# MEANINGFUL WRITING

*What Students Say about It & How Faculty Can Design for It*

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# Meaningful Writing

With the widespread release of generative AI in the fall of 2022, higher education has been confronted with yet another fundamental question. If artificial intelligence is able to complete basic classroom tasks, including producing written texts, how do educators adjust their teaching to ensure student success and effectively prepare students for life beyond university?

One response to this question focuses on student motivation for learning and encourages faculty to design learning experiences that students will find meaningful. This report contributes to that response. In the following report, we share how Mason's students described their experiences with meaningful writing projects and offer suggestions that faculty can use to intentionally design for meaningful writing.

## Background

In fall 2020 and spring 2021, researchers from Mason's Writing Across the Curriculum and Composition programs asked 28 seniors across disciplines about their experiences with writing. We sought to learn about writing experiences that they identified as meaningful, a term we left open-ended.

The project was inspired by Eodice, Geller, and Lerner's The Meaningful Writing Project (2016) in which they asked over seven hundred students across the three different institutions to describe their most meaningful writing projects. Their analysis of the students' responses revealed the "powerful roles writing plays in [students'] personal, academic, and professional lives" (5). Similarly, our study showed that writing can play a significant role in students' growth and learning across disciplines.

The findings we present in this report point to ways faculty across disciplines can design writing projects that students find meaningful. The characteristics introduced in this report and captured in the image below help facilitate student engagement and support transfer of their learning across the curriculum.

# Characteristics of Meaningful Writing

The image below identifies the three components that repeatedly appear in students' descriptions of meaningful writing projects. These three elements also appear in sequence: the relevance of writing projects to students' lives facilitates their engagement with the writing process and, as an outcome, produces transformational learning.

**RELEVANCE** → **ENGAGEMENT** → **TRANSFORMATION**
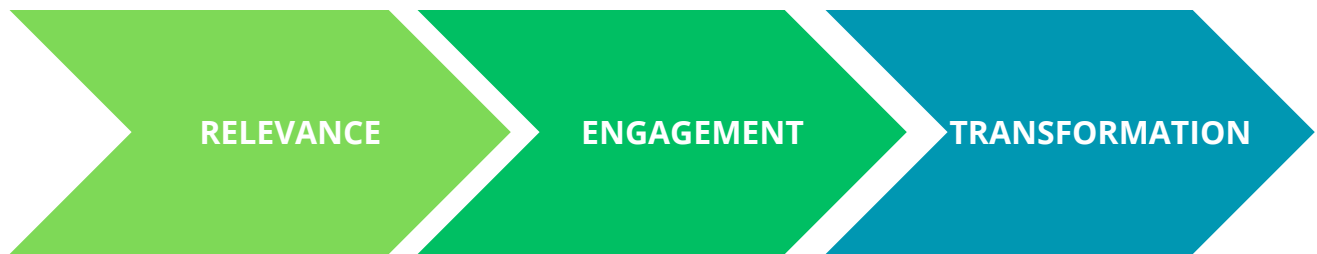
## 1 Relevance

The opportunity for students to work on projects relevant to their academic, personal, or professional lives.

## 2 Engagement

Involvement in a multi-stage writing process supported by faculty feedback and peer interaction that also asks them to consider real or imagined audiences for their writing.

## 3 Transformation

The development of insights into their learning, subject matter, and identities alongside a growing sense of accomplishment, motivation, and confidence.

# Relevance

The opportunity for students to work on projects relevant to their academic, personal, or professional lives.
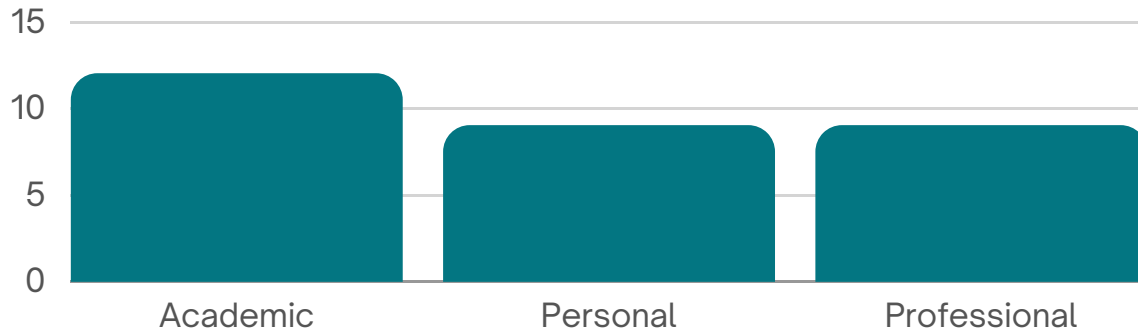


**Academic relevance:** Students were motivated by assignments that provided them an opportunity to pursue an angle on a topic that they were passionate about. While their topics ranged widely (e.g., segregation in education system, global warming, nursing for the elderly community, maternity leave benefits), these students enjoyed the opportunity to immerse themselves and express their stances on the topics they select for themselves.

**Personal relevance:** Students called their writing experiences meaningful when they were prompted to write about their personal experiences (unique childhood memory or a favored record player) or when they used writing for their personal purposes (writing farewell cards to coworkers, a letter to loved ones, or creative nonfiction about oneself).

**Professional relevance:** Students valued writing tasks that connected to their current internships or were applicable to their future career plans (writing HR recruiting proposal, scholarship essays, resume, a research paper for graduate school applications). They saw this writing as preparation for their future professional lives and reported an increased confidence in their ability to accomplish these tasks.

"I think that the most meaningful writing that I've done is in my writing intensive class for the forensics program. That was the heaviest writing that I've done for a class. Every other week we had to do a lengthy in-depth report for each piece of evidence that we were studying for that unit. I think that was meaningful because it felt like the writing that I need to do for my job."

# Engagement

Involvement in a multi-stage writing process supported by faculty feedback and peer interaction; opportunities for students to consider real or imagined audiences for their writing.
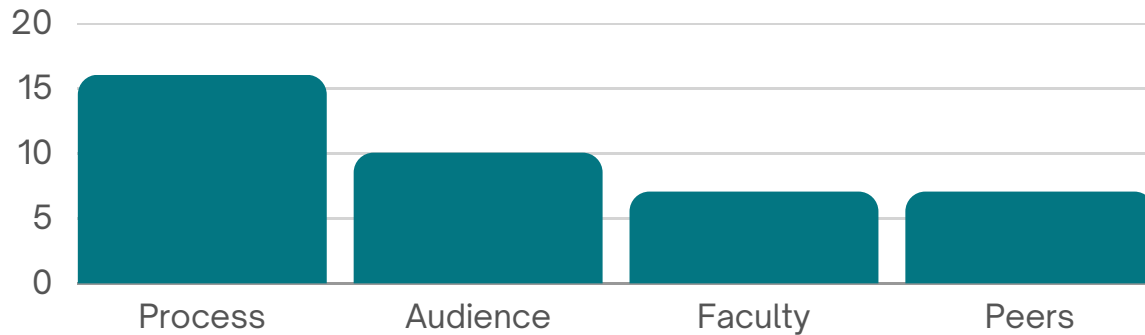


**A multi-stage writing process:** Participants valued projects that offered them opportunities to deepen their thinking and develop their work over a series of interactive stages. These stages include brainstorming, drafting, and revising based on their instructor's feedback.

**Interaction with instructors and peers:** Participants also observed that regular interactions with instructors and peers helped them to improve their thinking and produce better writing. They also felt more confident with and connected to their projects when these interactions were woven into a multi-stage writing process. Interactions included frequent and timely feedback from their instructors and opportunities to discuss ongoing work with their peers, including peer review.

**Engagement with a real or imagined audience:** Writing tasks that prompted students to communicate with a real or imagined audience proved motivating for participants in this study. Some participants described projects that asked them to address issues pertinent to a local community; others described addressing loved ones, friends, or public and disciplinary audiences. In either case, specifying an audience helped them to think more deeply about their writing and the content relevant to their audience.

"We were writing towards that community, and I was hoping to use this information that I learned after undergrad. And, the audience that we've established isn't just females as the maternal mortality, we believe, males should also be given the chance to learn about it and have a chance to speak up on it as well."

# Transformation

The development of insights into students' learning, subject matter, and identities alongside a growing sense of accomplishment, motivation, and confidence.



**Motivation & confidence (M&C):** Participants described having an increased sense of confidence and motivation for writing during and following the completion of writing projects they described as meaningful. This was in fact one of the study's most salient findings: almost all of the participants reported these gains in relation to their meaningful writing projects.

**Self-reflection:** Participants identified opportunities to reflect on their previous selves, present writing tasks, and the applicability of writing to future tasks and selves as a component of meaningful writing.

**Writing knowledge:** Participants reported an increased understanding of writing, including the importance of writing processes and the relevance of writing to subject matter, as connected to working on a meaningful writing project.

**Content knowledge:** Students reported that meaningful writing tasks deepened their content knowledge and associated critical thinking skills. These skills included applying knowledge to a particular situation, evaluating the relevance of content to an audience, and taking a stance on a specific issue.

"So I had to do some actual planning there. I really had to learn that you need to write an outline for a paper and you need to plan ahead and say 'I want to introduce the topic like this. I want these things to happen in the paper.' And you have to wrap it up with a good conclusion. So, it taught me the process. It taught me that you have to follow a format for a paper, otherwise my paper will turn out badly, even if it's done with the best of intentions."

# Designing for Meaningful Writing

Meaningful writing activities are relevant, immersive, and transformational; they offer opportunities for growth and agency in students' writing and learning. They are also enriched by social interaction with instructors, peers, and members of the community.

The findings in the **transformation** category are particularly important because, while all faculty might prize gains in content knowledge, the affective and metacognitive gains identified by participants have been shown to help students perform better on both current and future writing tasks. That is, these components of meaningful writing foster transfer and writing development.

## Recommendations

**To provide opportunities of relevance and agency**

1. Create assignments that allow and even encourage some element of student choice of topic, stance, or final product
2. Support students in exploring possible topics that connect to issues they are already passionate about
3. Design assignments that connect to or help students imagine their future academic or professional goals

**To provide opportunities for engagement**

1. Design writing assignments that are completed over multiple stages, including brainstorming, drafting, and revising
2. Create assignments that prompt students to communicate with a real or imagined audience
3. Integrate social interaction into the classroom by
   a. Providing ongoing and "next-steps" feedback on students' writing
   b. Sharing faculty's writing experience or modeling faculty's writing strategies with students
   c. Including peer discussion and feedback activities as a regular part of the writing process

# Recommendations continued

**To provide opportunities for transformational learning**

1. Integrate low-stakes reflective writing tasks as a regular part of the course. These tasks can prompt students to
   a. Describe what they have learned about themselves as writers, learners, or people while working on their projects
   b. Connect their learning in your classroom with learning they are doing in other classrooms or outside of the university
   c. Project how their learning will play a role in their future academic, professional, or personal lives

# Further reading

Anderson, P., Anson, C. M., Gonyea, R. M., & Paine, C. (2016). How to create high-impact writing assignments that enhance learning and development and reinvigorate WAC/WID programs: What almost 72,000 undergraduates taught us. Across the Disciplines, 13(4).

Bean, J. C., & Melzer, D. (2021). Engaging ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom. John Wiley & Sons.

Eodice, M., Geller, A. E., & Lerner, N. (2016). The meaningful writing project: Learning, teaching and writing in higher education. University Press of Colorado.