

Teaching with Writing (TWW) Tip Early Semester Writing Assignments

We often use writing assignments near the end of courses as ways to assess student learning. However, early semester writing assignments can serve a number of important purposes. By asking students to write early in the semester, instructors can get a sense of students' prior knowledge, learn more about students' motivation, and potentially detect early misconceptions about subject matter that can impede student understanding of course materials.

What makes early writing valuable?

Research on writing and learning confirms that early writing opportunities can have significant positive effects on student learning. By being asked to recall prior knowledge, students are better able to both [transfer knowledge across contexts](#) and [effectively organize their knowledge](#). In addition, opportunities to reflect and offer predictions can increase students' motivation to learn. Finally, because student projects cluster around midterm and finals week, early semester writing occurs at a time when students can be the most engaged. By keeping initial assignments low stakes (as a small portion of the final course grade), this work will not compromise the significance of later summative assessments.

Potential assignments for early semester writing

Prior knowledge assessments: If your course has a prerequisite or depends on students' content knowledge in your area, short writing assignments can help to determine the consistency of students' knowledge and recollection of core concepts.

For example, between an introductory microeconomics course and an intermediate course, it may be useful to review both opportunity cost and comparative advantage. A brief writing assignment can test both students' definitional knowledge and their ability to apply these terms in context:

In a short paragraph (no more than six sentences), define the concepts of opportunity cost and comparative advantage. Next, using these two concepts, explain the considerations a student must make before selecting her course schedule for a new semester as an econ major.

By selecting a familiar context, this brief assignment will provide an effective pretest on students' core knowledge and can alert the instructor to any common gaps in knowledge or misconceptions.

Predictive knowledge assessments: Ask students to define and provide their present understanding of the core concepts or ideas that will be featured in the course. Opportunities for prediction and confirmation both emphasize the significance of the subject matter and [create anticipation for gaining understanding](#) different from recollection. For example, in a nutrition course, an instructor might ask students to respond to the following prompt:

In this course, we will learn about metabolic processes in the body and their health effects. Based on your present understanding, what is metabolism? Does behavior or diet significantly influence metabolism, or is it determined by genetics or other factors? Finally, how important do you believe metabolism is to maintain effective health and energy?

Correcting misconceptions in prior knowledge: One of the most valuable potential uses of early writing assignments is to make students aware of potential misperceptions in their thinking as they acquire new subject matter knowledge. By addressing common misconceptions early in the semester, students will be better prepared to understand increasing complexity and specialization and instructors will be less likely to need to backtrack as the semester continues. Such exercises are particularly useful if the specialized vocabulary of a discipline conflicts with common understanding.

For example, students who are new to with statistics may misunderstand the difference between positive and negative correlation (Students will sometimes assume a positive correlation means that both variables increase, while negative implies that both values decrease). A simple writing exercise can help students recognize and correct this error:

Your neighborhood ice cream store announces that it is closing for the winter months, stating "the negative correlation of declining temperature and ice cream sales means the business is unprofitable." What common misconception is revealed in the statement; and how could it be changed to reflect accurate knowledge of correlation?

Early writing assignments can be brief and can be assessed using very simple criteria, including simply offering credit for participation in the activity. These and other examples are appropriate to use as before class warm-ups, in class exercises, or brief homework assignments. To see more examples of brief writing assignments, see the Teaching With Writing web page for [Informal Writing Assignments](#).

Learn more

[Writing to learn activities](#) (WAC Clearinghouse)

[How to address students' prior knowledge](#) (Carnegie Mellon)

[Alternative writing assignments](#) (WAC Clearinghouse)

Further support: January is an excellent time for teaching consultations. Visit us online at <http://writing.umn.edu/tww>. To schedule a phone, email, or face-to-face teaching consultation, [click here](#).

Our purpose is to provide practical strategies for teaching with writing. Our goal is to offer timely and pragmatic support to faculty members and instructors who teach with writing in undergraduate and graduate courses in all disciplinary areas.

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