Writing to Learn: Example Activities

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Materials, rationales and other notes are available at: http://tinyurl.com/institute14

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| **Admission Slips** |
| *Description* | *Strengths* |
| Students are asked to come with some writing done before class. This can be used in conjunction with other techniques below. | * Activates prior knowledge
* May be used to contextualize learning
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| **Personal Definitions** |
| *Description* | *Strengths* |
| Students are given a vocabulary word before the lesson and asked to give a personal definition. | * Activates prior knowledge
* Gives teacher a sense of what students are bringing to class and how to grow from this to a more complete understanding
* Helps a teacher identify misconceptions that might get in the way
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| **Journaling** |
| *Description* | Strengths |
| Student journals can be used in conjunction with many of the other techniques. Depending on how you set this up, the journal can be private or shared with the teacher or other students. | * Activates and engages the personal connection to the material and gives students a sense of ownership
* Establishes a habit of mind in which writing is connected to thinking and reflecting
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| **Lists** |
| *Description* | *Strengths* |
| These can be lists of 10 items (to foster brainstorming), top 3 lists (to require justification), ABC lists (with connections of the topic to every letter of the alphabet), or lists with images.  | * Simple to implement
* Gives everyone a connection to the topic
* Requires students to brainstorm and push beyond the obvious and/or to construct arguments about what is valuable and why
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| **Think-write-pair-share** |
| *Description* | *Strengths* |
| Students experience a demonstration, reading, viewing, or other engagement and then think and write about it on their own before sharing with a partner. | * Requires each student to be engaged
* Activates positive social effects and uses these to connect students to ideas
* Helps students who are shy or who have language difficulty get involved as they know they have something thought out before sharing
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| **Sentence synthesis** |
| *Description* | *Strengths* |
| Students are asked to synthesize a set of ideas or experiences into one sentence. | * Gives students a chance to practice distilling ideas
* Gives teachers a feeling for whether students are getting the main idea
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| **Talk then write** |
| *Description* | *Strengths* |
| Students are given a chance to talk in pairs or small groups before writing. This can be used in conjunction with many other techniques. | * Helps when a writing task is difficult and may require group brainstorming to get everyone going
* Models social constructivist principles in which ideas are built in community
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| **Letter to a friend** |
| *Description* | *Strengths* |
| Students are asked to write a letter to a friend explaining the ideas they have encountered. | * Activates social pathways in the brain
* Students use their own language rather than trying to use ‘teacher’ language
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| **Writing with images** |
| *Description* | *Strengths* |
| Students are asked to create pieces of writing that include images. This can be used with any of the other techniques. | * Builds on the strength of our visual
* Broadens understanding to include imagery that can be used in recall
* Useful for students with language problems and English Language Learners
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| **Explain your process** |
| *Description* | *Strengths* |
| Students must write down how they are thinking about a problem as they do it. Each step must be explained.  | * Builds metacognition, which is at the core of any successful writing-to-learn program
* Can be used in any subject, including math
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| **Cornell notes** |
| *Description* | *Strengths* |
| Students divide their paper into two columns, reserving a space at the bottom for a summary. The left hand column should contain key words and the right hand column is for notes, personal connections, drawings and possible questions. The summary section should be the students’ own work.  | * Helpful at organizing content for review and giving students ownership in the big ideas
* Allows for the integration of visuals
* Gives students a place to put personal connections
* Summary is useful for teachers trying to see what students are understanding
* Questions can be used to generate test questions
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| **Student-generated questions** |
| *Description* | *Strengths* |
| After engaging the material, students are asked to write test questions. | * Empowers students with respect to evaluation
* Builds community
* Can be useful if some students finish a task early
* Helps teachers develop new questions
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| **Sentence springboard** |
| *Description* | *Strengths* |
| Teachers or students choose a single significant sentence from a text and respond to it. This can be used with many other techniques. | * Focuses attention and allows students to go deep with their thinking
* Keeps students from being overwhelmed by long passages
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| **Double Entry Journal** |
| *Description* | *Strengths* |
| After dividing the paper vertically, students write individual statements from a text on the left and their reactions on the right. This can be modified to have them respond to images, data from an experiment or other discreet pieces of information. | * Students break down texts or experiences to make them easier to handle
* Personal reactions and interpretations are required throughout
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| **Author’s Prejudices/ My Prejudices** |
| *Description* | *Strengths* |
| This is a version of the double-journal entry technique in which students compare what they think an author’s preconceptions are with their own. | * Helps develop a critical habit of mind with respect to point of view
* By assessing another’s opinion and comparing it with one’s own, students build metacognitive skills
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| **One-minute paper** |
| *Description* | *Strengths* |
| The teacher stops class and asks students to write for one minute (or up to three minutes) on what they have learned. | * Easy to institute
* Helps students summarize and internalize material
* Gives teachers a sense of what students have been getting and keeps us honest
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| **Exit Slips** |
| *Description* | *Strengths* |
| Before they can leave class, students must turn in an answer to some question. It can be factual, conceptual or based or entirely subjective. | * Provides good closure
* Allows teachers to get formative evaluation information to see what they need to continue to work on
* Allows students opportunity to try out ideas and vocabulary
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