

## WRITE-TO-LEARN ASSIGNMENTS for the College Seminar

Write-to-Learn pedagogy builds on the fact that writing promotes active learning. Writing-to-Learn assignments invite students to explore ideas raised in class discussion or reading, rephrase course content in their own words, make tentative connections, hypothesize, inventory what they know at this point in the class, and try out interpretations. WTL assignments also invite students to develop questions and take risks in content and style.

**WTL assignments can be a few sentences or paragraphs long, as they are in College Seminars. In other contexts, such as writing intensive courses, they may be papers. What marks them as WTL assignments is their purpose and the way they are integrated into the content of the class and help accomplish the learning goals of the class.**

Below are some sample Writing-to-Learn assignments collected last year (with a few additions) and some notes about how to build them into a class. Try assigning one of these at the beginning of class, during class, at the end of class, or as part of a homework assignment. Remember that we learn best through repetition, so these will be most effective if you assign one kind of WTL strategy on several different occasions; however, it is important to incorporate them into the class so the work does not seem like “busy work” and so that the objectives of the assignments meet the learning goals of the course.

### TIMING

### BUILDING ON THE ASSIGNMENT

#### **(A) BEFORE CLASS TAKE FIVE MINUTES FOR STUDENTS TO GATHER THEIR THOUGHTS READY FOR DISCUSSION**

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| 1. Write all the questions you have about the topic/reading and then organize the questions in whatever way makes sense to you (e.g.: the content of the reading, the context, the author, connections between it and other texts, responses other students had to the reading or the topic in class), finally, prioritize the questions and decide which must be addressed first and which answers might lead to other answers. | <i>Ask each student to recommend one question and list them on the board organizing them into your own categories (or use the computer to collect and save them, projecting the list to the class as you create it and work through it. This list can structure the entire class or simply provide an opportunity for review depending on the number of substantial questions. Once the questions are listed, ask students to explore answers.</i><br><br><i>This could also be a moment to invite further research in the classroom or as homework.</i> |
| 2. Write a brief explanation of the main ideas of the reading for a student who missed class or couldn't do the reading because of illness (write as you'd talk, and try not to be long-winded).   | <i>Students can share these explanations with the person next to them and discuss what they included and why. If you hear them struggling to grasp the main idea, you can focus the class on a close reading of the text. If not, you can ask them to respond to that idea and build on their explanations.</i>  |
| 3. List three ways that the reading connects with, challenges, or builds upon other readings for the class and note which you find the most interesting or surprising connection.  | <i>Invite students to share these ideas with the class as a way to begin discussion. (A variation of #4 below; #3 and #4 can be combined if students are struggling).</i>  |
| 3. Work in teams of three or four to list three ways that the reading connects with, challenges, or builds upon other readings for the class.  | <i>Invite each team to create a diagram of the connections and then select a team member draw it on the board. Ask the students to comment on the various diagrams and use this to begin discussion</i>  |
| 4.   |  |

## **TIMING**

## **BUILDING ON THE ASSIGNMENT**

### ***(B) DURING CLASS, TAKE FIVE MINUTES FOR STUDENTS TO EXPLORE KEY IDEAS AND CONCEPTS***

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| 1. Explain how X is different from (or similar to) Y.   | <i>This is a good way to help students transition between ideas or just take a moment to make connections between material being discussed in the class. Invite students to share their observations as you continue the discussion—or if their comparisons are weak take a while to work through the similarities and differences in the remaining discussion.</i> |
| 2. Draw some visual picture or representation (a graph or diagram or flow chart or ?) of this concept or notion or process and explain how the pictorial representation should be "read." | <i>This provides a moment for the students to gather their thoughts and the act of reinterpreting can help them learn—or realize what they still need to understand. They can exchange their texts or simply add them to more formal notes for the class.</i>   |
| 3. Predict what a reading might say based on its title and on your previous experience.   | <i>A good way to prepare for homework or a new topic or focus. They can simply write their predictions and explanation and then return to this after the reading to see whether they were right.</i>  |
| 4. Predict the results of a process or procedure. Explain what goes into your educated guess and what could throw it off.   | <i>This could be something described in the material being discussed, something they will be doing in the class or as homework, or simply a thought experiment ("what if we did X?").</i>   |
| 5. Based on our discussion so far, what questions might be answered by a simple Google/Wikipedia search? How would you test the accuracy of the answer you find?                          | <i>If they have their laptops in class, invite them to do that research and present it to their peers with a ranking (1-5) of how trustworthy they think it might be. Or have them select a question or two for you to look up on the classroom computer.</i>   |
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### ***(C) AT THE END OF CLASS, INVITE STUDENTS TO WRITE FOR FIVE MINUTES TO REFLECT ON CLASS***

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| 1. Based on our class discussion today, write one thing (concept, idea, or interpretation) that you are sure about right now and explain what makes you sure of this one thing.  | <i>Invite students to revisit and respond to this at the end of the unit or reading—are they still so sure about it? If not, how have their ideas changed? What made them change? If so, what confirmed their certainty?</i>   |
| 2. Write one question that you still have about the topic/material discussed in class today and describe one strategy/process/procedure you could follow to try to answer this question.   | <i>Students could report on this at the beginning of the next class, or they could post it to Moodle and you could ask them to select one strategy they found useful and explain what they like about it. You could have them try the strategy or save it to use on another occasion. If the latter, it is better to repeat this several times and remind students of these strategies as they read!</i>   |
| 3. Write all the questions you still have about this topic/material and then organize the questions in whatever way makes sense to you (e.g.: the content of the reading, the context, the author, connections between it and other texts, responses students had to the reading or the topic in class), finally, prioritize the questions and decide which must be addressed first and which answers might lead to other answers. | <i>Begin the next class with this list. Ask each student to recommend one question and list them on the board, organizing them into your own categories. This list can structure the entire class or simply provide an opportunity for review depending on the number of substantial questions. Once the questions are listed, ask students to explore answers. If you have previously assigned #2, ask them to think about the strategies they could use to answer questions. This could also be a moment to invite further research in the classroom or as homework.</i> |

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**(D) IN PREPARATION FOR CLASS, INVITE STUDENTS TO WRITE A RESPONSE TO THE READING**

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| 1. As part of preparation for class, write at least one question you would like to have someone address as part of your discussion of this reading / film / image / music / play / poem / etc. Post these questions to Moodle at least 24 hours before class.   | <p><i>Everyone in the class select one or two questions for class discussion, writing a sentence or two in response to the selected question, explaining why it is a good question for class.</i></p> <p><i>This works especially well if you have already worked on asking questions (see “asking questions” handout).</i></p>  |
| 2. Read the questions posted on Moodle [see 1] and trying to take the position of the writer, write a one-paragraph response to one of the questions posted by someone else in the class.   | <p><i>This kind of assignment works better later in the semester when students have learned to ask questions that lead to thoughtful answers—although this assignment can also help to teach students the limitations of yes/no questions!</i></p>   |
| 3. Write a one paragraph abstract of the article you read for class. Identify the main point of the argument and several key subordinate points.  | <p><i>This assignment should be collected and responded to by you as this is an essential skill for college and at the beginning of the semester few students will be able to do it.</i></p>   |
| 4. Make a map of the argument of the article you just read. Draw a picture or diagram, make a chart or a list – choose whatever visual representation most clearly lays out the structure of the argument for you.  | <p><i>An alternative way of mapping ideas that will work for some and not for others. This can lead to a fruitful conversation in class about how we represent knowledge to ourselves (and on a more mundane level, about note-taking and the importance of each student finding his or her own method of capturing ideas).</i></p>  |
| 5. Write a paragraph in which you agree with some aspect of the argument advanced by the writer of this reading (state the argument and then explain why you agree).  | <p><i>This form of supportive reading will be difficult for many students used to looking for points of debate. It works well with the listening strategies (see handout). Students are “listening” to the text and building on it. Classroom discussion can start by inviting students to share strategies; like #3, this will benefit from specific feedback in which you model the same kind of supportive reading.</i></p> |
| 6. Write one or two paragraphs in which you expand on some aspect of the argument advanced by the writer of this reading and suggest connections to other readings or material discussed in class (first state the argument and then expand on it).   | <p><i>As with the other examples here, it is important that this assignment is short so that students can really engage with the ideas and with the words they use to express them. While the paragraphs generated for #5 and #6 could be combined to begin to build a paper, in college seminars it is important to begin and end with the paragraphs, in most cases assigning one per reading.</i></p>                       |
| 7. Write a paragraph in which you disagree with some aspect of the argument advanced by the writer of this reading (state the argument and then explain how [and why] you disagree).  | <p><i>Ask students to post their paragraphs from 5, 6, or 7 to Moodle, then choose one of the paragraphs of agreement or disagreement posted by a classmate and respond to it. Why do you agree or disagree? Are you ambivalent or conflicted?</i></p>   |
| 8. Can you identify omissions in the argument you read for class? What is not addressed or discussed that seems to you important to the argument the article tries to make? List a couple of omissions that you identify. Write a sentence or two in which you suggest how their inclusion would change the argument. | <p><i>This can be a prompt for class discussion or a way for you to see how well the students are reading / how hard they are finding the material. Collecting such assignments and providing feedback early on in the semester is valuable, later on these can be shared with peers in small groups in class or on Moodle, with students invited to respond.</i></p>  |
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**(E) EXPLORE A READING BY INVITING STUDENTS TO EXPLORE CONNECTIONS AND IDEAS**

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| 1. Place the reading for today in conversation with a prior reading in the class. Write a paragraph in which you look at the interaction between this argument and the other one you have identified. Do they agree or disagree? Are they making similar arguments but in different ways? | <i>This can help students prepare for class, and help you get a sense of how – and how well – the students are understanding the material they are reading. More important though, it encourages the critical reading and thinking and general habits of mind that are essential for college-level reading and writing.</i>   |
| 2. Write a brief dialogue between two or more of the authors you have read this semester. Each “character” should speak in the voice of the text you read and express the opinions expressed in the text; however, you can decide what aspect of the topic they discuss.                  | <i>This prompt achieves the same effect as #1 above, although the students may find it more engaging. In order to write a dialogue they need to understand the texts and have a sense of the voice of the authors. This does take longer, so you might want to assign class time for it. This may also be a group activity—students can write the parts in pairs or groups.</i> |
| 3. Select one image, example, case study, or quotation from the reading and explain how the author uses it to support the larger argument of the piece. Do you believe that use was successful? (explain your answer).  | <i>This assignment invites students to unpack a text and see the parts that are used to make up an argument—those images, examples, case studies and quotations come from somewhere else and are drawn into a text to serve a specific purpose. It is important for them to understand that these connections sometimes fail!</i>   |
| 4. Select one example, case study, image, or quotation from the reading that could be used to support a <u>different</u> argument, and explain how that would work.   | <i>It is a good idea to ask students to write #3 before the write #4 (two separate assignments) so that they learn to focus on the ways images, examples, quotations, and case studies are used in a reading before thinking of them as separate entities that could be used in different ways in other contexts.</i>   |

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**(F) EXPAND THE CONVERSATION BY INVITING STUDENTS TO DEVELOP INFORMATION LITERACY SKILLS**

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| 1. After discussing this work in class, do a little background research and write a question you might pose to the author / the artist who created this work / the photographer / the filmmaker / the playwright / the poet, etc.   | <i>You might suggest appropriate places for them to search or ask your librarian for a list. The focus here is on developing good questions based on background information—students don't need to be able to answer those questions, just determine that they are valid questions whose answers are not obvious or easily discovered.</i> |
| 2. Make a bibliography of the other books and/or articles (if any) written by the author of the material you just read. Include the title of the book or article, who published it, and where and when it was published. What does this list reveal about the author? Does it change your response to what you read? If so, how? If not, why not? | <i>Another opportunity for guided development of information literacy skills. Again, the challenge is to help students think critically rather than simply generating a random list. Class discussion should focus on what the bibliography might teach us or how it might change the way we think about the author.</i>                   |

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3. Select one of the authors who was cited in the reading and make a bibliography of other books and/or articles he or she has written. Include the title of the book or article, who published it, where it was published, and when it was published. What does this list tell you about the author? Does it change your sense of whether he or she was a good source for the article to quote (you can define “good” in this context).

*The purpose here is to invite students to engage with sources and see them as resources for further scholarship—as participants in a conversation the students are in the process of joining. This kind of bibliographic work will be developed further in College Writing 2, but maybe appropriate for the College Seminar in some cases. The emphasis of class discussion should be on how this changes our assessment of the source material and how valuable we think it is now we know more about it.*

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**(G) AT THE END OF A UNIT OR AT A KEY MOMENT IN THE COURSE, INVITE STUDENTS TO REFLECT AND ARTICULATE CONNECTIONS OR CONSIDER WAYS THEY MIGHT EXPLAIN IDEAS**

1. Write three short encyclopedia entries for the topic we have been discussing. The first for a standard college-level encyclopedia to which students might turn for an accurate definition/explanation; the second for an on-line reference that the general public might consult for a quick and simple definition/explanation; the third for a “hip” encyclopedia to be marketed to middle-school students and available for iPods and other portable devices.

*Students can each be assigned a topic from the class or work in pairs to generate an encyclopedia for the class with three entries per topic. Once they have finished writing, they should be asked to reflect on the process and what they learned about the topic by having to explain it for such different audiences. Focusing on the differences between the descriptions (from word choice to sentence length) and the decision-process they employed as they wrote will make them more conscious of such decisions in more formal writing (and will connect with work in the College Writing class).*

2. Write a brief description of the image/sequence of images/event/experiment/piece of music we have been discussing. Write the description for an academic audience. Then write a second description that would make sense to a child. Finally, write about the difference between your two descriptions and the decision-process you used as you imagined each audience and adjusted your description accordingly.

*A variation of the assignment above, which can be used the same way and with the same outcome.*

3. Write the story of your thinking about this topic or perspective. What did you first think when you were exposed to it? Then what did you think? Then what? Try to get everything down here - your confusions as well as your understandings.

*This is a wonderful invitation for reflection, providing the students a space to revisit their thinking process and gain deeper understanding of how they learn. Students will be asked to reflect in a similar manner at key points throughout their education at Drew as part of the writing ePortfolio and we recommend it as one way to assess the students in the Seminar (see assessment).*

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## QUESTIONS TO ASK AS YOU DESIGN WRITING ASSIGNMENTS: WHAT DO I WANT STUDENTS TO LEARN, WHY, & HOW?

### 1) Why do I want students to complete this assignment?

- *What will students learn from this writing activity?*
- *What will I learn from their writing?*

### 2) Why do I want students to complete this assignment at this point in the class?

- *How will this assignment build on what I have already done in the class?*
- *How will it prepare students for future writing activities in the class?*
- *How might it prepare students for future writing assignments in or outside of/beyond college?*

### 3) What have I done/do I need to do to prepare students for this assignment?

- *Do students understand why I have assigned this writing activity?*
- *Does the assignment specify an audience?*
- *Have I allotted sufficient class time for discussion of this assignment?*
- *Has class discussion reflected the ambition and complexity of learning that the assignment requires?*
- *Do students have enough information to make effective choices as they write?*
- *Will it be useful and appropriate for students to see good examples of this assignment?*

### 4) How do I want students to complete this assignment?

- *Do I want students to work alone or in pairs/groups? (How does this decision fit with 1, 2, & 3 above?)*
- *Will they hand it to me, post it on Moodle, read in class, etc?*
- *Do I want other students to read this before class? If so, have I made the deadlines and guidelines clear?*
- *Have I allowed sufficient time for student to complete this assignment?*

### 5) How will I incorporate this writing into the class to avoid the feel of “busy work”?

- *See over for some suggestions, but there are many more!*
- *Be sure to vary the assignments and answer 1, 2, 3, and 4 above each time.*
- *Students learn by repetition, but two or three times is generally enough before the writing seems rote*

### 6) What will I do with this completed assignment?

- *Will I grade this piece of writing? If so, have I made my grading criteria clear to students?*
- *What kind of feedback will I give and how will it connect with 1, 2, & 3 above?*

### 7) How/will this assignment contribute to the grade for the class?

UNGRADED WORK: WTL assignments tend to be ungraded or “low stakes” assignments that feed into class discussion and help accomplish broader learning goals. Not all WTL assignments have to be ungraded, but the advantage of assigning at least some ungraded writing is, to quote the Penn State WAC program, that informal writing can “relieve obsession with surface correctness . . . [allowing students to] begin to see writing as a tool they can use, rather than as just an occasion for numerous small failures.” (Penn State Writing Across the Curriculum Program, “informal Writing”). One of our goals for the seminar.

LETTER OR CHECK-PLUS, CHECK, CHECK-MINUS GRADES: Some of you may prefer to grade some WTL assignments, in which case think about which ones it is most appropriate to grade and how you might explain to students what you expect. The benefit of  $\sqrt{+}$ ,  $\sqrt{\phantom{+}}$ , and  $\sqrt{-}$  “grades” is that they give the student a sense of improvement (or not) without carrying as much stress as letter grades. A student can be graded on the progress from  $\sqrt{-}$  to  $\sqrt{+}$  (or the extent to which he or she tried to learn from previous assignments).

CONTRACT GRADES: Others may prefer to use “contract grades” where students receive a grade for the number of assignments completed with or without regard to quality (10 = A; 9 = A-; 8 = B+; 7 = B, etc)

LEARNING PORTFOLIOS: The principle of the portfolio is “collect, select, reflect.” A learning portfolio invites students to revisit the paragraphs and questions they wrote for a unit of the course and use selected examples to support an extended reflection on what and how the student learned. This can take the form of a narrative (see G-3 above) or a reflection where they summarize or describe (and quote from) a WTL assignment and then reflect on what it taught them, why they were pleased with that particular piece, how they might incorporate that strategy into their learning in the future, and so on.