

“WRITING TO LEARN” IN ENGLISH 101: NOTES ON THE READINGS JOURNAL

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For several years now, on the first day of English 101 (or 102) class, I read aloud the following little sermonettes, which are embedded in various locations throughout the syllabus. In general I despise reading to students what they already have in their hands because I always despised it when teachers read to me what I already had in my hands. But, having told them of my distaste and after assuring them that it would happen rarely, or never, again in this class, I proceed:



WHAT WE ARE ABOUT:

This is basically a writing course. To develop the many (and they are many) skills necessary to writing well, we will read, think, talk, and write. Most of our writing will take place in class, where I can be most immediately helpful to you. The discovery and practice of language will never again be as easy and fun as when we were all infants; but even now, as we are adults, it is always rich, often fun, and sometimes astonishingly easy. Let's do it.

Writing in this class will be essentially of three sorts: (1) “writing to learn,” which is mostly in your reading journals, three thirty-minute entries per week to be turned in at the beginning of class every Tuesday, regardless of its being called for — this is a standing assignment, like the appointed path of the stars; (2) “social writing,” usually in the form of in-class letters back and forth to each other about work we have done or are doing in class; and (3) “public writing,” the sort that you write, revise, and prepare (edit) for a reasonably thoughtful and critical audience like your own most sophisticated peers — or me, the teacher.

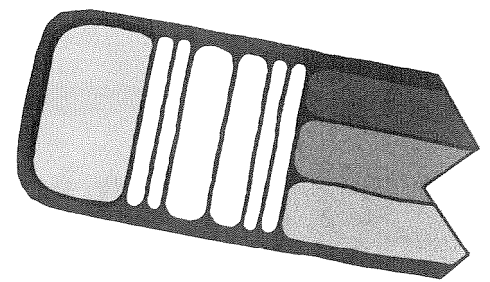
Except for the “writing to learn” entries in your journals, most of your writing will be done in class, at least the first versions. Grades on journals and social writing will simply be “A” or “F” (meaning that you did them conscientiously or you didn't) with the average of journals and the average of “social writing” each equal to one essay grade. You'll have a documented essay, following the MLA 1984 style, which will count as two essay grades, and the final examination will count as two essays. Most of my students end up with ten to twelve essay (or equivalent) grades.

As perfectly clear as I think these instructions are, I invariably have to explain more after students actually begin to face the open blank pages. So, after a few classes, I give them these notes about the techniques and purposes of writing in these kinds of journals:

First of all, the readings journals are part of a program, not just a perfunctory assignment. They are intended to produce several carefully considered results, all of which should be of great benefit to a student who takes the work seriously.



1 Fluency: Most students suffer from a lack of ease in writing, a kind of paralysis. They struggle to think of something to say that won't embarrass or fail them in the class. Often they struggle to think of anything at all under the pressure of classwork. The readings journals are meant to encourage ease of production and relatively spontaneous language, an effort to overcome some of the natural and factitious inhibitions about writing. To help clear the air of some heavy restraints, the journals are graded solely on effort, time profitably spent with conscientious intent, with none of the usual penalties for spelling, mechanics, grammar, etc.



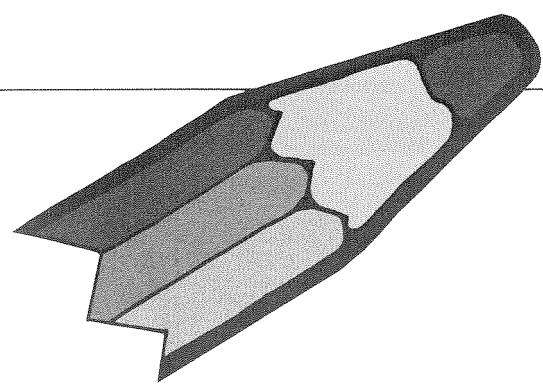
2 Thinking through Writing: Often, students are not familiar with the processes of questioning, hypothesizing, analyzing, and synthesizing that go on when one reads rich, complex materials with sophistication and college-level understanding. The readings journals are intended to encourage students, again without penalty, to deepen their thinking about certain readings that may have eluded them at first. The journals are not — I repeat: are not — simply for summarizing or reporting things students already know. Part of what happens in these journals when they are properly used is that students begin to make connections among various works read in class; ideas and details breed other ideas and expose new pertinent details. Depth. Connection. Analysis. Synthesis.



3 Gathering and Storing Material for Other Writings: With as much profound searching as should go on in the journals, each student develops a considerable stock of information in her or his mental warehouse. Ideas, details, specific references, even useful page numbers from their texts, all are made more accessible for further and more sophisticated writing as the course proceeds.

Students are, of course, free to follow their own thoughts (we cannot, in fact, stop that, nor should we). But they should also be shaping those thoughts. There's not much need in going to college just to confirm what one already knows. College is stretching time, intellectual muscle-building time. When we examine our ideas closely in the context of others' ideas, we make new ones of our own. That should be very exciting business.

My experience with “Writing to Learn” is that the process is extremely uncomfortable for many students.



Sometimes they think that journals are for personal "opinions." Sometimes they think the journal entries should be formal, technically flawless essays; sometimes, personal diaries with embarrassingly personal revelations. Sometimes students think that they have to make one separate entry for each work we read in the syllabus, when in fact, I say that they *could* write every single entry out of one reading, as long as the diligent searching for new details and thoughts persists.

Most often, and disturbingly, students lack confidence in thinking on their own. Reluctant to trust their own minds, they only timidly explore their own experiences in connection with the new knowledge they gain in their courses. Now, I am no fan of students who merely gush over their uninformed opinions and superficial observations, but I remind them over and over that, when they write for me, I want to see "the action of their minds upon the material of the course, their responsible use of others' ideas and information."

I don't want to claim too much for the journal approach, but many of the goals I set forth really are accomplished with most students. Many of them write more and more as the term proceeds. Many are surprised to see that they can think clearly about their own ways of thinking, learning to ask questions, to synthesize, to generate new experiences of the mind with no more time than they formerly spent to sharpen their pencils. Learning smarter rather than harder, one might say.

Finally, it is important to remember that no one kind of writing is sufficient to lead us to write fully and well. "Writing to Learn," "Social Writing," and "Public Writing" all are important to the enrichment and training of the actively literate mind. When students come to understand that not everything is about such topics as "My Summer Vacation" nor "Thomas Hardy's Naturalistic Inevitability," then they may begin to learn how to teach themselves to write. ●

(Tandem ... continued from page 7)

learns in English will aid the history or biology instructor.

The value to the literature or composition course is more subjective. The major benefit seems to be that the history or biology courses provide more substantive material to use as examples and as subject matter for essays and other written assignments. For example, the history or biology text can be used to provide material for learning how to prepare outlines, summaries, etc.

How it works

Composition courses usually require a number of papers during the quarter. The papers are designed to teach writing skills, the use of sources, how to find the Library and so on. Material such as novels, poems, or essays which relate to the history or biology course are used as sources for the English essays. In history, novels like Voltaire's *Candide* and Erich Marie Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* increase the student's historical knowledge and provide interesting essay topics as well. A good example of a book strengthening the English/biology relationship is Vincent G. Dethier's, *The Ecology of a Summer House*.

English 201 and History 111 create a different series of problems because the association must be very close. The literature selected for English must relate to the subject matter of the history from beginning to end. This requires close cooperation between the faculty members in preparing the syllabi, selecting reading material, and in teaching each class. The potential for this combination is great but needs more work and probably requires true team teaching, which creates new problems.

The final exams in the various classes can be used to tie the courses together. The last test used in history or biology can be revised by the student and used as the English final, although this creates two potential problems. The English final must be scheduled last and the history or biology must be graded quickly. Another method that works

well is to use an essay in English that relates to the history or biology course such as:

To what extent is *Candide* a typical product of the Enlightenment?

or:

In the second essay you should compare and contrast the scientific and literary methods of interpreting the same phenomena. Consider science's and literature's goals and attitudes toward the natural world as well as their means of interpreting the natural world and presenting that interpretation.

Conclusions

Anyone planning to establish a tandem relationship needs to keep a number of points in mind. (1) There must be close cooperation between the departments involved and with the Registrar's Office. (2) The faculty must preplan and work closely together. (3) The students must understand from the beginning that the courses are combined; they cannot be treated separately. (4) A tandem course does increase the faculty workload, but interested faculty need to remember that almost any course in the college curriculum can be taught in tandem with English, and the rewards make it well worth the extra time.

Reliable statistics have not been developed on grade relationships and whether the students do better or worse in the tandem or in the regular course structure — that is a later project. The primary value seems to be simple. How many times has something like this run through a student's mind? "I thought this was a history/biology [or whatever] class not an English course." The tandem course idea demonstrates that courses and disciplines are interrelated; a student cannot forget everything learned in one class (the infamous "dump valve"?) when he or she goes to another. If the student develops an appreciation of this interrelationship, the entire program is worth the effort. ●

