

"The best way to become acquainted with a subject is to write...about it."

–Benjamin Disraeli

Writing in the Content Areas: A Pathway to Critical Thinking

Rewards and Concerns about Assigning Writing in the Content

John Bean, professor of English at Seattle University and author of *Engaging Ideas: the Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*, claims that **writing in the content area can help students be better prepared and more engaged learners** who are "more likely to submit quality work" in the long run (xiv). However, Bean acknowledges that "**writing instruction goes sour whenever writing is conceived primarily as a 'communication skill' rather than as a process and product of critical thought [about the content]**" (3).

Myths about Writing in the Content Areas

Myth #1 *Emphasizing writing will take away time from my content.*

Response: "Helping students learn the subject matter of a course at a deeper and more intellectually mature level...can actually increase the total coverage of the content" (9).

Myth #2 *Writing assignments are unsuitable for my course.*

Response: Re-think what you mean by 'writing assignment'. Any course can use a brief writing assignment to check student understanding of an important course concept, help students "reflect on their own thinking processes" or help students "learn disciplinary methods of inquiry and analysis" (10).

Myth #3 *Adding writing assignments will bury me in grading.*

Response: Writing assignments can take much or little grading time for the instructor. Design your writing assignments with an appropriate grading time in mind. Consider in-class freewriting, perusing a sample of entries from a journal, or a "write-to-learn microtheme" (10-11).

Myth #4. *I'm not knowledgeable enough about Writing and Grammar to help students.*

Response: "The best teacher commentary focuses primarily on ideas and development.... Teachers simply need to be honest readers, making comments like these:

'I got lost in this part.'

'You need more evidence here.'

'you seem to be overlooking Baker's research on this problem. Can you summarize and respond to Baker's views?' (11).

Focusing Your Course on Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is a learned skill. Therefore, the professor can "establish an agenda that includes **learning to think** about subject matter" (4). In her 1988 report *Critical Thinking: Theory, Research, Practice, and Possibilities*, J. G. Kurfiss claims instructors should **help students inquire** into the central concepts of the course. Require them to "**formulate and justify their ideas about the content** in writing or other appropriate modes." Above all, "**make standards explicit and then help students learn how to achieve them**" (qtd. in Bean, 4).

Writing Assignments in a Variety of Sizes

INFORMAL WRITING ACTIVITIES

- **In-class writing** might include: probing a subject at the beginning of class, refocusing a discussion mid-class, conducting a question/confusion check at mid-class, or summing up the subject at the end of class (104-106).
- **Journal assignments** might include open-ended journals, learning logs, guided journals, double-entry notebooks (which include and discuss selections from a text), “what I thought” laboratory notebooks, contemporary issues journals, or exam preparation journals (106-109).
- Informal writing can be great **practice for thesis-writing**. These types of assignments might include practice essay exams, thesis statement writing, framed or structured paragraphs (114-116).

Evaluating Informal Writing? Try using the Minus/Check/Plus System, with a minus (-) indicating unsatisfactory performance, a check (√) indicating work that meets...expectations, and a plus (+) indicating strongly engaged, high-quality thinking or exploration. Most teachers translate the minus/check/plus system into a [point value] or letter grade. (116)

FORMAL WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Write-to-learn microthemes “provide a window into students’ thinking that allows the instructor to monitor student progress” (83). These assignments could include:

- “Dear Abby” style letter assignment explaining a concept in detail.
- One- to two-page essay explaining the target concept to the reader. (79-82)

A **thesis-driven essay** is the standard for academic prose; however, this pattern of thought does not come naturally to students. Some ideas for this type of assignment:

- Instructor presents a proposition (thesis) that students defend or refute.
- Instructor gives students a problem or question that demands a thesis answer.
- Instructor allows freedom of topic, but essay must follow thesis pattern. (87-90)

Alternatives to the thesis-driven essay often provide a balance for students to explore course concepts in a variety of ways. Some possibilities include:

- An exploratory essay, which is “thesis-seeking,” rather than “thesis-driven.”
- A reflection paper, reader-response paper, or personal reaction paper.
- A poem, dialogue, re-telling, interview, parable, content-specific autobiography, story problem, etc. (92-95)
- A formal, scientific research report, which includes a five-part format of introduction, methods, results, discussion of results, and conclusions and recommendations (91).

Designing the Formal Writing Assignment

Recall that Kurfiss encourages instructors to “make standards explicit” when assigning writing. A handout explaining the writing assignment should include:

- **Task:** Explain what the student is supposed to be writing about.
- **Role and Audience:** Typically, encourage students to write from the role of “expert” on a topic.
- **Format:** Specify length, manuscript form, and other details.

- **Expectations about the process:** Specify a time schedule for completion of drafts, peer review, revisions, etc. Requiring students to submit notes, outlines, and drafts encourages them to think critically on the topic and decreases the chances of plagiarism.
- **Criteria for evaluation:** Explain how the final product will be graded. (84-85)

Evaluating Student Writing

TIME-SAVING TIPS

- Design good assignments
- Clarify grading criteria with a scoring guide
- Check student work early in the writing process (prospectus, focus question & thesis, or abstract)
- Incorporate carefully designed peer reviews
- Refer students to a Writing Center (Smarthinking.com)
- Use efficient methods for giving written feedback
 - Focus on higher-order, rather than lower-order concerns
 - Make limited, focused comments and avoid marking errors
 - Use a scoring guide or analytic scale
 - Put minimal comments on finished products that will not be revised (217-238)

GRADING SCALES

An **analytic scale** “gives separate scores for each criterion ...” Analytic scales can include as many categories and subcategories as the instructor desires, and “many analytic scales weigh some criteria more heavily than others, depending on what the instructor wishes to emphasize.” These scoring guides can include a simple check to indicate the presence of a particular feature, could include a scale to rate the quality of the feature, or could include a space for the assessed point value, as illustrated below:

EXAMPLE 1: *Is there a thesis statement?* Yes _____ No _____

EXAMPLE 2: *Quality of thesis statement:*

Low			Middle			High	
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

EXAMPLE 3: **Clarity and Style** _____ points out of 10

Ease of readability; appropriate voice, tone and style for assignment; clarity and variety of sentence structure... (257-259)

The **holistic method** gives one score that reflects the reader’s overall impression of the paper, considering all criteria at once. [This method embraces the concept that] writing cannot be analyzed into component parts.... Holistic grading is faster, and so is often preferable when one’s main concern is rapidity of assessment rather than precision of feedback” (257). A holistic scoring guide should include a detailed description of the aspects included in a “Level X” essay, with one description for each level. Evaluators should easily identify the appropriate level based on the description. Students can review the descriptions to understand the specific qualities contained in their own work.

Information in this handout taken from: John C. Bean. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor’s Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco; Jossey-Bass Publishers. 2001.