

Writing Across the Disciplines Using Journals

Journals provide an easy, multi-beneficial vehicle to incorporate writing into any course. Their benefits for students and faculty are numerous:

For students,

- they help reinforce learning and understanding of course content;
- they give students an opportunity to critically examine an issue;
- they provide practice with writing;
- they offer a safe, no-fault arena for writing.

For faculty,

- they provide a quick, accurate report on students' understanding of course material and concepts;
- they help students focus on and consider important course content;
- they open the doors of communication student and teacher.

Focused Journal Writing

Focused journal writing often is the most effective use of journals in any course. By focused journal writing, we are referring to journal writing where the instructor provides a specific topic for students to respond to in their journals. This is easily done with both in-class and out-of-class journal entries. In either case, you will want to share with students your expectations of the journal entries.

In-class journal writing

Consider opening a class period by asking students to write for ten minutes or so on a particular topic. For instance, if you are about to discuss a reading assignment, ask them to ponder a specific idea or issue that came up in that day's reading. If they have read something you sense may have confused them due to the complexity of the reading assignment, ask them to share (in writing) what they found difficult about this selection. This gives students a chance to consider their responses to the reading and formulate their ideas into words. After 10 minutes or so, ask a couple of students to share what they wrote as a way both of addressing some of those difficulties and opening the class period as a collective.

Example (from ENG 254 Survey of American Literature II):

Discuss Hemingway's "Hills like White Elephants" as a work that illustrates the Modern Age in American literature based on features we discussed in our last class meeting. Refer to specific details to illustrate your points.

Out-of-class journal writing

Asking students to write in their journals out of class shares many of the same benefits of in-class journal writing with additional benefits: students are not constrained with time limits, can explore a topic more thoroughly, and can examine a more complicated topic with greater ease. You may still want to limit the length of the response so you aren't reading essay-length entries.

Sample (from ED 219 Multicultural Issues in Education):

Write a 2-3 page journal in your Blue Book on what you have observed about stereotypes and the ways that biases are passed on through everyday life. Give specific examples of stereotypes that you have learned from friends or family, movies, books, in class, etc. The stereotypes may refer to any of the following topics: race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, disabilities, or social economic class.

Include in your journal how you have been affected by these stereotypes? Are there any stereotypes that you have learned that continue to be a struggle for you?

Collecting and "Grading" Journals

Especially with large classes, it is difficult to collect entire class sets of journals. Fortunately, you don't need to do so. You can collect three to five journals randomly after each class meeting. This serves two purposes: you do not draw in an overload of journals to grade, and students stay on their toes and up-to-date on their entries since they don't know when you might collect their journal.

We vary how we "grade" journals. Annemarie often uses a short rubric with evaluation boxes she checks; Chris offers minimal comments and adds a "plus," "check," or "minus" for each entry. Whatever you do, be sure to indicate on your syllabus how you will grade their journal.

Students' Reactions to Journals

Students' responses to journal writing have been overwhelmingly positive. Here are some comments collected from students in a final, focused journal entry assigned on the last day of class where they were asked to comment on the use of a journal in class and to consider whether they thought journals would work in other disciplines.

The novelty of keeping a journal for class was refreshing. Certainly, keeping a record of one's progress through a term's development is useful... Personally, I found it invaluable not only for recording my progress but also for on-the-spot thinking.

What I appreciated about the journal entries is that I could not prepare for them. I was "forced" to think—and think quickly—about a "topic."

I think it was useful to write down initial reactions and impressions of the works before the discussion. The questions for each journal helped me organize my thoughts and often introduced a new way of looking at the work. I also liked that you collected the journals and provided specific comments about our entries. Journals added a creative and alternative outlet for expressing thoughts and ideas for those students who are not heavy participants in class discussions.

Using the journal insured that I read and thought about the assigned reading. I think the journal writing was also helpful because it allowed the instructor to have a regular indicator of my ability to understand the readings.

For me, the journal was invaluable. It enabled me to start thinking critically about the subject and most importantly, helped me to conquer some writing anxiety. Also, the journal enabled me to participate in different avenues of critical thinking.