



# Techniques for Facilitating Group Discussion: Using writing

Short writing assignments completed before, during, or after class discussion are a great way to improve discussion and counter students' reluctance to participate. Writing assignments can also foster critical thinking skills, help students develop more positive attitudes toward the subject, and give students valuable time to practice their writing skills.

Below are some ideas for informal writing activities. They involve writing that is a page or less in length. You do not need to grade these assignments, or even always collect them, but you should build in some sort of feedback process and accountability.



**Before a class discussion**, to clarify concepts, ask students to write:

- A short summary of important reading material or of the previous lecture.
- The answer to a conceptual question to help students begin to think about and organize information previously studied that relates to the day's discussion.
- An explanation, in their own words, of a key concept or procedure.
- A diagram illustrating connections between facts or idea.
- An important implication of material read or discussed.

The way that you use these assignments will vary. You may collect them to read later. You may ask a couple of students to read aloud what they have written. You could divide students into groups to discuss their answers. If the class has an opportunity to compare responses ask them what they notice: common features, similarities and differences, etc.



**During a lecture/discussion** you can pause and ask students to write:

- A statement of what they still do not understand.
- Predictions of the outcome of the discussion.
- Answers to short open-ended questions about the topic.
- Questions they have about the topic generally.
- Their opinions on a controversial aspect of the topic, using material just covered as support.

In inviting contributions from these writings you may discover questions that need to be clarified in the remaining class time.



**Towards the end of the class** students can write:

- Answers to questions over the topic.
- Two or three possible exam questions on the topic.
- A comparison of two or more approaches to the topic.
- Their thoughts on legal, ethical or moral issues raised by the topic.
- Preview questions over the upcoming readings or lecture.

In the next class session, students could discuss their responses in a group exercise or discussion, with the purpose of fostering a deeper understanding of the topic. If you choose to skim over some of these short papers, you will learn a great deal about how well the students understand the subject and what concepts, topics, or issues need to be explored further. If you assign papers or give exams that use similar kinds of writing and thinking skills, you may also notice an improvement in students' performance on these tasks.

