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# Writing at Transitions: Using In-Class Writing as a Learning Tool

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## *Tips for the Classroom* **Writing at Transitions: Using In-Class Writing as a Learning Tool**

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Drawing on the fundamentals of Writing to Learn pedagogy, this article describes how teachers across the disciplines can use in-class writing as a learning tool. Because in-class writing activities foreground the power of writing as a means for processing and integrating information, using writing prompts during times of transition common to every class—at the beginning or end of class, when moving from topic to topic or activity to activity, or at the conclusion of a particularly rich discussion—can serve to focus and extend student engagement. Offering practical advice and examples from his own teaching experiences, the author shows how structuring in-class writing at transitions not only encourages students to explore multiple perspectives on course content and take risks in articulating complex ideas, but also builds classroom community in the process, especially when supplemented by discussion and formal writing assignments. Helping students understand that writing is a support for their learning and not just a mechanism for assessment and evaluation gives them a tool they can use to build skills and knowledge in future courses.

The idea that in-class writing can be a learning tool has gained prominence through the growth of Writing to Learn (WTL), Writing across the Curriculum (WAC), and Writing in the Disciplines (WID) initiatives at colleges and universities of all types. For example, the current Bronx Community College WAC Handbook (2006, p. 5-10) highlights informal, in-class writing to create learning environments that promote exploration and engagement. A similar handbook at Princeton University offers advice on using in-class writing to deepen students' thinking (Walk, 2008, p. 3-4).

While in-class writing is an important component of many WAC and WID initiatives, strategies for using it to support student learning are often explained less thoroughly than other curricular components, such as designing effective essay assignments and giving feedback on formal writing. As a result, in-class writing is often seen simply as a way to fill class time. For example, guidelines published by the Thompson Writing Program at Duke University (n.d.) suggest WID courses should provide occasions for students to “write . . . frequently throughout the course . . . as opposed

to being assigned a single term paper that is invisible until it is turned in at the end of the semester” but provide specific guidance only for “crafting effective writing assignments” and “giving feedback on drafts.” While the guidelines imply that frequent and varied in-class writing might be pedagogically useful, they do not explain how teachers might use writing as part of regular classroom activities.

When the purposes or logistics of in-class writing are not described in detail, writing remains “invisible” as a teaching and learning tool and comes to be associated solely with

assessment and grading. Recent criticism of WTL pedagogy has focused on its emphasis on private and personal writing, as well as the lack of empirical evidence highlighting WTL's positive effects on student learning (Bazerman, et al., 2005, p. 57-65). This criticism is not surprising since teachers are unable to build "best practices" in planning classroom activities when the uses of in-class writing are so often inadequately described. Even so, when a teacher uses in-class writing as a basis for discussion and formal assignments, writing serves as more than a means for "private and personal" reflection. Rather, it offers students opportunities to test emerging understandings of course material and to practice difficult-to-master thinking and writing skills in low stakes contexts. In so doing, in-class writing provides teachers and students with a powerful tool for integrating learning in progress by enabling active transitions between topics and activities and across class meetings.

The purpose of this article is to outline an approach to in-class writing based on existing research on writing and learning processes. Building on links between the two sets of processes first proposed by Janet Emig (1977), the article describes effective prompts and ground rules for in-class writing, as well as follow-up activities that promote discussion and serve as a foundation for formal writing assignments. In addition, the article considers a range of benefits students, teachers, and classroom communities might realize through the consistent and intentional use in-class writing as a learning tool.

While most of my teaching experience has been in college writing classrooms, the approach to in-class writing described here can be applied across the spectrum of

college-level courses. Specifically, using in-class writing at moments of transition common to every class (e.g., at the beginning or end of class, when moving from topic to topic or activity to activity, or at the conclusion of particularly rich discussions) serves as a means of focusing and extending student engagement. In-class writing activities that lead to discussion and formal assignments foreground the power of writing as a means for processing and integrating information. Helping students understand that writing can support their learning and is not just a mechanism for assessment and evaluation gives them a tool they can use to build skills and knowledge in future courses.

### **Why Transitions?**

The transitions noted above are moments with great potential for student learning because they lead to or immediately follow planned instructional activities such as lectures, discussions, group work, and so forth. For the same reason, however, they are also moments when learning is most at risk. Understanding the key points of a given lecture or reading does not serve students well unless they can connect their new learning to other concepts and ideas. Writing at transitional moments gives students a way to integrate material they have learned through various activities and at different times and, by doing so, makes it more likely that they will make the valuable connections necessary for their learning.

For example, at the beginning of class students are often distracted by the activity they've just come from (e.g., work, lunch, conversation with friends, or another class) and therefore are not yet fully engaged with the learning tasks their teachers have in mind. Writing for a few

minutes at the beginning of class accelerates the transition into the day's lesson, importantly shifting students' attention away from phones, laptops, and other matters. Students seem similarly vulnerable to distraction at the beginnings and ends of discussions or activities, if not by their phones (despite policies prohibiting their use), then by their enthusiasm about a topic or discussion point that takes their attention away from the nuts and bolts of the task at hand or by their emerging anxiety about how and when they will be asked to demonstrate their understanding of a lesson. At the conclusion of even the most active class meetings, students can become preoccupied by their next activity (e.g., an exam, work, a date or party, sports or music practice, or even just hanging out) and allow their minds to wander before class officially ends.

Writing during these transitions gives students and teachers alike a means to manage distractions and to reflect on learning-in-progress. It focuses energy in the classroom toward specific learning tasks and gives students a way to channel their anxieties and enthusiasms in productive directions. Further, using in-class writing and follow-up activities to connect one class session, topic, or discussion to another gives students practice translating emergent and unorganized thoughts into coherent writing, the same work they are expected to do in formal writing assignments.

Peter Elbow (1994) identified similar opportunities for using in-class writing: at the start of class to help students "bring to mind" previous readings, lectures, or discussions; in mid-class when "things go dead;" at the end of class or lecture to reinforce important questions and topics; and at the end of class to report "the main idea for

Figure 1  
**Ground Rules for Effective In-Class Writing**

1. Use in-class writing consistently but vary the prompts and the transitional moments when students write.
2. Be clear and firm about parameters such as duration and whether or not writing will be shared.
3. Be a writer yourself and share your writing as part of the group.
4. Encourage students to write for the full time and to read exactly what they have written.
5. Take notes while students read their writing to create a common text for subsequent discussions or activities.
6. Thank students by name and give genuine feedback about specific words and ideas they contribute.
7. Be flexible about discussion of shared writing but ensure that the class remains focused.
8. Follow-up most in-class writing with sharing aloud, discussion or a formal writing assignment.

them, what was going on for them during that class” (p. 1). Elbow’s explanation of these four transitional moments suggests that teachers can use in-class writing to jumpstart class meetings and move discussions forward. My approach builds from Elbow’s by focusing on the opportunities that transitional moments provide students to link ideas within and across class meetings, articulate emerging understandings of course material, and reflect on their own learning processes. While teachers might view in-class writing as a way to help them transition from one activity to the next, they might not fully recognize that it can serve a similar purpose for students, focusing their attention and enabling them to make unplanned connections through their writing. Starting from what students have in mind at moments of transition rather than from expectations about how class meetings should flow puts the act of writing at the center of the

learning process and makes transitions as integral to students’ experiences as the more formal instructional activities that take up the majority of class time.

**Writing to Learn**

Synthesizing research in cognitive psychology and language use, Janet Emig (1977) identified four characteristics that writing and learning share: integrating different kinds of thinking; enabling immediate feedback; encouraging the making of connections between ideas; and facilitating active engagement (p. 128). According to Emig, writing is a powerful learning tool because it requires active engagement and the integration of different ways of thinking, such as planning, expressing, revising, and reflecting. When we write, we recall things we have read, heard, and thought and make connections among them by inventing language and writing it out. Once we’ve written something, and often before we’ve finished a given sentence, we begin to reflect on whether or not our words accurately capture our developing understanding and then revise what we’ve written or were about to write. This recursive process reinforces learning, as Emig explains, because it proceeds from feedback that is “immediately and visibly available” on the page (p. 125).

When a teacher supplements in-class writing with activities such as sharing aloud, discussion, and formal essay assignments, it further enhances for students the characteristics of writing that serve learning by providing a second layer of integration, feedback, and engagement. While Elbow (1973) does not refer to cognitive theory or make an explicit connection between writing and learning, he nevertheless applies a similar logic in describing the potential of in-class writing to create a “teacherless” classroom,

where students feel comfortable taking productive risks that lead to authentic learning. Distinguishing the communal aspects of the writing process from the conventional exchange of written artifacts between teachers and students, Elbow explains that “writing is not just getting things down on paper, it is getting things inside someone else’s head” (p. 76). His workshop approach to developing writing skills involves three main activities: sharing writing in progress; listening to classmates’ accounts of how one’s writing is being read and understood; and reflecting on one’s own experience of what others have written. In this kind of classroom, “improvement” becomes a function of learning about how what we write is experienced by others, especially by other writers.

Though the “teacherless” class Elbow describes is a writing class, as Emig’s research suggests, the combined pedagogy of writing, listening, and giving and receiving feedback serves learning in any kind of class. Pairing informal writing with active listening and discussion engages students and encourages the integration of different ways of processing information, both of which are key components of effective learning. Receiving and incorporating feedback provides students with an immediate opportunity to measure the strength of the connections they are making between ideas, while simultaneously assessing the coherence and meaningfulness of their prose.

**Prompts, Ground Rules, and Benefits of In-Class Writing**

The prompts that generate in-class writing along with the ways that teachers structure follow-up activities are crucial for making in-class writing an affirming and effective learning tool. In an unpublished

manuscript, Frank Cioffi (2011) describes in-class writing as a particularly intense use of class time because “it involves the teacher or facilitator in ways that the typical lecture or discussion rarely does; it requires a very careful use and awareness of class time; and it taxes the creative powers of even the most inventive instructor” (p. 196). The challenge of managing in-class writing activities is directly related to its power as a learning tool.

In order for students to take the risk of expressing their learning in writing, they must feel comfort and security that their emerging ideas will be valued, even and especially when the ideas are imperfectly articulated. As Cioffi (2011) notes, teachers can contribute to the development of this kind of classroom environment by providing a structure through which students share their writing and respond to each other’s writing as learning-in-process rather than as final product (see Ground Rules in Figure 1).

Following Cioffi’s (2011) and Elbow’s (1973) guidelines, I use two kinds of in-class writing in my classroom: writing that is shared and writing that is not shared, either of which might lead to formal writing assignments. I ask my students to write at some point during nearly every class meeting, but I vary the prompts, the transitional moments when they write, and the follow up activities we complete so that each writing activity is spontaneous and engaging. To help students focus on the prompt and feel comfortable with the follow-up activity, each in-class writing activity has clearly defined parameters, including a specific duration (never more than 10 minutes) and instructions about whether or not the writing will be shared and how, for example, through reading aloud, exchanging with a classmate, or in a small group.

I encourage students to write for the entire time and to focus on generating ideas rather than crafting the perfect sentence, even if it means writing “I don’t know what to write” until an idea presents itself. Continuing to write rather than staring at a blank page often leads students to make connections between ideas they had not imagined at the beginning of the activity.

As Cioffi (2011) recommends, I write alongside my students, responding authentically to the prompt rather than attempting to write a model response. If the writing is to be shared aloud, students might volunteer or everyone might be required to read. In either case, I encourage the class to take notes as they listen, focusing on specific words, ideas, and connections they hear in each other’s writing. I thank my students by name for reading their writing and for the significant contributions they make during discussion. Sometimes a student’s writing sparks an unexpected discussion; at other times no one has much to say beyond reading what they’ve written. Either kind of result is acceptable, but it is important to ensure that the class does not get sidetracked. If the writing is not to be shared aloud, I ask students to re-read silently what they’ve written and to reflect on it in a second piece of writing before moving on to the next activity. When the activity leads to a formal writing assignment, I ask students to transform or expand material from their in-class writing in a subsequent activity or in a homework assignment.

To make in-class writing an effective learning tool, writing prompts must be focused and directed rather than general and open (see Outline in Figure 2). As Cioffi (2011) explains, prompts have to be productive questions that “provide something” students can react to in

articulating what they are learning (p. 198). At the beginning of class, in-class writing can serve to clear students’ minds of outside concerns and to orient their thinking to the day’s lesson. Prompts such as “Write out whatever is on your mind right now;” “Write out what you remember as important from our last class;” or “Summarize the last work you did on your current writing assignment or lab project” ease the transition into class. While asking students to share their response to the first prompt might not be appropriate given the potentially personal nature of the writings, having students share responses to the second and third prompts could launch productive discussions.

Specific and directed prompts also serve transitions into lectures, discussions, or other classroom activities because they give students a structured way to make connections between what they already know and what they are working to understand. At the beginning of a discussion or lecture, a teacher might offer prompts such as: “Choose a phrase or sentence you find confusing from the day’s reading and then write two separate explanations of it;” “Make a list of terms or concepts you remember as being important from the last class and define them;” or “Write about something that is bothering you from our last class meeting and then suggest something we can do as a group to clear your mind.” Sharing responses to these prompts grounds the day’s activity in what students are thinking and what they can expect to learn. A teacher might also capture notes from each student’s response on the board or on a screen so the responses can serve as a supplemental text for class discussion. Using ideas that emerge from in-class writing as a basis for discussion centers the classroom on students’ engagement with a given

Figure 2  
Outline of an Approach to Using In-Class Writing at Transitions

Transition	Purpose	What Students Have In Mind	Sample Writing Prompt
Beginning of class	Clearing students minds of out-of-class concerns and orienting their thinking to the task at hand	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Am I late?</li> <li>• I can't wait for class to start!</li> <li>• I didn't finish the readings.</li> <li>• Why was it so hard to find parking?</li> <li>• My math test is going to be tough.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write out whatever is on your mind right now. (5 minutes, not shared)</li> <li>• Write out what you remember as important from our last class. (5 minutes, shared or not)</li> <li>• Summarize the last work you did on your current writing assignment or lab project. Draw a line under that and write out your next step. (5 minutes, shared or not)</li> </ul>
Beginning of discussion or activity	Giving everyone something to say (their writing is a script) and grounding discussion in what matters to students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• I don't understand anything about the readings.</li> <li>• What did we talk about last week?</li> <li>• I hope I don't have to answer any questions today.</li> <li>• My classmates speak more intelligently or fluently than I do.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Choose a phrase or sentence you find confusing from the day's reading and then write out two separate attempts to explain it. (10 minutes, shared)</li> <li>• Make a list of terms or concepts you remember as important from the last class and define them. (10 minutes, shared or not)</li> <li>• Write out something that is bothering you from what we did last time and then suggest something we can do as a class to clear your mind. (10 minutes, shared or not)</li> </ul>
End of discussion or activity	Confirming the main point of a discussion or activity and encouraging students to reflect on learning-in-progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Wow, that was a great discussion!</li> <li>• I don't understand that last point.</li> <li>• I'm completely lost in this class.</li> <li>• How is what we talked about going to help me with my paper?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflect on something a classmate contributed to today's discussion and then agree or disagree with her point. (5-10 minutes, shared or not)</li> <li>• Complete the paragraph that begins, "The most interesting idea we covered today is . . .". (10 minutes, shared or not)</li> <li>• Explain how today's activity relates to something we did last week (or two weeks ago). (5-10 minutes, shared or not)</li> </ul>
End of class	Encouraging reflection on learning-in-progress and setting the agenda for the next class or the next steps on work-in-progress	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good class, I understand things more clearly now.</li> <li>• Finally, it's over!</li> <li>• When is my paper due?</li> <li>• Maybe I should go to office hours to get a head start on my assignment?</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Write out what we could do next if we had more time. (5-10 minutes, shared or not)</li> <li>• Describe how something we did or discussed today will help you take the next step with your current writing or research assignment. (5-10 minutes, shared or not)</li> <li>• Refer to the learning goals on the syllabus and explain which goal today's class covered most directly. (10 minutes, shared with the class or just the instructor)</li> </ul>

text or topic and gives the teacher a way to connect key ideas to questions and concerns students have in mind.

Though they often overlap, the conclusions of discussions or activities and the ends of class meetings are separate transitions that deserve separate consideration as moments conducive to in-class writing. At the end of an activity, students benefit from opportunities to articulate new concepts in their own

words and to connect new material with content they have already mastered. The following prompts are effective for this transitional moment: "Reflect on something a classmate contributed to today's discussion and then agree or disagree with his/her point;" "Complete the paragraph that begins, 'The most interesting idea we covered today is;'" or "Explain how today's activity relates to something we did last week

(or two weeks ago)." As with in-class writing generated at the beginning of activities, a teacher might capture notes from responses to these prompts on the board or on a screen, and further encourage students to do the same so that the class's collective learning can serve as material for further discussion or formal assignments. Alternately, in-class writing can shape the transition at the end of class so that students leave

with specific tools and knowledge that will help them move forward in formal assignments. Prompts such as “Write about what we could do next if we had more time;” “Describe how something we did or discussed today will help you take the next step with your current writing or research assignment;” or “Refer to the learning goals on the syllabus and explain which goal today’s class covered most directly” give students a way to integrate work completed in individual class meetings and to make connections between work the class does together and work they do individually.

### Conclusion

Steven Schreiner (1997) argues that process-based approaches to teaching with writing can sometimes suppress differences “in culture, race, gender, [and] class” among students because they are typically based on strategies experienced writers use rather than on the ways novice writers from various backgrounds think and learn (p. 102). Because they assume a single writing process for all students, he explains, process-based approaches like Elbow’s can unintentionally privilege some students and inhibit others by projecting unfounded expectations about reading practices, sophistication with language, and self-confidence on all students (p. 99). In my view, supplementing in-class writing with activities, such as discussion and formal assignments, reduces the likelihood that unfounded assumptions will negatively affect student learning because it focuses teacher and class attention on what individual students are thinking. Rather than suppressing differences in students’ approaches to texts and concepts, in-class writing gives all students a way to “figure out what [they, individually] don’t yet know” (Elbow, 1994, p. 1). In addition,

linking in-class writing to sharing and class discussion makes it more likely that students in any given class will be exposed to multiple perspectives and learning styles. As students gain experience interpreting and responding to each other’s in-class writing, they also develop the ability to incorporate multiple perspectives into their own writing.

Elbow (1973) reported that writers in his best “teacherless” classes exhibit “bravery” in their writing as well as a “willingness to risk” (p. 112). The experience of having their writing read and responded to in depth can increase student confidence by reminding them that they are not working or learning in isolation. Elbow explains the positive effects of writing and learning in a classroom community in this way:

When people not only begin to improve their writing ability but also find themselves in a group where their words are heard and understood better than they usually are, they discover messages they want to send which they had forgotten were on their minds. They want to say things that are complex and difficult to express which they had previously learned to ignore because it had always been impossible to get them heard. (p. 123)

As Emig (1977) suggested, the confidence to make connections and express emerging, complex ideas is a fundamental precondition for learning in any discipline. Students who are willing to risk being wrong are, in turn, freer to engage more directly with learning tasks in their own way and at their own pace rather than being distracted by anxiety about proving what they know to their classmates or their teachers. In this way, frequent and consistent in-

class writing activities connect the act of writing to the ongoing process of learning and can provide a foundation for the kinds of sophisticated thinking expected in formal writing assignments.

A fundamental element of Elbow’s (1997) approach is his insistence that frequent in-class writing serves the practical purpose of making students less fearful and more ambitious and creative in responding to formal writing assignments. Following Emig’s (1977) theory of writing as a mode of learning, I have recommended modifications to Elbow’s approach that foreground the power of writing as a tool students can use to process information as they learn. The kind of consistent and intentional in-class writing I describe grounds students’ learning in their understanding of course material rather than in what they assume their teacher expects. In addition, it reserves regular class time for reflecting on how social, cultural, linguistic, and personal circumstances influence individual and collective understanding. Asking for in-class writing at moments of transition, in particular, provides opportunities for students to integrate learning in progress and makes it easier for every student in a class, as part of the community, to take responsibility both for their own and each other’s progress. Most importantly, as Schreiner (1997) would urge, focused in-class writing that is supplemented by discussion and formal writing assignments puts students’ knowledge, experiences, and ways of learning at the center of the classroom.

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