

## Informal Writing: Uses and Kinds

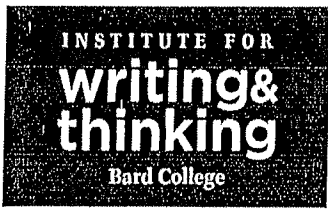
### USES

Informal Writing is done both in preparation for, and quite independently of, formal writing assignments in a course. It is freewriting, unconstrained by any need to appear correctly in public. It is not yet arranging, asserting, arguing. It is still reflecting and questioning. This is probative, speculative, generative thinking that is written in class or at home to develop the language of learning. It may not always be read by a teacher. Generally, it is not graded. Parts of it are often heard in class, but as a means of collaborative learning, not of individual testing. Its basic purpose is to help students to become independent, active learners by creating for themselves the language essential to their personal understanding. Specifically, informal written language serves:

1. **To develop abilities:** the abilities to define, classify, summarize; to question; to deconstruct complex patterns; to generate evaluation criteria; to establish inferences; to imagine hypotheses; to analyze problems; to identify procedures.
2. **To develop methods:** for example, methods of close, inquisitive, reactive reading; of recording and reporting data (observing); of organizing and structuring data into generalizations; of formulating theories; and, most importantly, of recognizing and applying the “methods” themselves.
3. **To develop knowledge:** knowledge about central concepts in a course, but also, for example, knowledge about one’s own problem-solving, thinking, learning, language; about knowledge itself (“metacognition”); about the broad aims and exact methods of a discipline.
4. **To develop attitudes:** for example, attitudes toward learning, knowing oneself and one’s work; toward mistakes and errors; toward the knowledge and opinions of others; the attitudes that affect behaviors and, therefore, aptitudes.
5. **To develop communal learning:** encouraging, for example, open exploration and discovery in a community of inquiry, rather than isolated competition; to promote “connected,” not separated, teaching and learning; to develop active listening; to teach through tasks, rather than just through data; and, finally, to locate the motivation for learning not in the “relevance” of the subject or in the performance of the teacher but in the social dynamic of the learning community.
6. **To develop, in summary, general capacities for learning:** the ability to question; to create problems (as well as solutions); to wonder; to think for oneself while working with others.

## KINDS

1. **Freewriting.** To become centered, present for the learning that is about to begin, grounding out the static we bring to class—time to breathe, hear oneself think. What's on your mind that needs acknowledgement, to be set aside for the moment?
2. **Focused freewriting.** All reflective, probative, speculative writing, freewritten yet focused, that explores a term, problem, issue, question openendedly. First thoughts on a subject, casting a wide net of inquiry. May be used to initiate or conclude a class discussion or, mid-class, to focus a discussion that is confused or lacks energy: What are we learning?
3. **Attitudinal writing.** Focused freewriting expressing the attitudes that influence aptitudes for learning. How do you feel about...? What do you bring to this reading, issue, or subject? What difficulties did you have with the last assignment? Where are you stuck? What is most difficult for you at this point? What questions do you have? What have you valued most in the course? What more or different do you need to know or do?
4. **Metacognitive process writing.** Examining how and why you acted (or will act) in a situation—done before or after reading an assignment, taking an exam, working on a problem, writing a paper, thinking about an issue. Anticipating and observing one's own learning behaviors, in order to become more autonomous, less passively reliant on the information and authority of teachers and texts.
5. **Narrative writing.** Stories, related to what one is thinking about—one's own thinking. Collecting all that one thinks—thoughts, feelings, memories, associations, biases. Personal, subjective, particular writing and holistic thinking, done prior to organizing linear discourse.
6. **Explaining errors.** On a test or homework—a form of “process writing” (#4) that helps students and teachers recognize where learning went wrong, and how and why.
7. **Listing questions.** Another form of “process writing” that helps students and teachers recognize where learning went wrong, and how and why.
8. **Creating problems.** Rather than solutions, defining problems and issues of one's own in the class.
9. **Quotation, paraphrase, summary.** What was noticeable in a reading or class?
10. **Defining.** One's own definitions, however imprecise initially, used to develop conceptual understanding in a way that memorization of textbook terms does not attempt.
11. **Writing to read.** Double-entry or “dialectical” notebook: recording and reporting what a reading says and, in a facing column or page, responding to the text. Convergent and divergent thinking. Noticing what both the reader and the author of the text think. Dialectical notebooks integrate attitudinal writing, questioning, summarizing, and process writing.
12. **Learning logs, microthemes, collaborative problem solving**—this list only begins to suggest possibilities.



## Principles of Writing & Sequencing Prompts

1. “All there is to thinking is seeing something noticeable, which makes you see something you weren’t noticing, which makes you see something that isn’t even visible.”

—Norman Maclean, *A River Runs Through It*

Ask first about what is **noticeable**; then, about what is **peripherally visible**; finally, about what is **invisible** (i.e., interpretive and evaluative questions about meaning and worth).

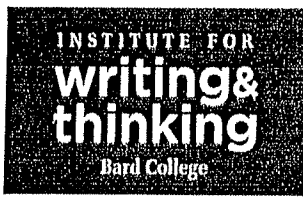
2. Three is a good number of questions; four are too many and two are too skimpy.
3. Make a personal connection with the first question, inviting some writing not necessarily about the self but out of the self, i.e., some writing that is invested, engaged, subjective.
4. Emily Dickinson begins a poem:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant –  
Success in Circuit lies

Particularly the first time, ask an **odd-angled** question that relaxes the imagination.

5. Never ask a question to which you know the answer. Knowing **an** answer is okay, but questions should be genuinely inquiring, capable of fresh, multiple answers, and not testing what is on the teacher’s mind.
6. Invite translation—questions that require explaining something, for example, by analogy or by shift of audience.
7. Ask experimental, not empirical questions—questions that probe and test their environment, rather than only gathering data. John Dewey, in *The Quest for Certainty*, observes that science is often mistakenly associated with empiricism, rather than with experimentation. Experimentation turns the key of a question in the lock of the world; what opens is knowledge.
8. Are there “generic” prompts that might be adapted to many purposes? Yes, for example: “What do you need to believe for it to seem true that...?”—a question that asks about the warrants supporting a claim (to borrow Stephen Toulmin’s language from *The Uses of Argument*).

—Prepared by Paul Connolly and associates from the Institute for Writing & Thinking, Bard College



## Collaborative Learning

### COLLABORATIVE WORK

1. (a) Form groups of 4-5, (b) choosing a “Recorder” to report back for each group to the whole class and (c) reading the text under study aloud, without discussion, to become familiar with it. (5 min.)
2. Pause for everyone to write about three questions or “prompts.” (10 min.)
3. (a) Hear each person’s response read aloud, around the group, without discussion. (10 min.)  
(b) In conversation, seek “consensus” and “dissensus”—defined as the most everyone in the group can agree to believe and what its members agree must remain in doubt. This conversation may follow hearing responses to *each* question or after responses to *all* the questions, as each group prefers. End by reviewing the Recorder’s sense of consensus/dissensus, to test that it reflects the sense of the group. (20 min.)
4. Groups report to the whole class and, through continuing conversation, seek a sharper sense of consent/dissent both within the class and between the class and the larger “discourse community.” (15 min.) TOTAL TIME: 60+ min.

### COLLABORATIVE QUESTIONS

Reflective practitioners make knowledge through “reflective conversation with the materials of a situation,” suggests Donald Schon in *The Reflective Practitioner* (Basic Books, 1983). Good questions begin such conversation. When creating questions for the group to use as the basis for focused freewriting, keep the following in mind:

1. Ask no more than three sequenced questions, brief, not over-determined (leading to a single answer), carefully phrased.
2. Questions may be odd-angled, even ambiguous, giving students permission to interpret and clarify the questions, as well as to respond to them.
3. Questions may be complex, seeking reflective understanding, not simple information, and at least one of them, the first, may make a personal connection with the text.

### COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

When first introducing collaborative learning, ask students to write and talk metacognitively about the process:

1. What happened as you discussed the text? What did you learn? From whom?
2. Describe your role in the group. How did you feel about it? Describe another’s role and how you felt about that.
3. What was the effect of seeking consensus and dissensus?
4. Describe my teacher’s role.

Task is everything in collaborative teaching: forming groups; choosing textual passages that are challenging yet manageable; posing questions and writing prompts; timing activities.

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