



Use Informal Writing to Help Students Learn & Retain Course Material, Connect Ideas, and Create New Ideas

Informal Writing can help students learn course material, but it does not need to be graded or collected!

Use Informal Writing to Help Students Learn & Retain Course Material

Students must be “engaged” before they learn new material. Informal writing for 2-3 minutes at the beginning of class can help students shift attention to course material. “Our students arrive at our classrooms with many things on their mind—the car that didn’t start, the child who seems to be coming down with a cold, the roommate who was in a bad mood, or the student who didn’t have time for breakfast and is starving” (Rice, 2018, p. 40).

“Thinking well requires knowing facts. . . . When we learn new facts, we are building up mental structures that enable us to process and organize the next set of new facts more effectively. Knowledge is foundational: we won’t have the structures in place to do deep thinking if we haven’t spent time mastering a body of knowledge related to that thinking” (Lang, 2016, p. 15).

However, “We also cannot assume that students are perfectly capable of memorizing such information on their own. In fact, research on student learning strategies suggests that students typically make poor choices when they attempt to learn new information” (Lang, 2016, p. 16). “Small teaching activities leveraged into the first and final minutes of a class session can provide a powerful boost to student mastery of knowledge. . . . Taking advantage of these easy opportunities to help students remember course material will ensure that students can engage more deeply and meaningfully” in the content of our courses (Lang, 2016, p. 18).

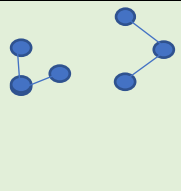
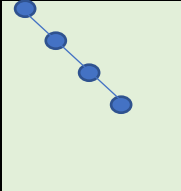
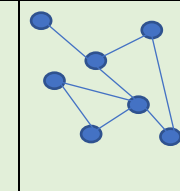
Informal Writing is one way to help students learn and retain.

Use Informal Writing to Help Students Connect Ideas

To begin class, instead of “reviewing what students learned in the previous class,” have students write for 3-5 minutes on what they learned previously + how it ties to the assigned readings for the day. This practice not only embeds the learning more deeply & enables students to more easily retrieve it, but it also accelerates class discussions. Students should NOT access the text or notes first. Lang (2016) recognizes that “these small writing exercises constitute the best method I have for supporting student learning in my courses” (p. 31).

Students may struggle to understand our course content and our disciplinary research because they do not yet understand what “knowledge” is in a discipline. They may think of knowledge as discrete bits of information. William Perry (1970) has shown that “most beginning college students view education dualistically, imagining knowledge as the acquisition of correct information and right answers. They see themselves as empty buckets being filled with data by their professors. To dualists, the only academic use of writing is to demonstrate one’s knowledge of the correct facts—a concept of writing as information rather than as argument or analysis” (as cited in Bean & Melzer, 2021, pp. 21-22).

Although students may seem to have a solid understanding of your course, they may have practiced these skills “targeting each skill area separately. Consequently, they may not have had sufficient practice using the complete set of skills in combination . . . it [may not be] the component skills they lack, but rather the ability to integrate them effectively” (Ambrose et al., 2010, p. 93). See the Knowledge Organization chart below (adapted from Ambrose et al., 2010, p. 50).

Examples of Knowledge Organizations		
		
Novice – few connections	Novice—linear connections	Expert-multi-connections

Cognitive overload may occur when we “provide nonstop information for long periods of time. Without opportunities to stop and check their understanding and apply what we are teaching them, students quickly lose interest” (p. 53). Have students pause to “link new information to earlier associations, uses, and procedures” (Rice, 2018, p. 64).

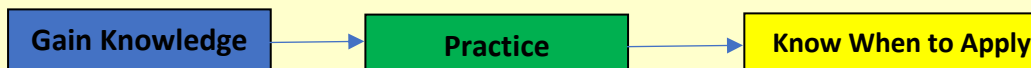
Informal Writing is one way to help students practice connecting course material.

Use Informal Writing to Help Students Gain Skills

Remember when you were first learning to drive? It was so hard to remember to look at the speedometer frequently, check the side mirrors & the rearview mirror, check position in the lane, etc. Students may struggle in our courses to “to integrate and use in combination skills they have learned separately.” In addition, “people’s performance tends to degrade when they are asked to do more than one task at a time” (Ambrose et al., 2010, p. 103).

Informal writing can empower students to practice one skill at a time until they achieve fluency, then they can be “required to integrate multiple skills” (Ambrose et al., 2010, p. 105).

“In order to develop mastery, students must acquire a set of component skills, practice combining and integrating these components to develop greater fluency and automaticity, and then understand the conditions and contexts in which they can apply what they have learned” (Ambrose et al., 2010, p. 120). (see chart below)



Help Students Create New Ideas Using Informal Writing

“Students come to college imagining knowledge as the acquisition of correct information rather than the ability, say, to argue a position or connect to a conversation. Eventually, students develop a complex view of knowledge, where individuals have to take stands in the light of their own values and the best available reasons and evidence and understand and empathize with multiple perspectives on complex issues. . . students will produce cognitively immature prose as long as their attitude toward knowledge remains in the early stages of intellectual growth” (Bean & Melzer, 2021, p. 27).

Writing is one way to help students practice creating new ideas.

References

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