

Writing Labs: Nine Possibilities

Below are nine ways to make the most of a 60 or 80 minute class focused on writing. References are to *Engaging Ideas*, by John Bean (Jossey-Bass, 2001).

1. In-Class Writing: A series of two or three free writes – questions about the readings or about the subject matter of the course more generally – will provide more than enough material for discussion. It's good to start with the general (e.g. “what strikes you about this passage/text?” “What are your thoughts about...”) and build to more specific questions that you want students to think about. Have students share them aloud (making sure that they read rather than summarize what they wrote, and making sure that everyone shares at least one), and then have a discussion. It will be richer for the time spent writing. You can give students 5 minutes at the end of class to capture any thoughts they have before they leave. This exercise helps generate ideas, but it also models a use of writing that is exploratory.

2. Model Essays: Have students read an essay from a previous semester that you think is fairly strong. When they come to class, have them discuss it in small groups and respond to a few questions: What is successful in this essay? What was surprising to you as a reader? What could be better? (If you have given them any written guidelines or criteria for writing, have the small groups apply them to this essay.) Then, in the full group, share these ideas and discuss the essay. End the session by having students do some free writing about what they specifically learned from the essay and about what they will do differently in their next written assignment. (See Bean 189 and 218 for more thoughts on this.)

3. Norming Session: As above, have students read a sample student essay (from a previous semester) before class, but this time pick an essay that is average. In small groups, have students discuss the strengths and weaknesses. What is successful? What is the next step for this draft? In the full group, you can pool these ideas together and have a general discussion about what makes a strong essay in your field and in your class. You can even ask students (later, not sooner) to discuss what grade they would give this essay. This helps clarify the expectations that you have as a reader, and it can help set the bar pretty high for future essays. As above, end the session by having students write about what they learned from the process and what they will do differently in their next essay. (See Bean 219 and 158.)

4. Peer Review: Have each student read the drafts written by two classmates, and then have them meet (in groups of three) in class. Be sure to give them a clear list of things to assess in the writing of their peers; this list should correlate to what you value and grade for in an essay, and it can emerge nicely from the model essay discussion or the norming session described above. (Helpful hint: keep track of time – students often need to be reminded to switch from one essay to the next.) Peer review is a learned skill, and it often goes much better the second (and third) time as compared to the first. Stick with it, and be sure to debrief each session – What went well? What did I learn about my essay? What are my next steps? Require students to hand in their peer reviewed drafts along with their revised drafts so that you can glance at what kinds of feedback they gave each other. (See Bean 222-225.)

5. Process Writing: A great discussion can be generated if you have students free write about their own writing. A few ideas: (1) Ask students to free write on the essay prompt you have given them – What does it seem to be asking? What would a good answer include? What would be the best place to begin? (2) Part way through the writing process, have students write about where they are in the development of their essay – what have they figured out? What questions do they have? What is the next thing they need to do? (3) Ask students to write a cover letter for their

draft in which they describe their process, assess the strengths of their draft, and state what they would have done if they had more time. You can also ask (see below) what handouts or writing resources they used when revising their work.

6. “The handout is dead; long live the handout”: Handouts are useless unless we put them to use in the class, so we should be on the lookout for opportunities to haul them out of our collective backpacks. Any piece of writing can be put alongside a handout – on grammar, on thesis statements, on pet peeves, on MLA – and be reviewed for those things. Students can edit their own work or the work of a classmate. (See us at The Learning Commons for sample handouts.)

7. Thesis Workshop: This is a chance – in small groups or in the full class – for students to pitch their ideas for an upcoming essay. Have students free write beforehand, and then have each person in class pitch their idea. What will they try to prove? What will the argument look like? What evidence will they need? Having just 5 or 10 minutes to do this brings a level of energy to the process, and they will want to get done and get feedback from everyone. (Bean mentions something similar on 115.)

8. Short Writing Assignments: If you assign a short (one page) assignment, and if you have made sure students don't object to their work being shared publicly, read them quickly to pick out one or two good responses. Copy these or project them during class, and then have the class discuss what makes it a good response. (When using the work of current students, only use good responses.) This is a chance for students to learn what a good answer looks like, and it seems to work really well for short, self-contained pieces of writing (summaries, write-to-learn pieces, abstracts, etc.) and for sections of longer works (parts of a lab report, introductory paragraphs, conclusions, etc.) This is a good way to use short writing assignments without having to read and provide feedback on them all – it should take you 10 minutes to pick out the ones to use in class. Note that in talking about these pieces, you are also spending time on the subject matter of the course, reinforcing key concepts.

9. Writing About the Writing Process: A separate handout (“Bringing Writing Into the Classroom”) offers several prompts to use in conjunction with several essays that discuss the writing process of students and experts. This exercise – a series of free writes based on one or more readings – is similar to #3 above (process writing) except that in this case students read essays about writing and revision beforehand. Prompts encourage students to reflect on their own experiences as writers and on what they can learn from the readings. By getting their habits and struggles into the open and onto the page, these exercises offer the chance to approach the next essay in a new way. (See us in The Learning Commons for the handout “Bringing Writing into the Classroom,” as well as the readings by Alex Johnson, Nancy Sommers, and Peter Turchi.)