

Using Short Writing Assignments in Teaching Research Ethics¹

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Regularly asking students to write down their thoughts and reactions to class readings and discussions is an effective method of teaching and assessing student learning. Furthermore, as composition teachers will attest, frequent writing assignments, regardless of content, dramatically improve writing skills. Asking students to think “on paper” about topics encountered in the classroom encourages them to think about those topics in greater depth, relate them to their own lives, and thus connect the classroom to the world outside. I will describe four kinds of useful short writing assignments – freewriting, the non-quiz, the one-minute paper, and logbooks.

Freewriting

Using freewriting at the beginning of class can effectively prime the pump for discussion. It works best if it is used frequently because students need some practice to get the full benefit.

At the beginning of class, students are asked to write for a specified period of time – say, five minutes. Many students will only write a half-dozen sentences or so in five minutes, so you should time it by the clock, **not** by how long it **feels**.

Freewriting can almost take the form of free association. The teacher should write as well, and students should be told to write for the whole time, whether they think they have anything to say or not. I tell my students, “If you can’t think of anything to say, write, ‘I don’t have anything to say.’ You won’t write that very often before you think of something more interesting to write.”

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² My teaching and thinking about teaching have been influenced by many great teachers and good friends; of the ideas presented here, I am not always sure which are original to me and which I learned elsewhere. My best teacher was the late Robert A. Guptill; some of my best interlocutors on teaching have been Patricia E. Sawin, William F. Guinee, and, especially, Jennifer E. Livesay. Thanks to Sandy Borden, David H. Smith, Karen M. T. Muskavitch, and Muriel J. Bebeau for comments on the first draft of this essay; I have made some improvements and additions thanks to the feedback of Teaching Research Ethics Workshop participants.