

# Content-Area Writing

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## Simple Ways to Improve Learning through Writing

### Quick Writes

1. **Admit Ticket:** When they enter class, students must hand you summary of a reading assignment or two questions about the reading.
2. **Bellringer:** As students settle into their seats, have a writing prompt written on the board for them to do a quick write. It can be a review, a preview, a reflection, or a concern about an assignment, OR it can be a response to a current event, brainstorming about an upcoming event...anything that makes their brain work. Open-ended questions free them to write freely: “What do you think about...?” “What if....?” “Why...?”
3. **Exit Box:** Place a box by the door and ask students to drop off closure statements or brief comments, queries, concerns when they leave the class. These provide valuable feedback and keep students alert during class.
4. **Breakthrough Metaphors:** Try using metaphors to help students do some creative and exploratory thinking. Ask them to compose metaphors, similes, or analogies to help them think through a concept. For example, “The unconscious mind is like a machine” or “Erosion is a deadly plague.” Students can share and respond to each other’s figurative writing.
5. **The One-Minute Essay:** As a way of monitoring students’ learning and stimulating class discussion and careful reading, consider the one-minute essay. It simply asks two questions: What’s the most important thing you learned today (or this week)? What’s the most significant question you still have? This one-minute essay can be done at the beginning or end of a week or a unit.
6. **Free Association:** Have students start with one word or concept, and then jot down additional words and phrases that come to mind as fast as they can and without stopping.

7. **Word Works:** Have students use as many vocabulary words as they can in a short piece of writing. Tell students it can be as crazy as they want it to be but must use each vocabulary word correctly.
8. **Debate:** Have students engage in a written debate with themselves, splitting their mind into two separate persons. Have one side debate with the other on the subject.
9. **Nutshelling:** Have students write down in one sentence the importance or relevance of something they have heard, seen, read, or studied.
10. **Mind Mapping:** This is a form of brainstorming to activate prior knowledge. Place a key word or concept in the center of a page and have students write down associated ideas around it. Ideas can then branch off from each other.

## Informal Writing Ideas

11. **Group Writing:** Assign group writing activities and collect only one piece of writing from each group. Groups of three or four will cut the grading load by two-thirds or three-quarters. Students will learn from each other as they exchange ideas, write, edit, and create a final piece.
12. **Joint Response:** Have students trade papers and read what others wrote. Have each pair then write a joint response and read it aloud to the rest of the class. This allows you to simply listen and jot down a grade.
13. **Microthemes:** Longer is not always better. A microtheme is a brief, in-class essay, written on a note card, and about a topic specified by the teacher. The brevity forces students to practice summarizing and concluding concisely. They also give you quick, valuable feedback on learning and encourage students to reflect on the meaning of what they are learning. In addition, have students write reviews or summaries of magazine articles, books, films, or other textual material on note cards. The shorter space helps them focus on key ideas.
14. **Writing Roulette:** As a review activity, ask students to write about what was significant about the material they learned. After two to three minutes, have students pass their papers to the person behind them. Then have students comment, clarify, and add to what the other student wrote. Stress to students they should try to focus their comments directly on what the first writer wrote. Repeat this process four times and then return the papers to the original writers. Collect them and read some aloud to the class, using the papers to respond by clarifying and emphasizing important points.
15. **Believing-Doubting Game:** For controversial issues, consider the claim, identify all the reasons to support the claim, and then identify all the reasons to doubt the claim. Students can do this in pairs or small groups.
16. **Data Sets:** In some courses, data set assignments that ask students to draw conclusions from charts, graphs, tables, or even a series of factual statements are a good way to get

- students writing. Present a data set to a group of students and have them collaborate on a short piece of writing to draw their conclusions.
17. **Descriptive Outlining:** For short reading assignments, consider the use of descriptive outlining (indicate main points from each paragraph). You can provide a simple outline form for the reading passage and have students complete it.
  18. **Idea Maps:** As a substitute for traditional outlining when students are beginning a paper, consider using an idea map that orders information visually in a diagram or web.
  19. **The List:** Sometimes it's more effective for students to practice with shorter forms of writing; in fact, that's always a good place to start with struggling students. Have students make a list of steps in a process, causes, effects, reasons, examples, items, suggestions, ideas, and conclusions. Tell students they must have a certain minimum number of items in their list.
  20. **Journals:** A whole chapter of this book could be written on the value of journal writing. Journals are a good way to have students engage in regular, preferably daily, writing practice. They are excellent for building writing fluency and increasing student comfort level with writing. Have students write in their journal daily or weekly using prompts that you have designed and that are related to course content. Journal writing can also be used to promote classroom discussion.
  21. **Freewriting:** At the beginning of a lecture, discussion, chapter, unit, or period, ask students to write nonstop for five to ten minutes on what they know about the concept to be introduced. This will help them focus on the learning, activate their prior knowledge, and share what they have written. Use the same freewriting activity at the end of the lecture, film, chapter, unit, and so forth. Ask students to write nonstop about what they have learned.
  22. **Notebooks or Portfolios:** Have students collect their freewriting in a notebook or portfolio, date the entries, and collect them at the end of the grading period. Or have students choose one out of several they want to turn in for credit.

23. **Note Cards:** Have students write responses on note cards rather than paper. After a reading assignment, film, lecture, or activity, ask students to write down “wondering” questions about the material. Redistribute the cards to other members of the class and ask each student to respond and answer the question he receives. Return the cards and have students read the responses.
24. **Test Questions:** Ask students individually or in groups to write test questions on note cards. You can specify the format: multiple choice, true/false, or short answer. Collect and redistribute these and have students answer the question on the cards they’ve been given. They can also be collected and used on the actual test that you prepare.
25. **Counterarguments:** If an argument has been raised in class, an alternative method of solving a problem has been shown, or more than one theory has been advanced to explain a phenomenon, stop for five minutes and allow students to write down all the counterarguments or counterevidence, list the benefits and drawbacks of the alternative methods, or present the case for accepting one theory or the other.
26. **Classification:** Prepare groups of related ideas on note cards. Place students in groups, give each group a set of cards, and have students sort them into categories to help make sense of the information.
27. **Case Study/Role Play:** Have students write in the voice of a character, historical figure, chemical element, mathematical symbol, scientific principle, or object. Specify the audience for the piece of writing.
28. **Group Paper:** Ask students to produce a group paper that integrates the work of all the students in the group. The group needs to select a topic, assign a particular role to each group member, and then produce a final group paper.
29. **Critiques:** Have students read an article from a newspaper or magazine, editorial, website, or chapter, and then critique the piece of writing for content, organization, layout, and so forth.

30. **Letter to an Imaginary Other:** Students write about an event, person, place, story, concept, or idea to another person involved in some way, to an imaginary person, a historical figure, or a friend.
31. **Special Formats:** Have students write in alternative formats or genres such as advertisements, news stories, poems, songs, flyers, blogs, raps, websites, Facebook pages, brochures, memos, magazine articles, plays, and so forth, to express their understanding of a topic or concept.
32. **One-Hundred-Word Papers:** Assign students to write a paper no more than one hundred words on a particular topic. Give some specific guidelines for what must be included or present a discussion question or prompt.
33. **Journals/Conversation Books:** Encourage freewriting and exploration of class ideas through journals to share with other class members. These can follow specific requirements. Use them to allow students to reflect on what they are learning. Journal writing should be read and responded to by you or other students but should not be graded.

## Writing Activities for Specific Content Areas

### Math

1. Math content knowledge is necessary to maneuver life. Choose a concept that is relevant, practical, and purposeful to students and have them identify the mathematical problem it deals with. Consider some of these: carbon dating, compound interest, inflation, population growth, bacterial growth, viral load, total square feet of a home, budgets, employment benefit options, the yearly depreciation of a car's value. Form groups of two or three and discuss the subject chosen. Have them identify what kind of mathematical problem they are dealing with. Instruct them to explain the problem in one paragraph and compose a solution in another. They should briefly conclude the composition with an explanation of the mathematical principles are involved.
2. Explain in writing the steps for solving a particular math problem such as proofs in geometry, Pythagorean theorem, factoring, and foiling.
3. For extra credit, have students analyze problems that were wrong on a test. They must identify the step where the error was made and describe how to correct it and move on to construct a correct answer.
4. Write from the point of view of a mathematical symbol or formula. Explain its purpose and what role it plays in equations and its importance in mathematics in general.
5. Write story problems to help others learn mathematical functions and calculations.



## Art

1. Write a description of a visually interesting object. Use it as a guide for other students who have not seen the item and have them produce a drawing of it.
2. Mold a series of beads that represent important events in your life. After you have fired the beads and painted them, write an explanation of the significance of the beads.
3. From three or more works of art presented to the class, choose one that you would like to encourage the school administration to purchase for permanent display. Write a letter to the principal. Another option: Write a letter to your parents urging them to purchase the work of art for your home. The letters must be persuasive with lots of reasons and specific detail.
4. Arrange three objects cut from magazines or online illustrations. Write an explanation that identifies the objects, their significance, and your reason for arranging them as you did.
5. Write a self-evaluation for your artist's portfolio.
6. Write about your best piece of work and explain why you think it is the best.
7. Write a report on a famous artist.
8. Write a critique of a painting, drawing, sculpture, piece of stained glass, or other work of art that clearly explains the criteria you are using to evaluate it.

## Social Studies

1. Write an explanation of capitalism to a pen pal in Denmark, pointing out the strengths and weaknesses of capitalism in contrast to Denmark's socialist form of government.
2. Write a letter to your congressman about an issue that concerns you.
3. Write a description of the location of your birthplace so that it can be located on a large map of the United States.
4. Write a description of a place in the United States you would like to visit. Choose interesting information from your research to persuade your classmates to share your enthusiasm for this place. Share the descriptions in groups and vote on the top five places to visit.
5. Write a letter from one historical figure to another historical figure explaining why you disagree with his actions or decisions. For example, at the time of the Civil War, write a letter from Jefferson Davis to President Lincoln.
6. Write a conversation or dialogue between two historical figures—for example, President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Winston Churchill.
7. Create a hierarchy of important historical figures or events. List them in order from one to ten and then write a rationale for the class to explain your reasoning.
8. Write short essay responses for test questions.
9. Write research papers on a historical issues or topic, geographical place, economics concept, or form of government.
10. Adopt the persona of a historical figure and keep a journal that records the attitudes and concerns of the figure during the events occurring.
11. Write a newspaper article about an important historical event as it would appear in a front-page news story. Compare student versions with actual newspaper articles.
12. Write a critique and response to a particular historical document.

13. Write an essay comparing and contrasting two presidents, periods of times, wars, or other events.
14. Create a timeline with detailed explanation of each part.
15. Create a Facebook page or personal website for a historical figure.

## **Vocational/Technical Education**

1. Write a book of directions for next year's students, outlining basic safety rules, location of equipment, and other dos and don'ts for success and safety in the classroom shop.
2. Write a paragraph or essay clearly explaining one important process you have learned that will help other students who have not yet mastered this process.
3. Write directions for operating or cleaning a particular piece of equipment.
4. Write instructions for completing a particular task.
5. Write a proposal to the instructor for your choice of a term project. What have you decided to make or do for the project? What materials will you need? What difficulties do you anticipate in completing the project? What skills will you gain?
6. Write a set of instructions or process used for building or making some-thing.
7. Write a self-evaluation or critique of your completed final project.

## Computer Science

1. Write computer software using a common computer language.
2. Write online instructions for a computer program, software installation, or computer game.
3. Design and write content for a website.
4. Research a computer science topic and write an article for a popular computer magazine such as PC World.
5. Write a troubleshooting manual for computer care, operation, and maintenance.

## Science

1. Write a lab report that is so clear and complete that it can be used by another student to duplicate the experiment. You might include warnings of specific problems that may be encountered in the experiment.
2. Decide how to divide the equipment for your lab work into two or three drawers. Write an explanation of this method of organization for students in other periods to justify your system of organization.
3. As you complete a problem or experiment, keep a record of your thinking. Draw a vertical line about a third of the way in from the right-hand edge of your page. Use the left-hand column to report the facts and steps in the experiment. Use the right-hand column as a journal to record your thoughts as you proceed through the experiment.
4. Write a report on a famous scientist or scientific discovery.
5. Write a paper that evaluates the work of a well-known scientist.
6. Write summaries of magazine articles about current scientific issues and topics. • Write directions for setting up a lab or preparing for an experiment.
7. Write a paper that argues for the importance of understanding a particular scientific concept or theory.
8. Write a comparison of a subject discussed in your textbook and the same subject in an online article or webpage.

## Physical Education

1. Keep a daily or weekly journal recording your progress on the skills you are practicing.  
Record areas of improvement and evaluate your progress.
2. Write a simple “getting started” basic skill and rule book for a sport played in the United States. (The act of writing about a specific technique in a particular sport may help students understand what they are not doing successfully.)
3. Write a set of instructions for handling, maintaining, and organizing gym equipment/supplies.
4. Write a letter as a varsity team member to give encouragement and helpful tips to a junior varsity team member.
5. Write an evaluation of your performance in physical education during a particular unit or grading period.
6. Write a report on a well-known athlete.
7. Write a set of instructions for how to do a particular activity.
8. Write a letter to your parents about your goals and progress in physical education.

## Health

1. Write a letter to a friend or family member who needs to change his eating habits, exercise more, quit smoking, or make other lifestyle changes.
2. Explain tactfully and convincingly the importance of making this change.
3. Keep a daily or weekly journal of references to specific health issues that you have studied in class. Clip articles from newspapers and record conversations you have heard about health issues.
4. Write a newspaper article that reports on a new medical or health discovery or a new disease or health issue and how to prevent it.
5. Create an informational poster on some aspect of public health, such as preventing the spread of the flu.
6. Write a report on a common disease or health problem, or a report on a person who has made a lasting contribution to health science.
7. Write a report analyzing the benefits of exercise and healthy diet.
8. Make a brochure to inform the public about various health problems and what to do about them.



## Music

1. Write a paper evaluating your contribution to the musical group. Outline your strengths and be honest about your challenges.
2. Write a press release prior to the concert or performance. Send it to local newspapers and media outlets.
3. Write a descriptive paragraph about a piece of music to be included in the concert program.
4. Write a paragraph to describe the mood created by a piece of music.
5. Research a piece you are performing and write notes to be included in the concert program.
6. Write a report on a famous composer or musical artist.
7. Write a letter to school administration encouraging them to support and fund music activities.

## Literature

1. Write a letter from one character in the story to another character explaining why you agree or disagree with his actions or decisions.
2. Write a ballad or poem that retells a story.
3. Write a “wanted poster” for the villain of a story or play you have read. Illustrate it with artwork or pictures and details about the story.
4. Rewrite the conclusion of a story or novel to present an alternative ending.
5. Write a continuation of a story or novel to show what will ultimately happen to the characters.
6. Write a newspaper article about the events in the story.
7. Write a biopoem (see part 3) about an important character in the story or novel. • Create a Facebook page for an important character from the story or novel.
8. Write a critique or book review of a class novel or a book read independently.
9. Write a research paper about the life and work of an author.

## Family and Consumer Studies

1. Write a process paper explaining to a student who has not mastered the procedure for performing a skill learned in class, such as sizing a pattern, kneading bread, or doubling ingredients.
2. Write a formal invitation to parents for an annual spring breakfast or tea, an awards ceremony, a curriculum fair, or some other special occasion.
3. Write a letter to a company whose product has been less than satisfactory or whose advertising is misleading.
4. Write a complimentary letter to a company to share your satisfaction with a particular product.
5. Create your own recipe and write it out clearly.
6. Write an evaluation of your performance in completing a class project.
7. Write directions for safety, maintenance, and cleaning of the school kitchen.
8. Write a menu for a special dinner or catered event.