

# “Write to Learn” Activities – Social Sciences

## In-class Writing (Five Common Activities)

### Free Writes

To activate prior knowledge or generate ideas by free association.

Students write about a predetermined topic for a brief, specified number of minutes (1-5 minutes) as fast as they can and put words on paper.

### When to use it

- ✓ Works as a good warm-up at the beginning of class. Instructors can pose an opening/introduction question related to the day’s topic.

For example:

- What do you know about X?
  - In your opinion, is overpopulation the cause of poverty, hunger, and ecological degradation? Take 3 minutes to write out your ideas. Then read and share your ideas with a partner.
- ✓ Can be used to wrap up the day’s topic or lecture or to help connect ideas.

For example:

- What did you learn today about X?
  - What questions are left unanswered with regards to X?
  - Summarize concept X or concepts XYZ that we’ve been discussing in class today.
  - What part of this concept/these concepts confuse(s) you?
  - Explain what we learned today in your own words.
  - What is the relationship between last day’s topic and today’s?
- ✓ Can be used to supplement reading content.

For example:

- What questions do you have about the last reading?
  - What were the most important points in the last reading?
- ✓ Can be used to moderate discussion activities.

Instructors can also use exam review questions as free writes to help students prepare for a test

### Paragraph Writing

Students write, read, and share their paragraphs.

Can be used to:

- ✓ Define a concept you’ve presented.
- ✓ Apply a principle to the students’ experience.
- ✓ Make connections with previous learning.

- ✓ Summarize or synthesis important points from a lecture or assigned reading.
- ✓ Translate a principle into a word problem.

Sample Paragraph Writing Prompt Based on Assigned Reading:

- Read or skim the two sections, “Neo-Malthusianism with a Green Tinge” and “Conclusion” of the Williams (2009) article.
- In a free writing paragraph, answer:  
“According to Williams (2009), is overpopulation the cause of poverty, hunger, and ecological degradation? Take 5 minutes to write your paragraph. Then read and share your paragraph with your group.”

### **One-Sentence Summaries**

Have students write one-sentence summaries of a lecture, reading assignment, or discussion.

#### **Sample Topic:**

“Using the same text source for our last topic on ‘Paragraph Writing’, write a 1-sentence summary of the reading assignment. Then share your ideas with someone from another discipline (outside of your area of Social Sciences, Humanities, or Science).”

### **Writing Questions**

Have students write 2 or 3 questions concerning the main ideas or concepts in a reading.

#### **Topic Prompt:**

“Using the same text as above, jot down 2 or 3 questions you have concerning the main ideas or concepts in the reading. Then share your ideas with another person from another discipline (outside of your area of Social Sciences, Humanities, or Science).”

### **The One-Minute Paper**

Students summarize the most important or most useful point(s) from the lecture, reading assignment, or discussion; Students can write questions that remain as well.

#### **Sample One-Minute Writing Prompt from Today’s Presentation:**

“What are the basic ideas behind the concept ‘Writing Across the Curriculum’ (WAC) that we learned today?”

### **Other in-class writing activities**

#### **Exam Prep**

##### *Mock Test Creation*

Use class time for students to brainstorm and review idea before exams.

### *Anonymous Question Box*

Make a question box for students to place things they would find useful to review before an exam. This could also be done by anonymous submissions of sheets of paper in class or online.

## **Writing**

### *“First Day” Writing Activities*

Some ideas for short writing prompts:

1. Give students a general question to introduce them to the general material on the first day.
2. Ask them to write a short response to submit to you; you can return it to the students at the end-of-term as a reflective exercise.
3. Toss out a “playground” question for them to answer in groups, or for you to put answers on the board. Ease them into contributing with a friendly assignment.
4. Have students jot down any fears or anxieties they have as they enter your course.

### *In-class Stop & Write*

This can be used when you feel students may need a moment to focus attention, assimilate information, or articulate a question. It can help refocus a class discussion or attention.

### *Alternative Views*

Have students write alternative points of view to a different topic relative to your course.

Psychology Class Example:

“How would the various viewpoints of Sigmund Freud, B.F. Skinner, and Carl Rogers differ on the causes of teen pregnancy?”

Women’s Studies Example:

“What were the primary concerns for women in: 1. the first 2. second 3. third waves of feminist activism?”

Social Science Class Example:

“How would poverty be explained from three different perspectives: Liberalism, Marxism, and Third Wave Feminism?”

### *Short Answer Writing*

The instructor poses a question. Students write and share answers with partners or the class.

## **Visual**

### *Visual Representation*

Instructors can lead brainstorming of main themes through visual representations or drawing. This works very well in dispelling myths, stereotypes, and stigma.

Example: Take a minute to draw some pictures of the first few things that come to mind when you think of X.

Sample Topics: poverty, sex worker, disability, etc.

## **Group Work**

### *Snowballing*

This involves expanding groups. Students prepare a question or response alone. Then they join a partner, pair, etc. to compare and discuss.

### *Buzz Groups*

Students work as a group to write down issues or specific topics or concepts from a reading. To diversify, students can write on note paper, poster board, etc.

### *Group Paragraph Writing*

Student groups join to write a collaborative response to a topic.

## **Note-taking**

### *Class Minutes*

Have 1 or 2 students be notetakers for the day who will be responsible for summarizing the class presentation, lecture, or activities in the first 5 minutes of the next class.

## **Other**

### *Rotating Response Stations*

This helps to introduce a physical element or dynamism for a specific topic of concept.

### *Writing Assignment Idea Generation*

Use class time to students to brainstorm and generate ideas for a writing assignment.

## **Out-of-Class Writing Activities**

### **Based on Course Concepts**

#### *Compact Essays*

Have students write a 2 or 3 page essay on a key course concept or topic. It's good to assign different groups different topics. Then they have to condense their own essay to 1 page and share it with classmates. The other students read and comment on it. Finally, they can write a group paper that combines the best of their ideas in 1 page.

#### *Record Challenges*

Students can jot down notes concerning where they are stuck or confused about certain points.

### **Based on Readings**

#### *Free Writes as Homework*

Students can write about what they read and what they don't understand; this can include notes and reflection; Instructors can change prompts.

### *Response Papers*

Students can respond to particular features of a reading or the effectiveness of logical argument; evidence provided.

### *Abstract Paragraph Summaries of Readings*

Students can practice writing abstract-style paragraphs for chapters or readings as a summary of the main points.

### *Short Synthesis Papers*

Students can work through commonalities across several readings in their writing.

### *Exploratory Writing Assignments*

Ask students to compare two concepts from a reading, connect a concept from the reading to some experience in their lives, or work out a definition in writing.

### *Annotation Paragraph of Readings*

Students can practice writing annotation paragraphs that include key ideas, strengths, and weaknesses geared toward a particular class project or assignment.

### *Journals*

This can include logs based on reading (combined with SQRRRW – Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review, Write skills/SPAR skills), writing logs, lecture logs, or thinking logs; journals can be ongoing; prompts can remain constant or vary.

## **Assignments/Presentations**

### *Writing Assignments for a Prescribed Role or Case Study*

Example: Letter to the editor; policy report; letter writing, etc.

Example: Write a convincing letter to X stating your reasons for or against X. (Sample Topic: Afrocentric schools in Toronto)

### *Paper Presentation*

Students bring condensed 1-page versions of assignment papers and present to groups or the whole class.

### *Writer's Log Submissions*

Have students submit a writer's log for submission of assignment drafts. Ask the students about their main point, how the writing went, which parts seem strong, weak, what questions they have for their readers, etc. This works like a reflection when students submit a draft assignment.

### *Annotation Paragraph of Readings*

Students can practice writing annotation paragraphs that include key ideas, strengths, and weaknesses geared toward a particular class project or assignment.

## **Other**

### *Class Discussion Questions*

Have students generate questions for discussion activities

### *Famous Person or Historical Question Period*

Students can generate a list of questions they would pose to the author of a reading or a famous figure in the field

### *Collaborative Team Reports or Writing*

Students join together for collaborative writing.

### *Debate Note Preparation*

Have students prepare written notes for debate format.

Roles:

- First Affirmative – defines main terms and outlines the affirmative case
- First Negative – contests any badly defined and outlines the negative case
- Second Affirmative and Second Negative – complete the case, especially with evidence
- Rebuttals – show weaknesses in the most important arguments of the opposing case
- Question period

Have student observers of the debate follow up in written form and make a judgement in written form with reasons and evidence.

### *Journals*

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## **Online Write-to-Learn Options**

Many of the activities can be tailored to online formats:

### *e-journals, Course Websites, or emails*

Students can respond to certain topics or prompts in these forums and instructors can highlight interesting or relevant posts.

### *Discussion Boards*

Students can post provocative questions, queries, or summary/analysis of labs or lectures on an electronic bulletin board or Web forum for class comment.

### *Puzzlemaker*

This is a fun tool for students or instructors to create crosswords, word searches, etc. for key concepts and ideas.

Link: <http://www.discoveryeducation.com/free-puzzlemaker/?CFID=3208214&CFTOKEN=18370909>