

Writing to Learn

Remember the last time you went to the grocery store? Did you bring a list with you? We sure hope so, because whenever we go shopping listlessly, we always forget the bread and the milk while piling up the cart with unplanned purchases, costly treats, and caloric impulse buys. That's why we need a list: to help us remember things, to plan and organize our shopping behavior, and, perhaps, to stick to the budget and the diet, no matter how tempting the treats might be in aisle 6.

The humble grocery list is an example of *writing to learn* (WTL). You probably use more of this kind of writing in your everyday life than you realize. Maybe you leave notes around the house for yourself or other family members, make holiday card or gift lists, jot reminders on a calendar or in a Palm Pilot, and dash off emails that take care of assorted everyday chores. If you are trying to make any kind of decision—how to balance the household budget, what to name the new baby, how to remodel the attic—you are probably using some form of writing, scratching, or noodling with paper (or the computer). Recently, while hunting for a new house, coauthor Smokey Daniels and his wife, Elaine, found themselves using a pro-and-con list to decide whether to make an offer on a particular property:

CHAPTER two



27 Tall Tree Drive

Pluses
lots of square footage
great views
outdoor areas
vaulted ceiling
huge kitchen
satellite TV antenna installed

Minuses
far from town
high maintenance costs
kitchen appliances old
bathroom fixtures ugly
office space very small
dialup internet access

And no, the Danielses didn't buy the house on Tall Tree. Using this little bit of writing to learn, they were able to examine both sides of the available information more carefully. (And, after all, who wants to go back to dialup Internet access now?)

What we are doing in all these modest, everyday instances is using writing as a tool of thinking. We are using writing to find out what's inside our heads, to dump ideas down on a page so we can play with them, move them around, make connections, figure out what's important, cross some out, and highlight others. In other words, we are *thinking*. And this kind of thinking, using writing as a kind of torque wrench of the mind, is officially called *writing to learn*.

Hearing this, you might say, "Aw shucks, that scratching I do? That's not really writing." (Well, you probably wouldn't literally say "aw, shucks," but you get the idea.) Don't be so modest. Denying that your jotting is really writing is like saying that, for example, skimming a document isn't really reading. Hey, skimming is a vital thinking strategy that proficient, literate people know how to use when it's the right tool for the job. Just think how cumbersome life would be if we had only one approach, one rate, one all-purpose form of reading in our cognitive repertoires. Same for writing; there are different types for different tasks.

A story: Among the women in Harvey's family, there is an old joke that when you copy down a cooking recipe for a friend, you always leave out one crucial ingredient. That way, no matter how earnestly Marge tries to duplicate your lemon chiffon cheese cake, hers will never taste quite as good. We do the same thing in our classrooms every day—we leave out key ingredients when we give kids the recipes for reading, writing, and thinking. (Unlike the omissions of the diabolical Daniels women, ours are inadvertent.) Writing to learn is a great example of one of these missing ingredients.

If we competent adults use writing-to-learn activities in our lives, maybe it is not just an "aw, shucks" throwaway, but a window into how smart people think. Maybe using a wide variety of casual writing and graphic representations is actually one of the keys to our success. Maybe our little writing to learns (or WTLs), among other factors, have helped us cope with college, become an expert in a complex discipline of

Spontaneous: A WTL is done off the top of our heads, just to get things down. We don't go rent a garret apartment in Paris and wait for the muse to strike. We don't plan lists, notes, or jottings the way you might carefully map out a longer, more

Short: Unlike a term paper or major project, WTLs—whether lists, notes, or instant messages—tend to be brief in length on a page and in composing time. They are bits of writing that we do in quick bursts, not in extended composition. They don't take up much of a page or a screen. Often, we write them on index cards or small pads of paper, or in a little box on a web page.

To elaborate a little:

WRITING TO LEARN	PUBLIC WRITING
short	substantial
spontaneous	planned
exploratory	authoritative
informal	conventional
personal	audience centered
one draft	drafted
unedited	edited
ungraded	assessable

In the next two chapters, we will show you fifteen ways to use writing to learn in your classes. As you choose to implement these, you will be showing your students some of the tricks of the thinking trade, giving them new tools for delving into your subject matter.

We want to be crystal clear: WTLs are different from the more formal or *public writing* tasks teachers commonly assign students—like term papers, research reports, and critical essays. It's important to understand the differences and to handle each type appropriately. In graphic form, the contrast looks like this:

Writing to Learn in School

knowledge, get ourselves a job and a life, and call ourselves a grown-up and a teacher. And maybe all the personal, informal writing that we have done for our own purposes over the years has also paved the way for us to create larger, more public documents when the time came for that. In fact, if we look back at our own writing lives with more than the usual scrutiny, we can probably notice that when we wrote successful big pieces in life or in school, they often began with or grew out of some humbler jottings, lists, or scratched outlines.

formal and public piece of writing. They come to us quickly, and often *while* we write, more ideas arrive and go down on the page.

Exploratory: In writing to learn, we use writing as a tool to help us figure stuff out, not as a way of announcing with certainty what we already know. WTL is writing in process, along the way—it's writing that doesn't necessarily know where it is going when it begins. When we start a grocery list, we don't know everything we need to buy. That's why we list! We use writing as a tool to help us develop a set of possibilities or goals for future action.

Informal: WTL is casual language, dressed down, relaxed and ready to spend a quiet evening at home. On a grocery list, we don't need to write *Heilmann's Mayonnaise*; *mayo* may be all we need. And when dashing off an instant message, we can use all the emoticons and shorthand we want. BTW, don't 4GET that so-called Internet jargon like ASAP, R&R, and FYI had already entered the standard language B4 the first silicon chip was ever cooked. KWIIM?

Personal: Mostly, WTL pieces are *for us*, the writers, not someone else. When we are done with that grocery list, we don't mail it off to the editors of *The New Yorker* magazine, hoping they'll publish it and launch our literary careers. WTLs are not mainly concerned with reaching, pleasing, or informing an audience—they are created to help us think, to get some work done, to plan, to collect our thoughts. Occasionally, WTLs may be shared with other people, as with instant messages and notes around the household, but the audience is usually very small, safe, and uncritical.

One Draft: Almost a defining characteristic of WTLs is that, in keeping with their nature as brief, spontaneous, utilitarian jottings, they are not revised. You wouldn't go back and create a second draft of your grocery list. Hey, if it helped you to shop effectively, it has done its work. Nor would you do a second edition of an IM to a friend or a note left for your spouse on the kitchen table. Not to say we all haven't written a few quick notes we regret, but still.

Unedited: Correcting errors and editing grammar have little role to play in WTLs. What's the difference if you misspell catsup (or is it ketchup?) on your grocery list? If you get the red stuff, you're good to go. No one is going to see it anyway, unless you (like everyone else) leave the list in the bottom of the shopping cart. Even so, whoever finds it probably won't be an English teacher with a red pen in hand.

Ungraded: Speaking of red pens, they have no place in writing-to-learn activities. That's a big difference between WTL and public writing. In formal writing, kids' products may be reviewed, ranked, scored, rated, or otherwise evaluated. But just

Shouldn't Kids' Writing Always Be Graded and Corrected?

The idea of unedited and ungraded writing can make teachers nervous. We've been acculturated to mark up with red ink whatever kids write, without thinking much about it. In fact, to be honest, this labor-intensive kind of grading is one of the main reasons we don't assign more writing in our classes—it takes so darned long to circle all the errors! And that's when we start cursing the English teachers under our breath: *Why haven't they cured this?*

For now we'll just tell you flatly: the intensive correction of student papers does not work; it has never worked and it never will work. Kids' writing does not improve when teachers cover their papers with corrections, no matter how scrupulous and generous that kind of feedback may seem. There's voluminous research showing this, going back decades (Zemelman and Daniels 1988, 20–30). And still we teachers do it. And our departments require it. And the parents expect it. We are all trapped in this dysfunctional, unscientific, and staggeringly time-consuming tradition. The problem is, it doesn't grow better writers.

So, with writing to learn, we break with this tradition. But still you might wonder, if we allow unedited and ungraded writing, won't students' errors and bad habits take root? How are they going to write a decent term paper if we don't correct their mistakes and demand accuracy every time they write? To put it another way, do we impede kids' growth as formal, public writers by encouraging less-crafted writing some of the time?

Well, do you lose your ability to give a formal speech by shooting the bull with the gang at the bowling alley? Do you lose your ability to run if you walk a little bit? The point is that there is a sliding scale of language use that *all* speakers, kids and adults alike, use.

Formal ←————→ Informal

Speaking or writing informally on one occasion doesn't undermine your capacity to use language formally later. But we all need balanced opportunities to operate across the whole spectrum of language uses, contexts, and levels. If we have students do only short, unedited noodling, we are doing them a big disservice. At the same time, if we have them write *only* big, abstract, third-person research papers, we are depriving them of a vital dimension of writing—indeed one that is often a building block of bigger public texts.

A great feature of WTLs is the way they can grow from something small, private, and embryonic into something bigger, more developed, and public. WTLs are often the seeds, nuggets, or kernels of longer, more polished pieces of writing. When we noodle ideas on a pad, or jot down a diary entry, or chart some pros and cons, we may be building the outline of something more. As you work through this book, you'll see how often smart teachers use quick WTLs as prewriting activities to help launch students on inquiries that end up with big formal, public texts.

Even if you still feel uncomfortable about leaving students' informal writing unmarked up, think of the *time* it would take you to grade it all. It's unthinkable!

We want you use lots of short, spontaneous writing activities in your class—maybe even every day. If you start dragging all those things home to grade, your personal life will be over. What's that you say? You work in a school where the department (or the kids themselves) demands that points be assigned for every piece of work? Fine! Just use all-or-nothing grading. Ten points for doing the WTL activity; zero for not doing it. This is over-the-shoulder grading—you should be able to walk by and assess by glancing at a kid's paper. All you have to keep track of is the four kids who didn't do the work. Everyone else automatically gets ten points in the grade book each time you do a WTL exercise. If you think kids will fake WTLs, announce that you will randomly collect one kid's piece from each lesson. Good deterrent.

like its out-of-school counterparts, writing to learn doesn't get graded. That's not to say that WTLs don't get lots of feedback. We will use them to start discussions, feed small-group work, or review key ideas, right during class.

So those are the traits of this special species of text called writing to learn: free, loosely structured writing with few rules and no penalties.

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Why WTL Is So Powerful

OK, how can this quick and casual writing help your kids learn physics? Or photo-synthesis, World War I, abstract expressionism, the past-perfect tense, or *To Kill a Mockingbird*?

Well, what does teaching consist of? What, exactly, are we doing—and what are the students doing—with the subject matter? How do we arrange the variables of learning: content, time, space, materials, and people? For starters, we usually assign some reading and ask students to write answers to questions about it. And we offer presentations, either a lecture or a lecture-discussion, during which students are required to take notes. These major modes of instruction, both using writing, are time-honored and ubiquitous, but do they really work? Do students engage with the material? Do they understand and remember the content? Are they acquiring knowledge?

We know from learning research that in order for learners to understand and remember ideas, they must *act upon them*. Just hearing or reading words is not enough. We are all intimately familiar with students who truthfully tell us, "I don't remember anything," after reading a chapter or sitting through a presentation (even a great one!).

good handwriting who doesn't mind going to class, and everyone else can sleep in. Sis boom bah!) But seriously, giving kids some practice with college-style note taking is definitely a great idea, and we should do that *some* of the time, especially later on in

To get true learning power, kids must put ideas into their own words.

all that's needed. You just need one student with of bucks. For higher education to proceed, that's notes co-op that sells the daily goods for a couple for campus in America there is a thriving class-school." (Of course, we all know that on every ma-someday, so we might as well start having them take lecture notes here in middle You might protest: "Well, my students will have to take lecture notes in college

antee solid learning. couldn't pass the simplest quiz. This should warn us: note taking is not enough to guar-are reminded of countless students whose notes included all the key words but who them in *their own words*. When we flip through our mental file of students' faces, we To get learning power, kids need to grapple with ideas, transform them, and put

probably remember about as much (OK, a monkey that knew English). that cute junior three rows back. A well-trained monkey could do this job, and would little practice, you can do this completely unconsciously, while simultaneously texting class notes act like automatons, uncritically copying down words as they fly by. With a less the teacher has specifically trained students differently, most young people taking traditional and familiar, note taking rarely requires listeners to *act on the material*. Un-So isn't taking class notes a good example of writing to learn? Usually not. However

stand, remember, and use it (Hyde 2006). Hence, writing to learn. schema theorists—all concurs: learners must *act* on information in order to *under-Well, it turns out that the old saw remains true to this day. Research from every*

10 percent of what they read
20 percent of what they hear
30 percent of what they see
50 percent of what they hear and see
70 percent of what they say and write
90 percent of what they say as they do a thing

around for sixty years. Briefly, it states that people generally remember his concept was probably more intuitive than scientific, Dale's formulation has stuck You've probably run across Edgar Dale's classic cone-of-experience model. Though out of the loop, on Neptune, and so on. and we have a whole lexicon of teacher jargon to describe this: tuned out, fast asleep,

school. But right now, most of the time, we have far more powerful kinds of subject-

matter writing that can help kids learn.

Well, how about having kids write answers to the questions at the end of a text-

book chapter? Isn't that good writing-to-learn practice? Let's take an example and talk about the limitations. But before we do, let us stop and stipulate: some textbooks are better than others, way better, and a few textbooks have richer, better questions than this one. But nevertheless, this sample end-of-the-chapter question is the essence, the very meat and potatoes of the genre.

15. Congress passed the tax relief Act of 1986 in order to reduce or end a confusing variety of tax _____, tax _____, and tax _____, as well as the number of tax _____.

Whew, got that? So, what's wrong with this item and the writing task it poses? First of all, this question requires, at best, factual recall, one of the lowest levels of thinking on anybody's taxonomy of cognition. But even worse is the nature of the task itself. The giveaway is right in the instructions: "Use the information in your textbook to complete these sentences." A kid with any sense is going to glide over the text and pluck the answers from the chapter, where they'll probably appear right in order, handily presented in bold type, ready for quick and thoughtless transposition to the answer sheet. It is entirely possible for a student to glance through a textbook and copy down these answers without ever reading the chapter, doing any thinking, or, ultimately, having a glimmer of recollection—of anything. This is not nearly enough cognitive work for students to do! This isn't *acting on ideas*, grappling with them, putting them into one's own words. This isn't *thinking*.

A perplexing sidelight to question 15 is that someone very knowledgeable about tax law in the United States, even one of the economists who helped concoct President Reagan's famed supply-side tax cuts, would have no way of answering this question. None. Only a kid in school who had the textbook right in front of him could possibly determine what goes into each of these blanks. That's because blanks do not represent knowledge about taxation, but merely a frame into which adolescent readers are supposed to copy certain words from somewhere else.

Yes, we know wonderful teachers who instruct their students in the art of note taking, and we know others who replace textbook quizzes with their own open-ended, inferential study questions. We applaud those hardworking colleagues. But in their standard forms, both lecture notes and end-of-the-chapter questions are essentially forms of *transcription*, of writing down other people's words. They don't ask enough of learners. Copying is not strong enough writing for kids to learn from. There are so many better tools.

Putting the Writing to Work

As you'll see in the next couple of chapters, writing-to-learn activities are not products or artifacts like the term papers or lab reports we discuss later on. Instead of collecting and grading these quick writes, we *put them to work in the classroom*—we use them to advance the learning.

WTLs give us starting points for new units: we have kids write to surface their prior knowledge, including their misconceptions, to activate their thinking, to set class and individual goals for an upcoming unit. Along the way, we use WTLs to help students stop and collect their thoughts, sort out ideas, notice and hold their thinking, review and readjust goals, and get ready to move ahead. Later in a unit, we use different kinds of short writings to help kids synthesize what they have learned, connect with others, compare notes, or plan projects or outlets for their learning.

Some writing-to-learn strategies can significantly improve or even replace whole-class discussions. Now, all of us would probably agree that large-group discussions too often involve teachers pulling teeth in the form of eliciting relevant comments from reluctant kids. Some have dubbed this very common teaching structure as the *gentle inquisition*, which leaves both kids and teachers frustrated. And why not? With one person talking and twenty-seven others waiting for a turn they either don't want or never get, this certainly isn't engaged learning at its finest.

And yet, discussion is very important. Kids need to talk to learn too, no doubt about it. Remember Dale's classic model: learners remember much more of what they say and do than what they hear other people yapping about. But if students can talk *only* one at a time and only when called on by the teacher, they'll never get enough talk time to learn anything. When we stick to the whole-class, out-loud discussion format, we marry ourselves to a bottleneck. We limit each kid's airtime to, if we are fair, one-thirtieth of a class period. Not enough! That's why, in the best practice classroom, we do lots of this valuable topic-talk in *kid-to-kid writing*, either used on its own or as a prelude to stronger but shorter whole-class discussions.

What's Coming Up

Between them, the next two chapters describe fifteen different writing-to-learn strategies and how to use them in any class. The first batch are true quick writes, activities that require no teacher planning and take as little as two minutes of class time but can give kids whole new opportunities to think about a subject. Our sentimental favorite is the elementally simple *writing break*. All this strategy entails is the teacher stopping, in the middle of any class, and giving the students two minutes to jot down whatever is in their heads at that moment: words, phrases, questions, confusions, connections,

distractions, whatever. And then you carry on with the lesson. That's it. Now there are a million other things you could do with those quick writings: have kids discuss them in pairs, have them hand their papers back three rows and write comments to each other, have volunteers read a few aloud.

But stopping to write is enough. You give students something we almost never offer them as we relentlessly cover the material—a chance to take a breath, pull their thoughts together, reflect on their thinking, and appraise their own level of understanding. This, all by itself, is a powerful gift and a masterly teaching strategy.

The second set of WTL activities, in Chapter 4, includes the slightly more complex strategies that need a little more class time and teacher setup—and which have an even richer range of possible uses and applications in the classroom. Needless to say, there's plenty of overlap between the two chapters; you can do a much longer and more involved writing break, and you can shorten up some of the usually longer activities.

So adapt, adjust, and enjoy.

Works Cited

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