

Teaching

A series of practical and innovative teaching tips for college faculty

No. 10

The Top 10...

Using Short Writing to Assess Learning

Everyone agrees that college students must write better. We also know that practice makes perfect. This means all of us must include more writing in our courses because writing is a way of getting students to think *through* the course content. Many faculty hesitate to use writing as a learning assessment because they fear it will be burdensome or frustrating to grade. Here are suggestions for how to use **short, easy-to-evaluate** writing to assess learning and thinking.

- ✓ Ask students to consider a career they may pursue and write about the writing that people in that career must do, and why. If your course is career-focused, ask them to write about why writing might be important for human service workers, educators, nurses, police, etc. This invests them in the importance of things like clarity and grammar in terms of career concerns and real-world implications.
- ✓ Use practical examples to emphasize why good, clear, organized writing matters in real life. A nurse's notes need to be clear. A police officer's report influences a conviction. Many, many jobs require people to use e-mail at work. In terms of academics, choose accessible writing samples from your discipline as models for how you'd like your students to write for your class. What are biologists currently writing about? Economists? Social workers?
- ✓ Consider using short, informal writing assignments half a page long or less. For directions, use a single, clear sentence that asks students to **briefly** explain, describe, compare, etc. The simpler your prompt sentence and the clearer its verb, the easier the writing is to assess.
- ✓ Swap out multiple-choice questions for short answer or short essay questions on every test you give. Again, use a single, clear sentence for

directions that asks students to **briefly** explain, describe, compare, etc. Short answers don't require elaborate organization, but they allow you to assess whether your students can think about and clearly articulate course content.

- ✓ Have a plan for how grammar issues will impact your assessment of the writing, and communicate that plan clearly to students and then hold them accountable to your standards. This doesn't mean that you have to teach writing if you aren't an English teacher, but it does mean that students will see that writing standards matter for more than just English teachers.
- ✓ Get students to both write questions and answer them. Try this: break your class into groups that each write one question about the course content that another group will have to answer. Then randomly assign each question to a different group that must now answer the question in a clearly written paragraph. Every group member must contribute. If possible, project the final products so the class can discuss which answer is the best and why. This is learning *through* writing.
- ✓ Before studying a key concept, have students write about what they believe they already know about the subject. This activates prior learning and allows you to skim their responses to inform your teaching and discover any assumptions or misconceptions you need to address.
- ✓ Require students to e-mail or message you informal writing assignments about course content or any questions they might have. For example, extra credit for students who analyze one strength and one weakness about the way they prepared for the test and what they will do differently next time. 2-3 paragraphs max. sent directly to you. When students think and write about their own learning, they build self-efficacy and self-regulation skills.
- ✓ Many community college students are kinesthetic learners or learners activated by concrete experiences and active experimentation, but that doesn't mean that they are hardwired against writing. Asking students to write about the real-world implications of course content gives them an entry point they can relate to more and reinforces for the entire class that your course relates to **their** world!
- ✓ Have students search the Internet (tell them nothing from the first three pages that come up in Google so they learn that there is more than that first page or two of results!) for information relevant to your subject, then summarize what they learned. Summarize, not plagiarize. It's a basic skill.