

# Formal and Informal Composition

The Writing Center at North Park University (Internal Version)

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What kinds of writing assignments, other than formal essays, can serve your pedagogical purposes?

## **Informal writing:**

- Thought-gathering in class before discussion—when students claim to have read their assignment or have heard a common lecture but have nothing or little to say in discussion, it can help to ask them to write on your question, or on a question of their own, for a few minutes. Writing can help to concentrate attention and to develop ideas beyond a simple statement.
- Summaries of discussions or lectures—these can be helpful when assigned ahead of the event in assuring that students pay close attention. They can also provide indirect feedback about what students understood or didn't understand, and they can provide an occasion for students to analyze someone else's logical progressions.
- One-minute surveys—a convenient and quick way to check in on what students have gleaned from a class session. At the end of a class (or each class, if you like), ask students to write brief answers and explanations to 2 questions: What was the most important information or idea you gleaned from today's class? and What is the most important question you're taking away with you from today's class? It doesn't take long to read through a set of these, and it can be extraordinarily helpful in giving immediate feedback on what worked and what still needs to be supplemented. When the next class begins with a response to the last set of questions, continuity is established between sessions, and students like

having their questions taken seriously; this can be a way for students—even shy students—to bring their interests and observations into class discussion. When there are particularly shrewd questions or observations, I sometimes circulate them to the class via e-mail, which has helped them to loosen up in discussion in class.

- Homework paragraphs—a kind of inversion of the one-minute surveys, and a substitute for regular quizzes. Students assigned to read material destined for class discussion may be asked to write a solid paragraph or two summarizing their observations on and questions about the material. This has the advantages that they need to read it and think about it ahead of the class in which they're to discuss it, and it gives them the time to compose questions they could ask. I've sometimes used homework paragraphs as the basis of attendance-taking—on the principle that merely sitting in class physically doesn't mean that they're prepared to take part in it.
- In-class pop quizzes—the standard quickie for making sure that students have done their work. They may help with punctuality if the quiz happens in the first few minutes of the class period and can't be made up.
- Journals—informal writing about readings, lectures, or other forms of coursework. Some teachers, for some classes, issue guide questions or topics that they want students to write about; others leave the choice of topic to the students. Students usually need some explanation of what a reading journal or academic journal is—it isn't just a diary in which to record the day's events or to air their likes and dislikes about the readings. Journals are most fruitful when they

encourage students to *develop* ideas rather than just listing them; students might be asked to pick an idea from their recent journals to bring to a class discussion, or they might be encouraged to use their journaling topics for further development in a more formal assignment. Journals don't need to be closely corrected, though some form of keeping students accountable to keep their journaling regular is advisable. Nobody is served if they write all of their entries at the same time, just before the journals are due to be collected. Students do appreciate it if an occasional comment from the teacher on the content of their journals is interspaced among their entries; it demonstrates that the teacher has read them and is respecting and interacting with their ideas.

- Letters—a variation on journals, but for a real audience. Students often find writing letters to other students in the class a little artificial at first, since they could just as easily *talk* to them (which, of course, they probably don't do, either). But writing letters about readings, lectures, and other class events has all the advantages of journaling with the added advantage that there's a real, direct, peer audience the writer needs to think about. Writing then becomes not just a private exercise but a genuine means of communication (which is generally one of our justifications for asking students to learn to write well), and the ideas communicated may begin a thought process and discussion which might otherwise have died in the brain of its author. The letters thus serve as a foundation for conversation and discussion; if students don't want to present their own ideas, the recipient of a letter may find an idea really good and present it to the rest. As a side benefit, if students write to each other regularly, the letters can

serve as a record of their intellectual, social, and personal growth—a strategy especially interesting among new, first-semester students. If students need to provide a letter to a peer each week, they cannot write all their letters the night before the letters are collected by the teacher. I ask students to keep a copy of all of their letters, then I collect the copies 2 or 3 times a semester—and when they turn in an installment of letters, they first need to look over their collection, then write a letter to me about what the letters tell them about X—about their growth as students, about their writing, about their study habits, about their priorities, intellectual curiosity, etc., etc. As for journals, a teacher need not correct the fine details of letters (though, interestingly enough, letters tend to be less carelessly written than journals, since they have a real audience), but an occasional comment which demonstrates respect, encouragement, and attention can be a relaxed form of teaching.

**Formal writing:** Lab reports; book reports; book, music, or art reviews; summaries of lectures, readings, films, excursions; surveys or summaries of literature; personal essays; reflection papers; research reports; abstracts.