book review? These papers may even be fluent, correct, and stylistically pleasing, but their approach to the topic is misdirected or their development thin. The problems here involve students' **thinking** processes more than what we usually call their **writing** processes.

Both practice and research indicate that writing is a powerful way to develop students' thinking. In fact, writing **is** thinking, not just language and syntax—thinking made visible on a page or screen. If we intend to help students become better writers, we must help them develop more than just fluency and correctness. We also must design instruction to help students learn to think in often unfamiliar and increasingly sophisticated ways.

Short, easily evaluated writing assignments can provide students with valuable opportunities to practice and rehearse important thinking skills, either replacing a formal paper assignment or preparing students for such an assignment. The table below describes a number of alternative or preparatory writing activities to develop students' thinking (and writing) skills.

Type of Thinking	Brief Writing Assignment
Critical reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - List the topics or main ideas of each paragraph in a reading assignment - Do a close reading of a brief thematic passage in a literary work, listing all the important ideas expressed there - Respond to a reading with notes and questions in the margins
Selecting resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Print out an online research process or write a brief narrative describing a library research process
Evaluating sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Develop an annotated bibliography - Write summaries of key sources - Evaluate web sources against explicit criteria
Interpreting source material	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Develop brief paraphrases or summaries of sample passages from a reading assignment
Analyzing and synthesizing information from sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Write the introduction to a paper, including a balanced thesis statement (“although some sources indicate ____, I believe that ____ is the best course of action”)
Interpreting data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Create several interpretive statements about a set of data
Documenting sources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Create a short bibliography of library or online sources on a hobby or interest - Write a paragraph using paraphrased information and cite the sources internally
Organizing information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Describe the organization of different sections of the phone book and relate the purposes of these sections to their organization - Create a shopping list from a list of random grocery items (to prevent retracing any steps) - Outline a short textbook section or reading - Write headings or titles for a reading selection that lacks them
Reasoning and argumentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Create an outline of an argumentative paper - Develop a pro/con list after reading about a controversial topic - Write a refutation of an opposing viewpoint
Rhetorical thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Create a personal list of every piece of writing done recently and identify both the audience and purpose of each document - Create a table that compares the potential content and style of documents written to different audiences on the same topic
Evaluating information and ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - List the criteria you would use for selecting a product or an action (e.g., choosing a restaurant for dinner, selecting a new car) - Develop criteria for evaluating a TV show, video game, movie, or spectator sport - Develop criteria for evaluating an employee in a fast food restaurant, movie theater, or recreation facility (or for evaluating a teacher, coach, or principal)

Each of these brief assignments can be evaluated quickly or shared in small groups and discussed before being submitted for credit. Feedback could be directed toward the whole class based on our observations of students' work; such formative evaluation makes efficient use of our time while still giving students valuable feedback. If it is possible to keep the writers anonymous, we can discuss during class some students' responses to the assignments. Positive models are always instructive to writers, and they will have even more impact coming from classmates responding to the same assignment.

Although we know that students need to write and receive feedback frequently in order to grow as writers, our number of assignments is always limited by our ability to read and evaluate this student work (as well as design instruction, give tests, and all our other myriad tasks). If our concept of "writing assignments" is limited to complete, formal papers, we will necessarily assign less writing than if we defined writing assignments more broadly—to also include brief **thinking and planning assignments** as well as **parts** of full-length papers. This broader definition allows us to make fuller use of writing's potential to teach thinking—and to improve students' writing in the process.

Reference

Forsman, S. (1985). Writing to Learn Means Learning to Think. In A. R. Gere (Ed.), *Roots in the sawdust: Writing to learn across the disciplines* (pp. 162-174). Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English.

Biography:

Susan C. Kirby is an Associate Professor of English at Radford University in Radford, Virginia. Her areas of specialty are composition and business/technical writing, and she has served as co-coordinator of RU's Writing Across the Curriculum Program and co-director of the Faculty Development Center. A fellow in the Virginia Writing Project in 1980 and 1985, she is an experienced presenter and workshop facilitator for faculty and student groups both locally and nationally. Her most recent presentations have been for the Association for Business Communication national conferences. She also serves as a reader of Advanced Placement essays for the Educational Testing Service.