

# Enhancing Students' Learning of Psychology through Writing

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Grading papers often does not make the list of college faculty members' favorite things to do. Although many instructors would like to provide opportunities for students to complete writing assignments, the reality is that they are inundated with the myriad responsibilities that accompany a faculty position. In this chapter, I discuss the benefits of including multiple writing assignments in psychology courses that are traditionally evaluated via objective tests. Furthermore, I explain how to use writing assignments to enhance student learning and increase critical thinking. I conclude with techniques for making writing assignments manageable for instructors.

Before considering adding writing assignments, we must reconsider how we conceptualize writing. For this chapter, I use the term "writing assignments" rather than *paper* or *term paper*. A writing assignment is merely an assignment that requires that students use writing to demonstrate comprehension of a topic or to elucidate or apply a topic. It does not have to be a *paper*. Brief writing assignments or short essays can achieve benefits for both instructors and students.

### Benefits of Writing Assignments

There are a number of benefits associated with writing assignments. Writing assignments require students to comprehend course material, apply it, and utilize critical thinking skills to synthesize and evaluate concepts (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). They can improve performance on exams (Davis & Hult, 1977) by requiring students to actively engage with course material rather than passively listening to lectures or reading textbooks. Thus, writing assignments provide an active learning mechanism. Ideally, writing assignments can help students gain an appreciation of course material (Cabe, Walker, & Williams, 1999) by providing a "hands-on" approach to the course concepts. Requiring students to address course material via writing can have the benefit of providing students with feedback on their understanding (or misunderstanding) of course material (Pascarelli & Terenzini, 2005).

Although most of the benefits appear to favor the students, instructors also reap rewards from assigning writing. Instructors can use writing assignments to enhance their lectures. These can be brief, in-class exercises in which students apply concepts in real-time and can promote class discussion. Additionally, writing tasks can provide instructors with a break from lecturing.

Prior to developing an assignment, instructors must first ask, "What is the purpose of this writing task?" This simple question helps guide a number of important decisions, including what type of task to assign, the length of the assignment, and its format.

There are a number of positive outcomes that students can achieve from completing writing assignments. Writing can lead to increased comprehension and application of course concepts. Using writing to explain a course topic can result in increased comfort with verbal expression of psychological concepts. Depending on the type of assignment, students can gain experience developing and supporting arguments. Other assignments can require that they evaluate a course concept and form an opinion about it. Many courses present information, however students are not encouraged to consider their opinion about the various topics; writing can help students become more active participants in their learning.

On a more practical level, in-class writing assignments can be used to assess attendance and can decrease absences and improve student participation. Writing about a topic can increase the likelihood that a student completes the course readings on schedule, can increase their confidence to contribute to class discussions, and can reduce “cramming” for exams. Writing can also improve exam performance, as it has the potential to teach students how to study in a manner that helps them absorb the material.

### Instructors' Concerns

While many instructors acknowledge the benefits of writing, they may be reluctant to assign these tasks. One obvious concern that many have about assigning writing is the increased workload that accompanies them. Giving students writing assignments requires careful consideration and planning, detailed grading, and providing feedback. In some psychology courses, instructors may be concerned that writing assignments may not fit well with the topic area. Courses such as introduction to psychology and abnormal psychology may fit in this category because they are often evaluated solely by multiple-choice exams. The timing of writing assignments is a concern, particularly for instructors teaching in a quarter system. The short time frame can preclude introducing, completing, and grading a writing assignment. On a more personal level, some instructors do not assign writing because they lack confidence in their own writing abilities. If they are uncomfortable with writing, then it is likely that they would be uncomfortable developing and grading writing assignments. However, the most likely fear that instructors have is *reading* their students' writing.

### Writing Assignments Made Easy

Several writing tasks are options in lieu of a lengthy research or term paper. “Minute papers” are in-class assignments in which the instructor assigns a short essay question related to the lecture. These brief papers can be used as effective lecture launchers, priming students on a topic prior to lecture and are useful to check students' comprehension. A variation of this technique is paired writing assignments, in which the instructor asks students to team up and create a short, written answer to a question about the course material. This requires students to use the lexicon of the course to discuss and analyze the topic. Additionally, a scaffolding approach to learning occurs as students teach one another. These techniques require little grading, as instructors can review the papers to see where students are unclear and address these areas as a class rather than providing individual, written feedback.

Concept application papers are short essays, usually no more than three pages in length. Instructors can use these to ask for responses to questions that allow students to expound on information in lecture and/or the text. Another useful writing

assignment is to have students write a paper explaining a course concept to a layperson. This requires them to put course concepts in vernacular language. These types of assignments are also useful in reducing material covered during class time, as instructors can use these papers to address topics rather than lecturing.

### Ways to Ease Instructor Burden

There are several ways to ease the burden of grading writing assignments. In particular, careful planning can help. First, it is important to be selective about which classes include writing assignments. Upper division classes may have more advanced writers, so the quality of the work may be easier to grade than for lower division courses. If an instructor has four courses in one term, he/she may not wish to have writing assignments in all courses.

Second, instructors should stagger these assignments so there is not a barrage of papers to grade at one time. The best way to get quality writing assignments from students is to spend time developing a detailed writing prompt that leaves little to interpretation.

Third, instructors can provide students with a specific format to facilitate grading. For example, faculty can direct students to organize their papers into sections corresponding with the particular domains to be addressed. This allows instructors to easily read each paper and grade the content in an orderly manner without searching through the document to ensure that each was addressed.

Fourth, it is important to have specific learning objectives for each writing assignment that fit with the learning objectives for the course. Instructors can also engage students in a discussion about what they would like to get out of writing assignments and incorporate this feedback into the assignment.

Fifth, using a detailed rubric also eases grading and promotes uniform review. Providing rubrics to students in advance of the assignment also helps them prepare better writing assignments. On certain types of assignments, students can benefit from receiving formal or informal feedback from their classmates prior to submitting the final draft for credit. This increases the likelihood that the final draft meets the instructor's standards.

Finally, an obvious suggestion is to have a teaching assistant (TA) to handle writing assignments. If funding for a TA is not available, an alternative is to use independent study courses to train students on teaching in the discipline. This can include teaching students how to effectively develop and grade writing assignments.

In sum, writing assignments can be an effective teaching and evaluation tool. There are a number of alternatives to traditional term papers that allow students to use writing to play an active role in elucidating course concepts. Furthermore, there are ways that an instructor can use writing to cover course material more deeply than through lecture. Although assigning writing requires more effort on the instructor's part, there are ways to reduce instructor burden to make assigning writing tasks worthwhile for both instructors and students.

### References

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