

Agenda
WAC Writing to Learn Workshop – April 6, 2010
Led by Brendan O'Malley and Jen Russo

10:30-11:30 Part I – Writing to Learn Strategies

- 1) General Introduction to WTL
- 2) Writing to Understand Difficult Texts Strategies
- 3) Activity: Assessing WTL Assignments for Your Discipline

11:30-12:30, Part II – Digital Writing

- 1) Introduction to Digital Writing
- 2) Blog and Wiki Assignments: Strategies and Examples
- 3) Peer Group Activity: Digital Writing Assignments

12:30-1:30 – Lunch (lunch provided/participants complete forms)

1:30-3:15, Part III – Peer Review and Collaborative Learning

- 1) Introduction to Guided Peer Review
- 2) Examples of Peer Review Guidelines
- 3) Introduction to Collaborative Learning
- 4) Examples of Collaborative Learning Assignments
- 5) Peer Group Activity: Designing a Peer Review or Collaborative Learning Exercise

3:15 – Evaluations

Writing to Learn

The following activities are examples of things you can do in your courses to encourage your students to learn through writing. They can be used one time or as a recurring feature of your course; they can be done in class or as homework; they can be adapted to different subjects and different aspects of your course; and they can be done on paper to be passed in, or online on Blackboard or a class blog.

1. *Learning logs.* Probably the most basic form of writing to learn is the in-class writing session at the beginning or end of class. Students write for about five minutes, summarizing the class lecture material, noting the key points of a lab session, or raising unanswered questions. Alternately, students write for just one or two minutes both at the beginning and end of a class. They might be prompted to summarize the key points from the preceding class so that the teacher doesn't have to remind them. At the end, they might be asked:

- What one idea that we talked about today most interested you and why?
- What was the clearest point we made today? What was the foggiest point?
- What do you still not understand about the concept we've been discussing?
- How would you restate the concept in your own terms?
- How does today's discussion build on yesterday's?

Such questions can provide continuity from class to class, and they can also give teachers a quick glimpse into how well the class materials are getting across. Some teachers collect the complete learning logs every other week to skim through them, and others collect a single response, particularly after introducing a key concept. These occasional snapshots of students' comprehension help teachers quickly gauge just how well students understand the material. Teachers can then tailor the following class to clarify and elaborate most helpfully for students.

2. *Reading journals.* Students are asked to keep a record of their thoughts on the reading assignments for the course, including any difficulties they have, questions they want answered, and connections they've made to other texts.

3. *Summaries.* Summarizing a text helps students understand it better; it's also a good study tool for tests. You might ask students to analyze abstracts from a major journal, and then write their own abstracts.

4. *Annotated readings.* Not as comprehensive as a summary, an annotation notes key ideas and indicates strengths and weaknesses in something the student is reading.

5. *Response papers.* These can range from informal off-the-cuff responses to more formal, carefully thought-out reactions to the argument in a reading.

6. *Synthesis papers.* This a way for students to respond to more than one reading at once, to note similarities and discuss differences; this can be good practice for a more formal literature review.

7. *Writing about difficult reading.* It may not occur to students that even if they don't understand something, they can write about *how* they don't understand it. This technique might be used in journal-writing or in class, especially at the beginning. Then, after discussing the reading or concept, students could write about the same topic, explaining how their understanding has changed and what they still don't understand.

8. *Tracing the steps of a process.* Process-oriented writing can be motivated by asking the students to explain the process to someone else who is less familiar with it. The process could be a concrete thing like "how to find a book in the library" or it could be the steps taken in solving a problem. Students could try describing the process while they are doing it, if it is, for example, a complex math problem.

9. *Problem statements.* Presenting students with a problem is the classic way to assign a paper, but having the students write the problem is a useful alternative. After you introduce a new concept in your course, ask students to write out a theoretical or practical problem that the concept might help to solve. Another version of this exercise is to have students write a problem statement that is passed on to another student whose job it is to answer it. Such peer answers are especially useful in large classes.

10. *Pre-test warm-ups.* Students generate questions, perhaps in groups. Tell students some will be on the test.

11. *Case histories.* Giving students the details of a specific case (a business situation, a practical physics problem, a clinical subject, etc.) engages them and allows them to put theory into practice. They might be asked to explain how they would deal with the case, or to analyze how the case would be different if one detail were changed.

12. *Letters.* Writing a letter often provides a clear context and purpose for a writing task. Students might explain professional concepts, positions, or policies in letters of application or letters to politicians, project proposals or requests for assistance. The letter might also be a more imaginative task, where the student writes in the voice of another person, such as one historical figure writing to another. Also, students might write informal letters to one another, after reading an assigned text, but before class discussion, expressing questions, confusions, etc. about the reading. Later, they each write a longer response attempting to answer—or at least intelligently speculate on—the questions posed in their partner’s first letter

13. *What counts as a fact?* Select two or more treatments of the same issue, problem, or research. For example, you might bring in an article on a new diet drug from *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and the *Journal of Dietetics*. Ask students to write about what constitutes proof or facts in each article and explain why the articles draw on different kinds of evidence, as well as the amount of evidence that supports stated conclusions.

14. *The believing and doubting game (Peter Elbow).* First support an idea, concept, methodology, or thesis; then find ways to reject or oppose it.

15. *Analysis of events.* Although this heading may suggest that only historians can assign this WTL task, in fact an analysis of events can be useful in most fields. This analysis can be “post hoc” (after an event is reported in the news media or in your discipline, ask students to reflect on what happened and why) or it can be “what-if” analysis (use a hypothetical event, or a hypothetical change to an actual event). For example, what if Gore had been elected president instead of Bush? What if radioactivity had not been discovered?

16. *Autobiographies.* Ask students to write the history of their own involvement with a problem or issue or subject. This is especially useful for subjects that students may be resistant to. For example, students could write about why they have always hated math — or why they have always been good at it.

17. *Real-world scenarios.* Using storytelling techniques, students describe a real-life situation where what they are learning might be put to use.

18. *Creative writing.* Sometimes it is enough to just ask students how they might write about a subject. Encourage them to incorporate the course material into any sort of writing they like — a poem, a short play, a news article.

OTHER TIPS

- Writing about a problem should happen over time, in order to slow down and extend the thinking process, allowing all sides of an argument and all evidence to be examined before coming to a conclusion.
- Writing-to-learn activities are about process rather than product, and this should be reflected in the grading.
- Use these activities to break down the distinction between writing and content.
- Do the writing assignment yourself so you can anticipate what benefits and obstacles it may present.
- Whenever possible, give students well-written models to demonstrate what you’re looking for.
- Give students a motivation: find out what they are interested in writing about. Use narrative and humour.

These suggestions were adapted in part from the following sources:

- The WAC Clearing House: <http://wac.colostate.edu/intro/pop5.cfm>
- Belanoff, P., P. Elbow, and S.I. Fontain, eds. *Nothing Begins with N: New Investigations of Freewriting*.
- Emig, Janet. “Writing as a Mode of Learning.” In *Landmark Essays on Writing Across the Curriculum*. Bazerman, Charles and David R. Russell, eds. Davis, CA: Hermagoras, 1994.
- Fulwiler, Toby. *The Journal Book*. Portsmouth, N.H.: Boynton/Cook, 1987.
- McKeachie, Wilbert J., ed. *McKeachie’s Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Teachers*. 10th ed. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1999.
- Sorcinelli, Mary Deane and Peter Elbow, eds. *Writing to Learn: Strategies for Assigning and Responding to Writing Across the Disciplines*. New Directions for Teaching and Learning 69 (Spring 1997).
- Zinsner, W. *Writing to Learn*. New York: Harper Collins, 1988.

Using Writing to Read Difficult Texts

Difficulties that Students Report Facing with Reading:

- 1) Understanding the Reading Process:** Vary your reading speeds, levels of concentration, times and lengths of reading, and most importantly number of times reading a text.
- 2) Understanding Different Reading Strategies:** There are different purposes for reading, for example, to get the gist, to abstract the argument, to analyze meanings.
- 3) Perceiving Structure:** There are different functions of different parts of texts, e.g., conclusions, premises, rhetoric, examples, introductions, etc.
- 4) Assimilating the Unfamiliar:** Never assume that writers are not necessarily using words, concepts, or ideas that are familiar to you.
- 5) Appreciating Rhetorical Context:** Every text has a political, cultural, or literary context in which it was written.
- 6) Noticing that Writing is (Mostly) Dialogical:** Writing is (mostly) about encouraging dialogue between reader and author rather than for extracting information.
- 7) Cultural Literacy:** Writers come from all variety of different cultures and do not always assume access to background information, assumptions and references.
- 8) Inadequate Vocabulary:** The vocabulary words required differ with different texts. No text should be read without a dictionary close by.
- 9) Complex Syntax:** Often texts present difficult syntax, especially in primary sources.
- 10) Differences between Disciplines:** There are various formal and stylistic differences between disciplines.

Ways to Improve Reading: Writing To Read

- Ask your instructor to provide information about the author, the audience, the occasion, the influences, and the author's purpose.
- Write in a notebook next to you: Don't merely copy what the text says, respond in your own words.
- Do not use a highlighter; instead, when you want to highlight, WRITE in the margins why you think that passage is important.
- Draw diagrams, flowcharts, maps, or outlines of the text.
- Play the game of believing and doubting: Read a text and try to agree with everything the author says; then, the second time, read the same text and try to disagree with everything.
- Read with a dictionary close by, or if you do not have a dictionary, write "dict." in the margins, and look the word up later.
- Translate difficult texts into your own words.
- Read something with different amounts of engagement: first, skim, then read again with more concentration for detail.

Lesson by Writing Fellow J. M. C. Dow, Inspired by J. C. Bean's Engaging Ideas Ch. 8.

Using Writing to Read Difficult Texts

from “Framing disease: An underappreciated mechanism for the social patterning of health.” By Robert Aronowitz

Implications

The “framing” mechanisms outlined above may explain only a small fraction of the social patterning of health and disease. They also may act in concert with more direct, material mechanisms. For example, the incidence of breast cancer in the United States and other industrializing countries probably grew considerably in the 19th and early 20th century. The most likely explanations are socio-material ones, that is, a series of demographic and other social factors that together led to greater life time menstrual cycles and estrogen exposure. Better nutrition contributed to lower age of menarche and later age of menopause; greater reproductive freedom, economic advancement, and other changes led to dramatically decreased fertility and later age at first childbirth. Yet, the rising incidence rates later in the 20th century may well have been catalyzed and maintained more by framing mechanisms rather than changes in the material conditions of life: public education and screening campaigns, changes in the definitions of cancer, changed diagnostic thresholds, and increased cancer fears (Aronowitz, 2007).

vocabulary¹:

demographic: of or relating to the statistical study of human populations especially with reference to size and density, distribution, and vital statistics

fertility: the quality or state of producing or bearing fruit in great quantities

menarche: the beginning of the menstrual function; especially : the first menstrual period of an individual

catalyzed: brought about, inspired

¹ all definitions from merriam-webster.com

Class Blogs

Having a class blog can enhance the content of your course and enrich students' interaction with the course content. Class blogs also provide the additional benefit of allowing your students a forum in which to become a community of thinkers, making them more comfortable with sharing their ideas with the class, thus enlivening class discussions. It can also allow for dialogue in a large class where regular class participation from the majority of students is unrealistic or impossible. Students have a safe space in which to disagree with an instructor's position, whether stated or assumed. On a practical level, it can be used to ensure that assignments are read before class. It also gives students a way to contact each other outside of class with questions about a difficult assignment or a missed class. By nature, blogs encourage an informal, free-flowing dialogue that can engage students in ways not possible with more formal writing assignments.

Assignments:

Require students to respond to readings in a blog post.

Ask questions about a reading that students are required to answer.

Post major assignments and allow students to post questions about them.

Have students post drafts of their work and ask others to give them peer feedback.

Require students to visit a few select websites to read articles, listen to podcasts, listen to literary readings, watch a video, etc., and then respond in a post on the course blog.

Wiki Assignment - POLSC 112: Introduction to Political Theory Fall 2010

Thinking about politics never takes place in a vacuum. Rather, political thinkers respond both to the political events of the past and the present, and also to the political ideas of their contemporaries and predecessors. Understanding the richness of these connections can help reveal some of the enduring and difficult questions of political thought, while also helping to offer the invaluable context of political theory. The aim of this assignment is to help you begin to see the richness of the history of political thought.

September, 6 – Sign up for topic

- Students must select a philosopher from a preapproved list of thinkers. You can write on a philosopher not on the list, but only with the prior approval of the instructor

October, 4 – First Draft

- Students must compose and post a summary of the main ideas of their thinker. The summary should be no longer than 2 double spaced pages.

October, 18 – Peer Review

- In assigned groups and outside of class time, students are to meet as a group and will review the individual work of their group members.

October, 25 – Second Draft

- Students are to revise their original draft using the feedback from their group members.

November, 8 – Hypertext Links

- Students are to research the intellectual connections that their own thinker has to other thinkers, and then using this information they should link their own page to a minimum of three of their peers' pages. The link should be fluidly integrated into their initial page. To do this, the link should contain a brief write-up (a sentence or two may suffice) explaining the nature of the intellectual connection they are demonstrating with that link-to philosopher. You also need to inform the original student author of the page to which you linked that you have linked to them (do so via email).

November, 22 – Hypertext Responses

- In response to the links you have received to your page, you need to add content to your original page responding to that original link. If your thinkers are contemporary with one another or if your thinker followed the other thinker, did your thinker respond to the idea in the link? If your thinker precedes the other thinker, how *might* your thinker respond?

November, 29 – Free write

- Read your initial entry, then follow links as you see fit. Where do they take you? Did you learn anything? Start at another students page and do the same. Write a one page response paper to the completed wiki. We will discuss these responses in class.

Blog Assignment - POLSC 112: Introduction to Political Theory Fall 2010

Within political theory classrooms, we usually encounter political thought by reading highly sophisticated and polished philosophical texts. What this means is that we often spend our time exploring the final drafts of a work, while ignoring the preceding rough work. However, contrary to appearances, the texts we read do not spring out of the minds of our thinkers fully formed. Rather, they are the product of reflection, debate, false starts, and much revision. The purpose of this assignment is to engage in some of the type of thinking and writing from which larger and more sophisticated work might later develop.

Prior to each of our class meetings, a different student will be responsible for an original blog post to our class blog. The post should be a minimum of a half a page and a maximum of one full page. The title of the topic is entirely up to you, but I am happy to brainstorm with you if you would like. The title of each topic should begin “The politics of ...” but the sentence can be completed with any topic whatsoever. **The blog post is due by 5 p.m. on the day prior to the following class.**

Additionally, every student is responsible for commenting on at least half of the posts submit by other students. This is a minimum – feel free to respond more frequently if you like. The responses need not be lengthy but they should be thoughtful. There is no rule governing the content of your response, but you should take a little bit of time thinking about what you want to say before typing it. **These responses are due by midnight on the night of the initial blog post.**

I will begin by posting the following post this evening, and for this initial post, every student must submit at least one response.

The Politics of the Classroom

We will soon see that Plato writes that the activity of education is about forcibly turning students away from an untruth and orienting them in the direction of the truth. A few implications follow from Plato’s theory. Firstly, according to Plato, being educated isn’t about possessing a body of knowledge, but about “knowing how to look.” Secondly, Plato seems to be implying that education is not something you can do on your own. You need an experienced teacher, familiar with both lies and the truth, to help guide your vision to where the truth lies. Both of these premises seem controversial, but that doesn’t mean they aren’t true. Is education about learning how to look or is it about acquiring knowledge? Are these related? Is there another alternative? And also, can we become educated on our own? Do we need teachers? Why or why not?

Ultimately, what I’m asking is this; do you need me or can you do this on your own?

Peer Review And Collaborative Learning

Questions to ask when planning a peer review session:

1. What is the goal of the peer review session? The goal one chooses constrains one's answer to many of the questions below. Possible goals include:

- o Choosing or revising a topic for an upcoming essay.
- o Writing or revising a thesis statement.
- o Structuring an argument.
- o Evaluating evidence.
- o Organizing ideas that are present in a preliminary draft.
- o Transitioning between paragraphs.
- o Correcting a particular point of grammar, style, or diction.
- o Making sure that citations are in order.

2. At what point(s) in the course would it be good to conduct a peer review session?

Peer review can be helpful at nearly every stage of a course. It is, however, particularly effective to have students review each other's written work prior to submitting a midterm or final paper. Other forms of collaborative learning can take place at any time.

3. What written materials will the students be asked to prepare for peer review?

If the goal of the session is to have students evaluate each other's writing, they should be required (and reminded) to bring the relevant written materials to the session. Examples of manageable materials include essay introductions, short stories, bibliographies, and thesis statements.

4. How much time should be devoted to this peer review session?

A peer review session lasts anywhere from twenty minutes to a full class session. The length of time depends heavily on the nature of the task and the amount of material students are asked to bring to the session. For instance, if the task is to determine whether an introductory paragraph contains a workable thesis statement, the session may be short. Other tasks may take longer to complete.

If you plan to devote only twenty minutes, make sure to work on a small, manageable task, and do everything on a tight, regulated schedule. If, on the other hand, you plan to devote a full class session, make sure you have enough tasks for the students to complete. (It's awkward if the students are done with the assigned tasks but cannot leave the classroom until the period is officially over.) In any event, it may be best to devise a strategy for transitioning from the peer review into a lecture or another activity.

5. Will the students be required to hand in something that demonstrates what they accomplished during the session? If so, it is best to inform them about this, and to remind them at the end of the session.

6. How many students should make up each group?

Peer review groups can have from two to five students. Groups larger than five are, by and large, ineffective.

7. Should the groups be selected ahead of time, or “randomized”? Some considerations:

- o If students are already working in groups for other projects, then it may be good to keep the groups together, provided they are doing well.
- o Selecting groups allows the professor to make sure that people working on similar topics work together (or that they don't, if that's preferable).
- o Selecting groups also allows one to distribute the stronger students more effectively.
- o For all its advantages, selecting groups takes a lot of time and planning.

8. What should one do with students who come in late, or who don't have their work ready for peer review? (The students who come late are often the ones who don't have their work.) Some possibilities:

- o Have an alternative task prepared for latecomers.
- o Have latecomers join a group and observe the interaction.

Having settled the questions above, the next step is to create a handout that contains instructions for the peer review. Peer review sessions work best when students have a copy of the instructions in front of them and can refer to it at will.

Peer Review Exercises

Exercise 1

Step 1: Silently and attentively read through your partner's draft without making any marks on the paper.

Step 2: Reread the draft one paragraph at a time. Underline the thesis statement, and note whether or not it seems clear and complete. It should include: 1) the overall argument or topic of the paper, and 2) references to the evidence that will be used to support the argument.

Step 3: On a separate sheet of paper, note (in a couple of words) the topic of each paragraph. If a paragraph seems to cover more than one topic, list each one. If a topic appears in multiple paragraphs, list it separately each time.

Step 4: Indicate why you listed the topic(s) you did. If you thought there was more than one topic in a paragraph, write down what made you think so. Were there two sentences in the paragraph that seemed to be about very different things? If so, underline those sentences.

Step 5: Discuss any areas in the text where you were confused or where you think more support would be helpful to back up a general statement. Perhaps ask questions to prompt the author to provide the kinds of evidence you, as a reader, would like. (You may do this directly on your partner's paper or write your comments/questions on the back of the page.)

Step 6: Let your partner know if any quotes seemed clunky or too extensive. You may help her cut the quote to the essential point that she is trying to make. Also circle any glaring errors in style or grammar, just to notify your partner. Don't dwell on these too much, though, because this is a first draft.

Debatable statements: Your research paper is your particular and creative perspective on your primary or secondary text. It should contain a thesis statement, with paragraphs of evidence to back the statement up.

1: List one debatable statement that your partner has made. (Remember: this doesn't mean that you have to choose a statement that you disagree with. You can choose a statement you are in complete agreement with, as long as it is a statement that someone could reasonably disagree with.)

2: List two different pieces of evidence that your partner has listed. Are they convincing?

3: Now, list every argument you can think of for the opposite viewpoint. What questions would an opponent of this viewpoint ask? What arguments might he make?

Exercise 2

Step 1: Exchange papers with your partner. Silently and attentively read through your partner's draft without making any mark on the paper. Answer the following questions:

1. What do you think is the paper's strongest quality?
2. What strikes you as the most important aspect of the paper the author needs to work on in revision?

Step 2: Reread the paper. This time address the following questions on the draft (in the margins or between lines, etc.) and/or on this sheet.

1. Does the paper have a clear focus? If yes, underline the thesis in the draft. If no, can you pinpoint what the most interesting or important aspect of the draft is and suggest how your partner may revise it to make this her focus?
2. Is there anything you don't understand? Locate any confusing passage(s) and write a question in the margin that will direct your partner toward explaining what is unclear.
3. Does the author provide sufficient specific evidence (examples, etc.) to convince you of her ideas? Mark anywhere in the text where the author needs more support to back up a general statement. Perhaps ask questions to prompt the author to provide the kinds of evidence you, as a reader, would like.
4. Does the author make connections to course readings? If no, can you make suggestions as to where in the text the author might include relevant material from readings?

Step 3: The draft you are reading is probably incomplete. Based on what has already been written, what do you, as a reader, expect the remainder of the paper to do? What else needs to be covered?

Step 4: In the time remaining, speak with your partner. Explain your comments and suggestions. Listen to her feedback on your draft. Ask any questions that you think will help guide your revision.

from The Philosophy Writing Resource Book by Writing Fellow James Dow

In-Class Workshop Sheet
Focus on: Details

Your Name: _____

Author of paper you are critiquing: _____

1. Read the paper once without writing anything. Just read to enjoy it and get a feel for the writing.
2. Now read the paper again and look for both its strengths and weaknesses.

If there are any sentences, words or ideas that you don't understand or that need to be corrected, circle them and put a * next to each circle. This should include all grammatical and spelling errors.

If there are any images or ideas that seem especially interesting or well written, put a check mark next to them.

3. Now underline the single sentence in the paper that best states the main point or **thesis statement** and write it in your own words here:

4. Does the author use interesting, detailed examples to support his or her main ideas?

Make a list of any especially original details and another list of any clichéd language that should be revised.

Original Details

Clichés

5. Is there anything you would like to read more about? Is there anything you would like to read less about?

By Writing Fellow Tahneer Oksman

In-Class Workshop Sheet
Focus on: Organization

Your Name: _____

Author of paper you are critiquing: _____

6. Read the paper once without writing anything. Just read to enjoy it and get a feel for the writing.
7. Now read the paper again and look for both its strengths and weaknesses.

Put a * next to any unclear or confusing word, phrase, or sentence.

Put a ◇ next to any image or idea that seems especially interesting or well written.

Questions

1. Create a road-map of this author's essay, as we've been doing in class. Jot a 3-5 word summary of each paragraph in the margins of the paper.
2. In 2-3 sentences, describe how this paper is organized:

By Writing Fellow Tahneer Oksman