# Writing-to-Learn: Using Writing to Teach Course Content

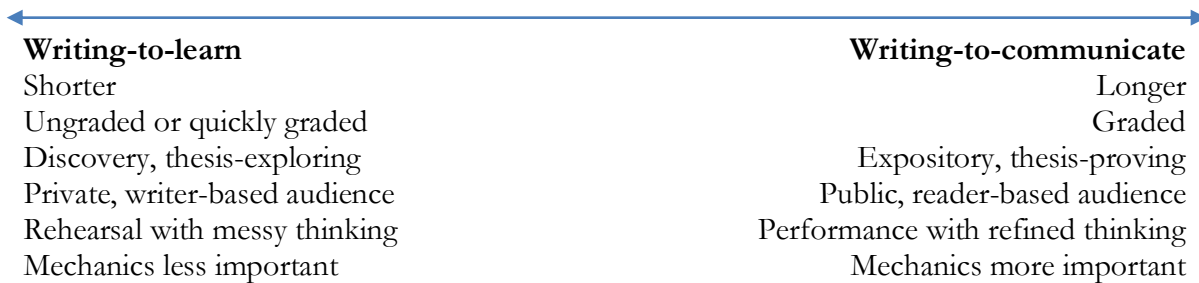**What is Writing-to-Learn (WTL)?**

Writing-to-learn assignments are low-stakes approaches to teaching course content through writing. They are typically short and informal tasks that offer students an opportunity to explore and consolidate their understanding of concepts.

**Why WTL?**

WTL assignments don't require a lot of work from faculty, but they can facilitate a lot of learning for students. They have generally been shown to increase critical thinking, enhance student engagement, and improve student reading comprehension. They can also be quite a bit of fun because they enable more teacher and student creativity.

**Some Characteristics**

WTL contrasts more formal writing tasks understood as Writing-to-Communicate (WTC). These paradigms, however, are not exclusive of but rather complementary to each other; it's better to think of them as existing on a continuum. In fact, many instructors use WTL to scaffold WTC assignments. To better understand these foundational concepts, we offer a quick sketch of some of their main characteristics below:

| Writing-to-learn | Writing-to-communicate |
|---|---|
| Shorter | Longer |
| Ungraded or quickly graded | Graded |
| Discovery, thesis-exploring | Expository, thesis-proving |
| Private, writer-based audience | Public, reader-based audience |
| Rehearsal with messy thinking | Performance with refined thinking |
| Mechanics less important | Mechanics more important |

**Some Basic Examples**

**One-minute or five-minute paper:** Ask students to write quickly in response to a brief prompt. These can be used at the beginning, in the middle, or at the end of a class to warm-up, generate conversation, or check understanding.

> **Example prompt:** The most interesting thing that I learned today is ---, and the most unclear aspect of our current discussion is ---.

**Meaningful paragraph:** Identify one or several core terms that are important to the week's lessons and ask students to write a paragraph using them.

> **Example prompt:** This week, we have encountered five important new terms. Please write a paragraph using all five terms in relation to one another.

**A More Creative Take: RAFT Design**

RAFT design is a heuristic that prompts faculty to place content into context. It allows for a more creative and engaging writing experience by shifting from a topic-based to a problem-based scenario. The letters of the acronym stand for elements that should be present in the prompt:

**Role:** who is the writer?
**Audience:** who is the audience?
**Format:** what form will the writing take?
**Task/theme:** what is the writer trying to accomplish?

**Example prompt:** You are at home for Thanksgiving break and a conversation develops amongst several family members [role] about [here, you can direct students to a recent article they have read for class]. The conversation begins to get tense and your cousin [audience] jumps in with a striking contribution [here, you can summarize an interpretation of the article]. You disagree and believe that this person has misrepresented the information [task]. How would you respond? Is their position accurate? How do you know? How might you change their mind? Write a 1-page dialog [format] imagining how the conversation unfurls.

**Evaluating WTL**

WTL assignments can be graded in a number of ways depending on the type of assignment and how it is will be used. Examples like the one-minute paper can simply be collected and responded to in class or use to plan for the next class; the meaningful paragraph assignment might be graded on a check, check-plus, check-minus system depending on how well students understand and use the key terms. The RAFT assignment above might be graded in a similar fashion or with a rubric with elements for basic criteria, content knowledge, and creativity.

**WTL Online?**

WTL pedagogies are ready-made for and already tacitly inform much learning in online environments. Many discussion board, wiki, blog, and journal assignments are effectively WTL assignments. An assignment like the meaningful paragraph described above could be used weekly in journal or wiki form as students encounter and record new vocabulary. The critical idea is that these assignments offer students an opportunity to explore and make meaning out of course content.

**Further Reading**

Bean, J. C. (2011). *Engaging ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom.* John Wiley & Sons.

WAC Clearinghouse. (2020). What is writing-to-learn? Available at https://wac.colostate.edu/resources/wac/intro/wtl/