

Write to Learn and Learn to Write

“Write to Learn¹” (WTL) has to do with using writing to help students learn, reflect on, and ultimately assimilate what they are taught. The focus is much more on **process** than on the written product: the real product here is the greater understanding that the student acquires through the reflective activity of writing. WTL exercises tend to be short, and to be low- or no-stakes (i.e., you might incentivize them by giving just a mark or a few marks for completion). They tend to be fairly informal in terms of language and structure.

Why are they so great?

1. Because WTL exercises tend to be short and relatively informal, they can easily be fitted into your tutorial structure
2. They can defuse some of the scariness of writing for students who aren't comfortable writing (or writing in English).
3. Some of them can even be deployed spontaneously, when you want a time-out or want to ensure that students are following.
4. They can be used as means of checking comprehension, whether with regard to the lecture, the reading, or with what's been happening in the tutorial.
5. Depending on the exercise, you don't necessarily have to read student responses thoroughly: you can skim them to get an idea of what the class is thinking on a given topic.
6. They can be preparatory, used to get students to focus their thoughts or brainstorm before engaging in discussion or group work.
7. They can become a regular, structuring feature of your tutorial, whether used at the start (to get students thinking about the readings/lecture), in the middle (to check comprehension or change topics), or at the end (as a summary of what happened).

Can you think of some exercises that might fall into the WTL category?

¹ Material used in RGASC's Writing TA Training sessions.

“Learn to Write” (LTW) refers to using writing as a means of training students to think and communicate as disciplinary insiders. In other words, LTW work is focused on teaching students to produce material that conforms to the expectations of your discipline—this applies to structure, language, reasoning strategies, etc. LTW exercises tend to be longer and more formal than WTL ones, and are usually higher stakes. LTW work is often the majority of the written work that is listed on the course outline and submitted for marks by the students. However, that doesn’t mean that you can’t use LTW strategies in tutorial.

Why are they so great?

1. They tend to be graded, or clearly related to graded work, so it’s easy to convince students of their importance and to relate them to the course goals.
2. They have definite formal/structural requirements, which can be laid out clearly for students.
3. They teach students that disciplines have ways of both expressing knowledge and creating it.
4. They can be used not only to teach students how to write in their discipline, but also how to read published work (articles, etc.).

Most LTW assignments will be on the course outline and will be graded: you probably won’t have to develop many of them on your own for tutorial use. However, you can use writing instruction to help students understand and successfully complete the assignments.

Often, the biggest stumbling block for students is the meaning of the verbs that describe the task. Students may be fuzzy on the distinction between “analyze,” “describe,” “assess,” etc. So you could try, for example, a) identify the typical verbs used in your field or on the assignment, b) have students define these verbs on their own, c) have them work in groups to refine their definitions, and d) take up the definitions with the class.

Another example: Many students read articles like they would read fiction: start to finish. This is not efficient, for one thing; for another, it prevents them from seeing overall organizing principles that they could apply to their own work. Reading academic articles in an effective manner is an acquired skill: even if we don’t remember the exact stages when we acquired it, we all learned it. Learning this skill will help your students not only do the assigned reading more quickly, but also create papers that conform to disciplinary standards. So in preparing for writing assignments, you can use published writing that is similar to what the students will be expected to produce and show students how to read it effectively. You can talk about the structure and what each section does for the article; talk about the importance of topic sentences; talk about

what the intro and conclusion do; in short, guide your students so that they read by looking at the claims (intro) and the final conclusions (conclusion), and then get an overview of the whole article through topic sentences, then encourage them to apply this analysis to their own writing

Please answer the following questions:

1. Aside from verbs, what aspects of assignment prompts give students in your courses/field a lot of trouble?
2. How can you use writing or the analysis of writing to help students get a better grasp on these aspects?
3. In your own words, define WTL and LTW.
4. Quickly think up two different examples of WTL and LTW assignments for your course and share with a partner.