

Low-stakes Writing and the 5x8 Notecard

Here are fifteen low-stakes, easy-to-grade writing activities that students can complete on 5x8 notecards. You can add these activities to your repertoire of informal writing activities. These should take no more than five minutes of class time. If you like, you can assign them as brief homework assignments to ensure that students are prepared for class or to help them develop critical thinking. Graded or non-graded, writing helps develop critical thinking and contributes more than any other single element to student engagement.

We have also included a list of useful sources and websites. Feel free to use or adapt these, and please attribute them to us if you print them out.

Dee Baer, dbaer@udel.edu and Dorry Ross, dross@udel.edu, University of Delaware Writing Center, 2006



MINUTEWRITES (aka microthemes or the three-minute paper)

Students write short papers on one or both sides of a 5x8 notecard as they explore a topic you are about to present, reflect on a key question about the reading or lecture, or focus their thoughts before a class or small group discussion. Minutewrites can also be used for many of the activities we have suggested on other notecards: exit cards, questions of the day, and so on.

Minutewrites are not freewrites (rapid written “idea dumps” that generate quick initial ideas); rather, they are thoughtful, focused postings by students that reflect their current understandings and questions. As such, they convey important information about student learning and can be included in any assessment documentation you wish to collect. They also show students that writing their ideas clearly and concisely is an important enterprise.

Notecards should count toward the final grade, although this doesn’t mean you need to grade each one each time: checks and minuses work fine. My students earn 10% of their grade from participation/notecards.

You can review the cards quickly between class meetings and respond to several with a comment or two. You can also share some students’ written comments or questions in a future class. Your attention to their communication is a powerful statement to students that you hear what they have to say; in large classes, this feature is especially welcome.

Dee Baer, dbaer@udel.edu and Dorry Ross, dross@udel.edu, University of Delaware Writing Center, 2006



THE DOUBTING/BELIEVING GAME

Peter Elbow's "doubting and believing game" creates a framework for thinking critically that is useful in and out of the classroom. Often, students are encouraged to question (doubt) everything they read by searching out contradictions, inaccuracies, and illogical reasoning. Elbow maintains that doubting is only half the process. Believing is the other half, and it involves an equally vigorous and conscious effort to "believe everything, no matter how unlikely or repellant it might seem, to find virtues or strengths we might otherwise miss" (*Embracing Contraries* 257-58). In other words, students need to embrace both because believing and doubting are tools to deepen thought and avoid spontaneous evaluations.

Tell your students to follow these three steps:

- ▶ Believe everything the author says, even if the ideas seem contradictory. Don't argue. Accept the author's logic and reasoning. Work at understanding the author's main points. Explain these to others or write them down on one side of a card or page.
- ▶ Doubt by questioning every obvious and hidden assumptions. Be logical and detached. Take nothing for granted. Persist in looking for problems and pitfalls. Search out weak points and hidden agendas. "Yes but. . ." the author. Explain this side to others or write it down on one side of a page or notecard.
- ▶ Write your "take" on the reading after believing, doubting and thinking about the issues.

Sample Topics for Doubting and Believing

- ▶ Vitamin supplements are usually unnecessary.
- ▶ Censorship is not an effective way to protect children.
- ▶ Birthright citizenship should be repealed.
- ▶ Athletes have the right to accept the benefits and risks of performance-enhancing drugs.
- ▶ Genetically engineered food is dangerous.
- ▶ The U.S. is acting responsibly in refusing to sign onto the Kyoto Protocol.

Sources:

Elbow, Peter. *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching*.

New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Shapiro, Alan. "Teaching Critical Thinking: The Believing and Doubting Game."

22 March 2006. <http://www.teachablemoment.org/ideas/criticalthinking.html>

Klausman, Jeffrey. "Peter Elbow's 'Doubting and Believing Game': Guidelines for Effective Critical Reading and Thinking." 22 March 2006.

<http://writing.whatcom.ctc.edu/wac4.htm>



THE META-NOTE

The meta-note is the students' thoughtful take on their own thinking after a unit, project, or paper is completed and about to be turned in. It is the one 5x8 notecard I'd never give up because it tells me what procedural and cognitive challenges students felt they met, what they learned that they didn't know before the project, or where they still have concerns or questions.

- ▶ You can pose key questions as suggested above or pose others. For example, you could ask students to identify specific links they see between what they learned or wrote earlier in the term and their current work. Meta-notes such as these help you assess whether students are making connections important to your discipline.
- ▶ If your students are not turning in a project or paper, but you are finishing a unit, you might ask them *before they begin the new unit*, to write a meta-note about how their thinking has evolved.
- ▶ Finally, the students can write about anything else important they want to say about their work before I look at it or about the unit they are completing. What I learn from these comments is that students are usually quite insightful about their progress.

Time saver: If your class time is limited, your students simply come to class with the meta-notes already prepared on notecards.

Dee Baer, dbaer@udel.edu and Dorry Ross, dross@udel.edu, University of Delaware Writing Center, 2006



MID-COURSE CORRECTION

The mid-course correction is a practical tool to measure students' understanding of a lecture, new concept, etc. You can use this tool several ways:

- ▶ Ask students, part way through a lecture, to write on a 5x8 notecard what they have learned so far that day. Or, you may wish to pose a question specific to your class goals. In a large class, you can randomly collect several of the cards and glance through them to see if the students are on track. In a smaller class, you can collect them all and skim them quickly to decide where you will go next.
- ▶ Ask students to note what they think you will cover in the second half of the lecture.
- ▶ Ask students to list three questions about the lecture to that point. These can cover things they don't understand or things they would like to know more about.

Depending on what you learn from the cards, you may decide to continue with the lecture or activity, or you might decide to return to a key topic that many students clearly did not grasp.

Variation: Sometimes a discussion can peter out or, conversely, become agitated. You can intervene mid-course by asking students a key question that didn't come out in the uninspired discussion or a question that seemed provocative in the heated discussion.

Dee Baer, dbaer@udel.edu and Dorry Ross, dross@udel.edu, University of Delaware Writing Center, 2006



QUICK DRAWS (also known as sketching-to-learn)

Concept maps are student-made drawings of particularly technical or complex ideas or texts. For example, when my students were looking foggy-eyed as we were discussing global warming and the changing ratios of albedo, I stopped the discussion and asked them to draw a concept map of albedo. Here's how concept maps work:

- ▶ The students reread the challenging passage from the homework or from a slide you present in class and then try to represent it graphically on a notecard.
- ▶ Tell them that artistic ability is not important and prove it by working out a large drawing on the board as they work on their own.
- ▶ Students share their notecards with a neighbor, comparing efforts and determining the strengths of each card.
- ▶ For longer readings, you may permit them to use words as well, but as a result many students limit drawing and end up missing the value of the transformation.

In essence, what students are doing in this exercise is shifting their learning mode as they summarize a concept or a passage. They are converting words into a picture, a powerful student-centered activity. Students tell me that they always remember what they have drawn in the class. For more on sketching-to-learn, see Patricia Dunn's *Talking, Sketching, Moving*, Boynton-Cook, Heinemann, 2001.

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THE PASS-AROUND

The pass-around, is a shared writing/thinking activity, useful for several purposes. It can be a quick in-class peer review of a proposal, an introduction, conclusion, or thesis statement. Or it could work when you pose a thought question mid-lecture. Here's how it works:

1. Students bring a notecard with the brief writing you want them to share—let's imagine you are trying to encourage them to turn in papers with lively introductions and clear thesis statements that make a claim.
2. Starting in the front row, students pass their notecards one person to the right, with the last person in the row passing her card to the person behind her. Students in that row pass cards to the left and so on in snake-like fashion. Each student quickly reads the new card, and then passes it along once more in the same direction for up to five passes.
3. Once each student has read five introductions other than her own, she can think about which ones seem the most engaging, least interesting, etc. In addition, she can see how her thesis compares with the others.
4. At this point, each student writes something evaluative, helpful, questioning (depending on your instructions) on the current notecard. Each also scores the card on a Likert scale of your choosing or ranks it based on the five cards she's seen.
5. Students then pass the notecard they've just written once in the direction opposite to the initial direction, repeating the written evaluative process and ranking. Finally, each student receives her original card, now annotated by her classmates.

Pass-arounds allow students to see how others have tackled the assignment. Even if students don't receive the most helpful feedback, often just seeing other students' good thesis statements improves the final product. Students can take the cards home, or after they've had a few minutes for reflection, you can collect them and share some strong and weak samples with the class.

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Q² (questions squared)

Q² encourages students to dig past the first, often easy, level of a question about data/information/ artifacts and to respond to deeper levels of questions that can lead to more complete understanding and mastery. As such, Q² represents an important critical thinking activity. While this activity can be used as a discussion technique, it works very well with the 5x8 notecard. With the notecard, everyone participates.

- For example, in an ancient history class, the professor could ask students to list the two or three main differences in city streets between ancient Rome and Athens. The first Q² might ask students to write down **why** they chose their answers. The second level might ask them to reflect on **what** the differences might show in terms of political philosophies.
- You can also square the square by continuing with other questions that increase the level of thinking such as **how** or **what if**. These, however, might require a second notecard.

Tip: Remind students of the 5W's (plus H): who, what, where, when, why, and how.

Dee Baer, dbaer@udel.edu and Dorry Ross, dross@udel.edu, University of Delaware Writing Center, 2006



QUESTION OF THE DAY

Simply put, the question of the day is a question you'd like your students to answer.

However, used wisely, it asks not for recall or summary—cognitive tasks lower on Bloom's Taxonomy—rather, it asks higher order thinking questions that help develop or measure students' critical thinking.

While the question of the day can't be answered well at the beginning of a class or the beginning of a unit of instruction, asking it then can give you an assessment of where students are pre-instruction. Once the class is nearly over or the unit is complete, you can ask the question again in order to assess what they've learned. These cards can help students note initial thoughts on a question that they later may wish to cover in a paper.

To point students in a specific direction, you write a question of the day on the board so that students can think about it during the class lecture or activities. Then, in the last few minutes of class, students respond to the question in a 5- or 3-minute paper (see our notecard on Minutewrites).

Alternative: I've repeated a question periodically during the semester, asking my first year art students about the role of the artist in our culture. I did this in the first week of class, mid-semester, and in the last week. We all enjoyed seeing the changes in perspective and writing abilities in those cards.

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THINK-PAIR-SHARE

The think-pair-share activity combines writing and discussion. It is particularly useful in large classes because everyone gets to communicate orally with at least one other person. Think-pair-share is a four-step process:

- The instructor poses a thought-provoking question.
- Students think for a short time about the question and jot down their answers on a 5 x 8 notecard.
- Students share their ideas with the person sitting next to them, and the two try to come to consensus (this can also work in a small group of three or four).
- If time permits, one member of the pair shares the consensus idea with the class. If there is not time, the pair writes a new notecard and turns it in to the instructor.

This activity shows students that the same issues can be expressed and solved in many ways. Further, as they hear alternatives to their own ideas, students see the value of collaboration and the value of not rushing to closure.

Both the notecards and discussion allow the instructor to assess student learning as well as the effectiveness of group discussion, which can otherwise be difficult to measure.

Dee Baer, dbaer@udel.edu and Dorry Ross, dross@udel.edu, University of Delaware Writing Center, 2006



USEFUL SOURCES FOR WRITING-TO-LEARN ACTIVITIES

Bean, John. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.

Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Facione, Peter, A. *Critical Thinking: A Statement of Expert Consensus for Purposes of Educational Assessment and Instruction* (The Delphi Report). Millbrae, CA.: The California Academic Press, 1990.

Paul, Richard. "Socratic Questioning." *Critical Thinking: How to Prepare Students for a Rapidly Changing World*. Santa Rosa, CA.: Foundation for Critical Thinking, 1993.

Dunn, Patricia A. *Talking, Sketching Moving: Multiple Literacies in the Teaching of Writing*. Portsmouth, NH. Boynton/Cook Heinemann, 2001.

<http://www.criticalthinking.org/>

<http://www.iub.edu/~cwp/lib/thkgbib.shtml> bibliography of critical thinking

<http://dhc.ucdavis.edu/fh/ct/whatis.html> more on critical thinking

<http://writing2.richmond.edu/wac/wtl.html> writing-to-learn

http://mwp01.mwp.hawaii.edu/resources/wm_11.pdf concept maps and other activities

R2R--RESPONSE TO THE RESPONSE

How well do your students understand your comments on their papers? You often spend a good deal of time responding – both in the margins and in an overall note – to their writing. However, students may interpret your comments quite differently from what you intend. You write, “*This paragraph needs much more development—what about the Wexler theory we discussed in week 2?*” The student thinks, “*My professor thinks I need to pad this to make it longer, and he doesn’t really understand that the first part of the paragraph was about Wexler, wasn’t it?*”

When you return papers, ask your students to take 5 minutes to write down on a 5 X 8 notecard exactly *how* they interpret your comments and *what* questions they might have for you. Their responses will help you guide them in revisions and will also reveal how clear *your* responses are.

Dee Baer, dbaer@udel.edu and Dorry Ross, dross@udel.edu, University of Delaware Writing Center, 2007



LETTER TO SELF: Self-congratulatory or Self-Reflective

Self-congratulatory: After a particularly difficult project or paper, ask students to write themselves a letter on a 5 X 8 notecard in which they praise themselves for what they have accomplished, being as specific as possible. After collecting these, you will be able to see how students assess their own accomplishments. This activity encourages students to give themselves a pat on the back and to see where they have made the most progress in your course to date.

Self-Reflective: Part way through a difficult project or midway through the semester, ask students to write a letter to themselves on a 5 X 8 notecard, reflecting on their progress—the challenges, the successes, the questions they have. After collecting these, you will be able to see how your students feel they are measuring up to the course goals you’ve set for them. Depending on what you find, you might decide to adjust your course assignments accordingly or to schedule appointments with selected students.

Dee Baer, dbaer@udel.edu and Dorry Ross, dross@udel.edu, University of Delaware Writing Center, 2007



THE VENT

VENT/CIRCUMVENT: Part way through a difficult project or midway through the semester, ask students to *vent* their specific frustrations and confusions on a 5 X 8 notecard, taking at least 5 minutes to do so. Once they've done this, ask them to flip the card over (or take a new card) and try to figure out ways to *circumvent* these issues in order to proceed successfully. The students should keep these cards.

VENT/VENTAGRAM: Part way through a difficult project or midway through the semester, ask students at the beginning of class to vent their specific course-related frustrations and confusions on a 5 X 8 notecard, taking at least 5 minutes to do so. This card is not handed in. Then, five minutes before class ends, students write a *ventagram* on a new notecard for you, perhaps modifying their language and discussing only what you can help them with. For the most honest feedback, keep ventagrams anonymous.

Dee Baer, dbaer@udel.edu and Dorry Ross, dross@udel.edu, University of Delaware Writing Center, 2007



THE PROGRESS REPORT

When students are involved in a long project or a major paper, ask them to submit progress reports on 5 X 8 notecards at various stages. You can leave the task completely open, just reading what they have to say, or you can ask specific questions about their progress to date.

If your class is small, you should respond quickly and briefly to each student's progress report (*looks like you are on track; you should find more technical sources by next week; come see me to see if we can figure out this perplexing programming error*). If the class is large, you are likely to find that student progress can be generalized into several categories; instead of responding to each student, you can address the entire class about the most common categories.

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