

WRITING TO LEARN ACTIVITIES



Writing to learn activities are short informal writing tasks that help students think through key concepts or ideas presented in a particular section of a topic.

They can be:

- impromptu, drawing on strategies and structures to apply at a particular point or
- used to build the field for more academic writing in a formal writing task.

There is no need for pro-formas or worksheets, as it is more effective if students record their learning directly into their own digital or paper workbooks.

These writing tasks can be as brief as five minutes of class time, and can be assigned as part of homework. Writing to learn activities can happen often in your classroom. Some can last for a day, or a week, or extend over a term.

Marking: It is not necessary to mark every grammatical or spelling error in a Writing to Learn activity. The purpose of these activities is to get the ideas, the thinking, down on the page; it is designed to be informal. Students will naturally edit and self-correct as they share these ideas with others. Students can check their own grammar and spelling when they are refining notes into a more formal piece of work, just as they refine their notes into sentences.

Marking Short-Cut: Develop with your students a standard set of symbols for errors. Give students a handout explaining your each symbol. One symbol can be used for a sentence that gets confused, another for punctuation, and a third for inaccurate words (spelling or meaning). Save your time and energy for commenting on the meaning – the learning part of writing to learn.

Good Ideas: As you think about making up writing assignments, use these principles:

- Make sure the writing task is connected to a specific syllabus outcome.
- Ensure the focus of the task is clear to the students. These are not ends in themselves, but rather provide details for future writing, speaking, reading or viewing contexts.
- Ensure students are clear about the context, purpose and audience for the writing, as with any writing task.
- Break down the task into manageable steps, so you are clear about what students have to do, and can prepare for possible glitches.
- Teach each step of the process, whichever strategy you use.
- Make sure there is plenty of time for talk around the writing – these are not tasks to be completed then left for the teacher to take home to ‘mark’.
- Develop a simple rubric, preferably with the students, which shows criteria, standards and examples of the task, so students know how they can improve their learning through writing.

Example: Floorstorming

(Holliday, p.19)

Provide a set of pictures related to a topic or a text. Students work in pairs or groups to discuss the pictures. Observations can be written around the images, or on ‘sticky notes’. Comments and noticings can then be grouped and organised to provide the basis for writing observations, then comparisons. You may like to introduce a simple [Venn diagram](#) to help find similarities and differences.

History: pictures of the same thing with a considerable amount of time between, eg 100 years apart: pictures of the [same street](#), [cars from 1890 and from 2018](#), farm machinery, farm workers, clothing/fashion, communication technologies such as [telephones](#); maps showing national boundaries, etc.

Ref: The historical concept of change is integral to the disciplined process of historical process of inquiry.

NSW History Syllabus K-10 p. 10

Geography: Pictures of the same place over time: before and after natural disasters such as tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, bushfires etc; maps of forest, desert, coastlines showing changes over time.

Ref: Geographical concepts for Stage 3: the effect of natural disasters on the environment

NSW Geography Syllabus K-10 p.51



Visual Arts: Images of:

- different versions of the same subject by the same artist, eg self-portraits by Rembrandt, Vincent van Gogh, and Natasha Walsh.
- the same subject by different artists, eg images from landscapes by Fred Williams, Elisabeth Cummings
- the comparison of Mulkun Wirrpanda and by John Wolseley in the exhibition 'Midawarr/ Harvest'.

The questions below will act as prompts. Students may use a Venn diagram to record their observations.

What can you see in these pictures?

Are the pictures alike in any way?

Are they different? How?



What do they make you think about?

Is there anything surprising? What is it? Why does this surprise you?

Reference:

Holliday, M. (2010) Strategies for Writing Success, Primary English Teaching Association, Newtown