Writing to Learn

Too often we create situations of “writers who don’t want to write for readers who don’t want to read” with the ultimate (illogical) goal of “improving communication” (Young 36).

Overriding principles of writing to learn
- Students are responsible for their own learning.
- The teacher is a mentor or guide and should focus on what’s right and what can be improved, not what’s wrong and needs to be fixed. Offer suggestions for improvement.
- Teachers need not read everything students write. Some of what students write will be their thinking on paper.
- Writing is a process of steps each writer goes through to create a final product, but not all writing needs to be read or graded by the teacher.

Writing to learn is
- writer-based
- personal
- reflective writing
- experimental
- creative
- a process
- a way to discover
- a way to find out what you know so that you can pass it along to someone else
- a way to explain something to yourself
- active learning, active thinking
- “rehearsal” for future thoughts, ideas, papers
- thinking on paper
- a planning/invention tool, a way of generating ideas

Uses of Writing to Learn
- To start a discussion
- For brainstorming
- As an icebreaker to motivate students
- To improve communication in classroom and improve classroom environment
- To read, talk, visualize, critique, solve problems, listen

Types of writing to learn activities
- One-minute essay
  In-class activity: What did you learn [from the reading/in class today]? What questions or concerns do you have about today’s lesson?
  (TEACHER provides a collective response to whole class.)
- Journals
  Students ask questions, work out problems, organize experiment, play with words, and/or attempt to make sense of knowledge.
  (Students choose 2-3 entries for teacher to respond to.)
- Writing Notes
Collaborative exercise: Students have conversations about the subject matter with partners. Writing means something because it is a “real response to a real reader.”
(TEACHER provides a collective response to the whole class.)

- Rough Drafts
  Students write to discover, trying out ideas or to see what they think.
  (TEACHER offers suggestions for future drafts.)
- Write poetry/ dialogue/play
  Students creatively try out new perspectives, experimenting with words and ideas, creating connections between material and lessons.
  (TEACHER can give check marks for credit.)
- Writing letters (like notes above)
  Students move from their personal voices to more critical, academic voices, and they respond to their partners’ concerns. Students become real audience, real readers and responders with real questions.
  (TEACHER offers a collective response or none at all.)

Teacher considerations
- Purpose and audience
- Context and relevance
- Guidelines/ criteria for assignments
- Grading rubric for assignments
- Response from teachers
  What responses will best guide students to further knowledge and learning?
- How and why will writing be used in the course? (test prep, discussion, group work)
- How will writing assignments promote mastery, develop critical thinking, creativity and/or improve communication skills?
- Create clear connections between writing and class goals and outcomes
- Integrate assignments with other class work
- Format of writing assignments (free write, journals, notes, letters, poems, monologues, dialogues, questions, summaries, critiques)
- How will teacher be a mentor or guide to the students?
- How will teachers know they have succeeded?
- Teachers should assign what they want to read.
- With most writing-to-learn assignments, students should receive credit for doing them and not be assigned a letter grade.

From Art Young’s Teaching Writing Across the Curriculum, third edition. Prentice Hall. 1999.