

Informal Writing

Informal writing is typically done in class to encourage students to explore an important idea. These activities are short (3 to 15 minutes long) and unedited; students responses to a prompt might be as short as a word and rarely longer than a paragraph. Why bother, you may be asking yourself. To learn anything, we must actively process the new material, and informal writing helps students to move from passively listening to actively engaging with class content. When we use informal writing, it's helpful to explain to students how it can enhance their learning. Here are some simple ways to add informal writing to a class session:

- At the beginning of class, students can list the most important things they learned in the last session. If they do this without consulting their notes, they are engaging in the kind of retrieval practice that helps build long-term learning. Various students might share one idea from their lists until the key ideas from the previous session have been mentioned.
- During a lecture, students might define a key term in their own words, generate their own example of a concept, or pose a question. They might share their responses in small groups, or a few students might read what they wrote to the whole class.
- After a small group activity, students can be asked to relate what they did to an important idea for the day. For instance, we might show a short passage from the assigned reading on a slide and ask students to write a few sentences relating their conversation to that quotation.
- At the end of class, students can be invited to write a "minute paper" explaining the central point of the session and describing what remains unclear to them. We collect these anonymous papers and begin the next class by addressing important questions and misconceptions.

What about grading? In general, the more we explicitly connect informal writing to the work of a class session, the less grading we will need to do. Some informal writing assignments are never graded, for instance a "minute paper" and its cousin "the muddiest point." Most of us will choose to grade some of the informal writing, to help students see that we take it seriously. When we choose to grade, it's fine to be selective, choosing assignments that seem particularly important. Because of its unedited and exploratory nature, most people grade informal writing lightly, perhaps giving a check or a single point for an acceptable entry and counting these grades as participation points. If we make a comment, one related to the content is more suitable than one about mechanics or writing style.

Do you want to read more about informal writing?

Bean, J. (2011). *Engaging ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking and active leaning in the classroom*. 2nd. ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Flash, P. (2015). Informal, in-class writing activities.

<http://writing.umn.edu/tww/assignments/informal.html>