

activities for teaching writing

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introducing syllabi

Team teaching syllabus/assignment prompt. I do this every semester—I assign groups of students section(s) of the syllabus. They then read these sections carefully and develop a brief presentation on that section and ask at least two questions. I also like to do this with assignment prompts.

Syllabus quiz. For this activity, have students review the syllabus (either in class or for homework) and write up a quiz with questions that focus on the key things you want students to take notice of. Maybe best score wins candy!

Syllabus speed dating. Karen Eifler, an education professor at the University of Portland, designed this activity. Two rows of chairs face each other (multiple rows of two can be used in larger classes). Students sit across from each other, each with a copy of the syllabus that they've briefly reviewed. Eifler asks two questions: one about something in the syllabus and one of a more personal nature. The pair has a short period of time to answer both questions. Eifler checks to make sure the syllabus question has been answered correctly. Then students in one of the rows move down one seat and Eifler asks the new pair two different questions. Not only does this activity get students acquainted with each other, it's a great way to get them reading

the syllabus and finding out for themselves what they need to know about the course. (From Dr. Maryellen Weimer on Faculty Focus.)

Syllabus bingo. Design a Bingo card with different questions they can find answers to in the syllabus. Get them into groups and have them study the syllabus to find the answers. (The motivation to win is even higher if you bring candy or some other small reward for the winning team.) This also can work as a good ice breaker, although students will often work alone on this because they want to complete the task on their own rather than in a group -- there is less discussion than in the drawing exercise. (From Greenriver Community College Faculty Resources.)

Syllabus scavenger hunt. This works in a similar manner to the Bingo game, but instead of questions in a Bingo card, it is a more linear list of questions they need to find answers to in the syllabus. For extra fun, have students hunt in groups! (From Greenriver Community College Faculty Resources.)

icebreakers

Two truths and a lie. A nice way for students to introduce themselves. Have students each write two truths and a lie about themselves. As students introduce themselves, the class guesses which they think is a lie. It's fun if it starts with the instructor!

Age game. A lot of students have played this many times before but I still like it. Tell students that, without speaking, they need to line up in order of age. Students will generally figure out they can write on sheets of paper—it's fun for community building and getting out of your seats.

Never have I ever. Have students in a circle go around and introduce themselves. Each introduction should end with a "never have I ever" statement (never have I ever been to Hawaii) —something the student hasn't done. Students start with five fingers (palm open) and fold a finger each time they have done that thing (a student who's been to Hawaii would now have only four fingers up). The student who has no fingers up first wins! But keep playing until the game is over and everyone has introduced themselves. This game usually come with lots of laughs.

Name acrostic. Use the letters of your first name to describe yourself to the class (C - charming, H - happy, etc.)

Name, hometown, sense, scar. Have students go around the room introducing themselves with their name, their hometown and its claim to fame (Chicago, deep dish), favorite sensory

experience (toes in the sand, sound of crickets in summer), a scar story (I have a scar on my leg from when I got hit by a car...) (Adapted from Steel Wagstaff on lessonshare.)

Unique/memorable quality. First, have students interview a peer, getting their name and one unique or memorable quality about that person. They then pass the sheets of paper with their names and qualities up to the instructor. The instructor reads them aloud and has everyone copy down all of the unique qualities. Next, students circulate around the room, interviewing each other trying to find out—without asking directly—who has each unique quality. Then, come back to the class as a whole, and have students identify themselves and explain (For example—I'm Maggie and I'm the one who was in a folk band in college). (Adapted from Jacque Wilson-Jordon on the CBW Resource Share.)

Best and worse classes. On one section of the blackboard, write: "The best class I've ever had" and underneath it "What the teacher did" and below that "What the students did." On another section, write "The worst class I've ever had" (well, actually you might write, "The class from hell") and then the same two items beneath. Ask students to share their experiences, without naming the course, department or teacher, and begin filling in the grid based on what they call out. If there's a lull or not many comments about what the students did in these classes, add some descriptors based on your experience with some of your best and worst classes. In 10 minutes or less, two very different class portraits emerge. Move to the best class section of the board and tell students that this is the class you want to teach, but you can't do it alone. Together we have the power to make this one of those "best class" experiences. (From Dr. Maryellen Weimer on Faculty Focus.)

First day graffiti. This is an adaptation of an activity proposed by Barbara Goza in the Journal of Management Education in 1993. Flip charts with markers beneath are placed around the classroom. Each chart has a different sentence stem. Here are a few examples: "I learn best in classes where the teacher ____" "Students in courses help me learn when they ____" "I am most likely to participate in classes when ____" "Here's something that makes it hard to learn in a course: ____" "Here's something that makes it easy to learn in a course: ____" Students are invited to walk around the room and write responses, chatting with each other and the teacher as they do. After there are comments on every flip chart, the teacher walks to each one and talks a bit about one or two of the responses. If you run out of time, you can conduct the debriefing during the next session. (From Dr. Maryellen Weimer on Faculty Focus.)

MVP awards (actually for the end of the semester). Maybe tell students at the beginning of the semester you'll be doing this, but, at the end of the semester, have students nominate their peers who were especially helpful during the semester (Adapted from Collie Fulford on the CBW Resource Share.)

the first five minutes of class

Open with a question or two. The cognitive psychologist Daniel Willingham, argues that teachers should focus more on the use of questions. "The material I want students to learn," he writes in his book *Why Don't Students Like School?*, "is actually the answer to a question. On its own, the answer is almost never interesting. But if you know the question, the answer may be quite interesting." At the beginning of class, he shows four or five questions on a slide for students to consider. Class then proceeds in the usual fashion. At the end, he returns to the questions so that students can both see some potential answers and understand that they have learned something that day. So consider opening class with one or more questions that qualify as important and fascinating. You might even let students give preliminary answers for a few moments, and then again in the closing minutes, to help them recognize how their understanding has deepened over the course period. (From James Lang on The Chronicle.)

What did we learn last time? Instead of offering a capsule review to students, why not ask them to offer one back to you? In the opening few minutes of class, ask students to "remind" you of the key points from the last session. Write them on the board — editing as you go and providing feedback to ensure the responses are accurate — to set up the day's new material. Five minutes of that at the start of every class will prepare students to succeed on the memory retrieval they will need on quizzes and exams throughout the semester. One important caveat: Students should do all of this without notebooks, texts, or laptops. Retrieval practice only works when they are retrieving the material from memory — not when they are retrieving it from their screens or pages. (From James Lang on The Chronicle.)

Reactivate what they learned in previous courses. Asking students to tell you what they already know (or think they know) has two important benefits. First, it lights up the parts of their brains that connect to your course material, so when they encounter new material, they will process it in a richer knowledge context. Second, it lets you know what preconceptions students have about your course material. That way, your lecture, discussion, or whatever you plan for class that day can specifically deal with and improve upon the knowledge actually in the room, rather than the knowledge you imagine to be in the room. Here, too, try posing simple questions at the beginning of class followed by a few minutes of discussion: "Today we are going to focus on X. What do you know about X already? What have you heard about it in the media, or learned in a previous class?" You might be surprised at the misconceptions you hear, or heartened by the state of knowledge in the room. Either way, you'll be better prepared to shape what follows in a productive way. (From James Lang on The Chronicle.)

the last five minutes of class

The minute paper. The Minute Paper comes in many variations, but the simplest one involves wrapping up the formal class period a few minutes early and posing two questions to your students: What was the most important thing you learned today? What question still remains in your mind? Taken together, those two questions accomplish multiple objectives. The first one not only requires students to remember something from class and articulate it in their own words (more about that in a moment), but it also requires them to do some quick thinking. They have to reflect on the material and make a judgment about the main point of that day's class. The second question encourages them to probe their own minds and consider what they haven't truly understood. Most of us are infected by what learning theorists sometimes call "illusions of fluency," which means that we believe we have obtained mastery over something when we truly have not. To answer the second question, students have to decide where confusion or weaknesses remain in their own comprehension of the day's material.

Closing connections. Finish the last class of the week five minutes early, and tell students that they can leave when they have identified five ways in which the day's material appears in contexts outside of the classroom. You'll be amazed at how quickly they can come up with examples when this activity stands between them and the dining hall.

The metacognitive five. Before the midterm, I asked students to take two minutes and write down for me how they studied for the test. When I compared what they said with the exam scores, the evidence couldn't have been clearer: Low-performing students used phrases like "reviewed my notes" and "reread the poems"; the students who aced the exam said things like "wrote an outline," "rewrote my notes," "organized a timeline," "tested myself," and "created flashcards." I made a slide with a side-by-side comparison of the two columns, and spent five minutes of class showing students the differences. They'll see that slide again in the last five minutes of class just before the next exam. Imagine what a difference we could make if we all took five minutes — even just a few times during the semester — to offer students the opportunity to reflect on their learning habits. We could inform their choices with some simple research, and inspire them to make a change. One five-minute session in one course might not mean much, but dozens of such sessions across a student's college education would add up.

general class activities

Think (or Write!)/Pair/Share. For this activity, first ask students to think/write about an issue/concept. Next, have them discuss their thinking with a peer. Finally, have groups share their thoughts with the class. This helps to engage students individually working their way up to the whole group.

Take a stand! On plagiarism, for example, place signs reading “plagiarism” and “reinvention” on opposite sides of the room. Give students examples of appropriated material and ask them to take stand. Once students gather on each side of the room, they discuss and explain their decision to the class. This activity can be adapted to teach other concepts as well! (Perhaps most effective thesis statement, paragraph structure, types of peer critique etc.) (Adapted from Lauryn Gold on lessonshare.)

Writing with style. First, give a brief explanation of the concept—for this example, the quote sandwich (introduce, quote, explain). Next, divide students into groups and write a sample quotation on the board. All but one group is then asked to create introductory material, choose what part of the quote they’ll use, and create explanatory material. The remaining group—the judges—deliberate and decide which group’s material works best and why. They explain to the class. That group gets a point. Repeat, rotating which group serves as the judges. This activity can also be adapted for teaching concision, show-don’t-tell writing, and other issues of style.

When writing goes bad. Divide students into groups. Assign each group a “bad” writing technique and a passage (2-3 paragraphs) from a “good” piece of writing. Students then work in groups to write a new version of that passage using the “bad” writing technique (passive voice, telling v. showing, run-on sentences, fragments, etc.). Students then present on their good and bad versions. Helps students think more consciously about style (Adapted from Matt van Buren from lessonshare.)

Draw your essay. A really cool organizational activity. Have students draw and explain their argument/essay/etc. Encourage students to stray from the usual venn diagram/mind map and get creative. This really helps students think about argument, organization, and synthesis. (Adapted from Shirley Brice Heath.)

Analyzing sample texts (AKA Jigsaw teamwork). Bring a sample text which emulates an assignment/skill students are working on. Divide students into groups and have them develop a presentation which analyzes or reverse outlines a section of the article (abstract, introduction, methodology, etc.) or a particular skill/concept in that article (citing sources, synthesis, active voice, etc.). Students then present to the class on that section/concept.

Arguments in context. I’ve done this in a couple ways. Basically, the idea is to have students bring in real-life arguments and to analyze the rhetorical/argumentative strategies employed.

You might have students write about the last argument they got into (maybe with their roommate/friend/mom) or have students get into an argument in the comments section of a YouTube video or newspaper article, or on Instagram or Twitter and have them bring it in for analysis. Always fun.

Problem-based learning. Give students a scenario and have them “solve the problem” in groups. For example, you’ve been asked to write a 20 page paper due in two days. Or, a local business has asked you to help with their advertising (give a sample ad), what advice do you offer? etc. (Adapted from Basic Active Learning Strategies, U of M).

working with class readings/ class discussion

Lightening rounds. For this activity, students have 30 seconds (or however long) to answer. They can either answer or pass. Ask the questions rapidly while growing the anticipation for each next question by imitating quiz show lightening rounds (Are you ready for the next question? Here it comes.) Ask the question before calling on a student so that all students must be ready to answer. (Adapted from Dr. Richard Curwin on Edutopia.)

Throw the ball. When you ask a discussion question, call on them by letting them catch a ball. Then have students throw the ball to another student for the next question or for following up on that question. Adapted from Dr. Richard Curwin on Edutopia.)

Group answers. Divide students into groups, then assign each group a question, then come back to the class for large discussion. Adapted from Dr. Richard Curwin on Edutopia.)

Agreements. When the first student answers a question, ask another student if s/he agrees or disagrees, then ask another student. Keep going until about five students have answered. Adapted from Dr. Richard Curwin on Edutopia.)

Chat stations. Stations or posters are set up around the classroom, on the walls, or on tables. Small groups of students travel from station to station together, performing some kind of task or responding to a prompt, either of which will result in conversation (Straight copied from Jennifer Gonzalez on Cult of Pedagogy.)

Philosophical chairs. A statement that has two possible responses—agree or disagree—is read aloud. Depending on whether they agree or disagree with this statement, students move to one

side of the room or the other. From that spot, students take turns defending their positions. (Straight copied from Jennifer Gonzalez on Cult of Pedagogy.)

Pinwheel discussion. Students are divided into four groups. Three of these groups are assigned to represent specific points of view. Members of the fourth group are designated as “provocateurs,” tasked with making sure the discussion keeps going and stays challenging. One person from each group sits in a desk facing speakers from other groups so they form a square in the center of the room. Behind each speaker, the remaining group members are seated: two right behind the speaker, then three behind them, and so on, forming a kind of triangle. From above, this would look like a pinwheel. The four speakers introduce and discuss questions they prepared ahead of time (this preparation is done with their groups). After some time passes, new students rotate from the seats behind the speaker into the center seats and continue the conversation. (Straight copied from Jennifer Gonzalez on Cult of Pedagogy.)

Socratic seminar. Students prepare by reading a text or group of texts and writing some higher-order discussion questions about the text. On seminar day, students sit in a circle and an introductory, open-ended question is posed by the teacher or student discussion leader. From there, students continue the conversation, prompting one another to support their claims with textual evidence. There is no particular order to how students speak, but they are encouraged to respectfully share the floor with others. Discussion is meant to happen naturally and students do not need to raise their hands to speak. This overview of Socratic Seminar (<https://www.facinghistory.org/resource-library/teaching-strategies/socratic-seminar>) from the website Facing History and Ourselves provides a list of appropriate questions, plus more information about how to prepare for a seminar. (Straight copied from Jennifer Gonzalez on Cult of Pedagogy.)

Affinity mapping. Give students a broad question or problem that is likely to result in lots of different ideas, such as “What were the impacts of the Great Depression?” or “What literary works should every person read?” Have students generate responses by writing ideas on post-it notes (one idea per note) and placing them in no particular arrangement on a wall, whiteboard, or chart paper. Once lots of ideas have been generated, have students begin grouping them into similar categories, then label the categories and discuss why the ideas fit within them, how the categories relate to one another, and so on. (Straight copied from Jennifer Gonzalez on Cult of Pedagogy.)

Concentric circles. Students form two circles, one inside circle and one outside circle. Each student on the inside is paired with a student on the outside; they face each other. The teacher poses a question to the whole group and pairs discuss their responses with each other. Then the teacher signals students to rotate: Students on the outside circle move one space to the right so they are standing in front of a new person (or sitting, as they are in the video). Now the teacher poses a new question, and the process is repeated. (Straight copied from Jennifer Gonzalez on Cult of Pedagogy.)

Conver-stations. Students are placed into a few groups of 4-6 students each and are given a discussion question to talk about. After sufficient time has passed for the discussion to develop, one or two students from each group rotate to a different group, while the other group members remain where they are. Once in their new group, they will discuss a different, but related question, and they may also share some of the key points from their last group's conversation. For the next rotation, students who have not rotated before may be chosen to move, resulting in groups that are continually evolving. (Straight copied from Jennifer Gonzalez on Cult of Pedagogy.)

Hot seat. One student assumes the role of a book character, significant figure in history, or concept (such as a tornado, an animal, or the Titanic). Sitting in front of the rest of the class, the student responds to classmates' questions while staying in character in that role. (Straight copied from Jennifer Gonzalez on Cult of Pedagogy.)

Snowball discussion. Students begin in pairs, responding to a discussion question only with a single partner. After each person has had a chance to share their ideas, the pair joins another pair, creating a group of four. Pairs share their ideas with the pair they just joined. Next, groups of four join together to form groups of eight, and so on, until the whole class is joined up in one large discussion. (Straight copied from Jennifer Gonzalez on Cult of Pedagogy.)

using the library/ citing sources

Google vs. the Library. Divide students into groups, and pose research questions to students. In groups, they research to locate the answers. The first group with the correct answer and then describes their process and gets a point. Repeat. Try to identify questions that relate to the assignment/topics you're teaching and will require students to visit a variety of sources.

Race to correct citation. Break the class up into four groups. Give each group a newspaper article, a scholarly article, a book, and an article in an anthology (or whatever sources are most relevant to your course). Have students race to develop a correct works cited (or reference page). Students will bring you drafts to correct, the first one with a completely correct draft wins! Discuss with the class. A prize of some kind always helps, but isn't really necessary.

Design a Citation System. In groups, have students design their own citation system, thinking about what is necessary for a citation system and why. This activity will help students think more deeply about the purpose of citations, how they work, and what they're for.

Telephone Citation Game - Have students unravel a citation and follow it back to the source! Helps students think about how and why citations work.

peer review

Preparing for peer review. It can be helpful to spend a class period or so discussing peer review/workshopping. I often have students reflect on their best and worst peer review experiences which allows us to come up with a do's and don't's list and humanizes the work. Next, we review a sample paper and walk through what an effective peer review session would look like. This "demonstration" depends on the mode of peer review you choose.

Peer review manifesto. Read the night before a couple examples of manifestos (Mozilla manifesto etc.) talk about those as a genre, then move in to talking about what their experience has been with peer review before, what went wrong and why. Then, we talk about what peer review *should* be and collaboratively write a manifesto for how workshops should go.

Instructor-led review. This can be really great, especially for the class's first peer review. Instead of having peer review during class, cancel class and have groups of students meet with you in your office to workshop their essays. Have students share essays a day or two in advance to give everyone time to read the essays and be ready to discuss with you. This will help you model what a constructive peer review looks like.

Writer's workshop (Group discussion). Each writer takes a turn (divide the time equally). The first writer reads their draft aloud while the other group members listen. The author then listens to a conversation about the draft without taking part in the conversation. The author should take notes. Questions to discuss may include: What is the main idea and/or feeling that is communicated to you in this draft? What story or stories do you hear? Summarize the story in your own words. What details support the writer's purpose? Do you want additional details at any point? How do you understand the context for this draft? Do you think this writer was writing for you? Do you feel included? Why or why not? The author may then ask questions. (Adapted from lessonshare.)

Round-robin peer review. Each student takes out their (short) essay and a piece of paper. To begin, each student takes a few minutes to introduce their proposals. Then, students pass their proposal and a sheet of paper to a group member. By the end of the activity, all students in a group will have read and commented on each essay. Leave five minutes at the end of class to discuss the activity. (Adapted from lessonshare.)

Author in charge peer review. Have students, either before or at the beginning of the class, reflect on questions and issues about their essay they would like to discuss. Next, dividing time equally between each student in each group, each author should lead a review/discussion of their own paper. Authors are encouraged to ask questions and keep discussion going (adapted from one of Kate Vieira's peer review methods).

Peer review letters. Two authors switch papers and spend the class reviewing and writing a 1-2 page letter to the author, focusing on three or four key areas for improvement and at least two or three areas of excellence. Each key area should be accompanied by an explanation, example, and some potential strategies for approaching the issue. Optional: After the second draft, students compile their first draft, letter, and second draft and trades them with another student. Students then write a final letter to the author point out areas of growth between 1-2 and suggesting areas for further growth.

Evaluating revision. Have students bring first and second drafts (or second and third drafts etc.) to class (a computer lab helps). Have them use the compare documents feature in Microsoft Word (Tools > Track Changes > Compare Documents) and save the new draft which will highlight the changes between drafts. Next, have students trade papers with a partner and evaluate their revision. A set of questions to help students evaluate revision is also helpful, asking students to think about what kinds of revision the student has engaged in as well as how much revision the student has engaged in. Finally, have the student offer the author some suggestions for further revision, especially filling in the gaps for missing modes of revision (content vs. sentence level etc.).

Reverse outline peer review. Have students trade papers and reverse outline their peers paper. Next, have the student answer the following questions: • What are two things that your partner did well? Does your partner have a clear, specific issue they are trying to explore? (Do you know what their question was by reading their paper? Do they provide grounds for each of their perspectives? Does the organization of their paragraphs make sense or are there sections that don't fit with the rest of the paragraph? Is there analysis after each quotation that they use? Does each paragraph link back to their main claim? Do you think that the paragraphs build off of each other to prove a larger point? Are you clear about why they think the issue they are addressing matters? What other improvements can your partner make to their paper? What additional questions do you have about the topic your partner is writing about? Is there more information that would be helpful for understanding your partner's paper? Are you persuaded by their paper? What could they add to make it work better? (Adapted from Jurecka Blake on lessonshare.)

Peer review worksheet. Identify the key areas of the assignment and write up a worksheet for students to fill out about each other's essays to turn back to the author. Questions might focus on issues like argument, support, analysis, organization, clarity, etc.

writing as a process

My writing process. For this activity, have students locate six phrases and six images that illustrate what their writing process looks like (for example, pics of people writing, coffee, etc.). Next, have students think about why their writing process is this way, what works about it, and

what doesn't work about it. Share with the class. (Adapted from Nicole Hancock on the CBW Resource Share.)

Following up on writing assignments. Do a think, pair, share with the following questions: 1. When did you begin writing it? 2. Did you write it all in one sitting? 3. How did you get started? How many breaks did you take? 4. Which part of the assignment did you find the easiest/most difficult? Why? 5. Which part did you enjoy doing the most/least? 6. Did you try doing anything you've never done before? Sunny Chan explains that by doing this in class after every assignment is due, it reinforces the idea of thinking about writing as a conscious process, helps students identify their own habits, strengths, and weaknesses, as well as hear about other approaches. (Adapted from Sunny Chan on lessonshare.)

Rethinking the introduction (teaching revision). Have students rewrite the introduction from their most recently graded essay, no matter how awesome that introduction is (they may want to use your comments to revise). Students hand both their old and new intro to a classmate who must decide which introduction is better. The criteria may vary, but you can consider: Which intro grabs your attention and keeps it? Which gives you a clearer idea of what the essay is going to be? Which thesis statement do you like better? The reviewer then explains why they like that version better and the writers finally decide whether they agree. (Adapted from Sara Tsai on the CBW Resource Share.)

Director's Cut - Watch a clip from a film and everyone in the class guesses why things were done a certain way. Then watch the director's cut. This should spark a discussion about writer's memos and explaining the thought process behind your work.

Student Interviews - Interview each other about their writing processes and then have pairs of students write their partner's writer's memo rather than their own!