

DESIGNING SHORT WRITING/THINKING TASKS: TEN EASY-TO-USE STRATEGIES

1. Think of tasks that would let students link concepts in your course to their personal experiences.

Example: In your own words, explain why a learned behavior is less resistant to extinction if it is reinforced regularly rather than only occasionally. Illustrate your explanation with an example from your own life.

2. Ask students to teach difficult concepts in your course to a new learner.

Example: Explain to your kid brother the difference between "reliability" and "validity" in the construction of an assessment instrument. Invent your own examples.

3. Think of controversial theses in your field (for thesis-support assignments or believing/doubting exercises).

Example: "The overriding religious view expressed in *Hamlet* is an existential atheism similar to Sartre's." In your argument summarize fairly and respond reasonably to opposing views.

4. Think of problems, puzzles, or questions you could ask students to address (old essay exam questions are often excellent here).

Example: You are an accountant in the tax department of Kubiak, Kartcher, and Elway, CPAs. Last Saturday morning you were in Winchell's Donuts, as is your norm. Just as you finish reading *Doonesbury* and start on your second apple fritter, a gentleman sits down beside you. He introduces himself as Fred O. McDonald, a farmer from up in the valley. He says he recognizes you as "that CPA who frequents the donut shop." Fred has a problem and asks tax advice from you. Here is Fred's problem:

Last Tuesday farmer McDonald planned to remove stumps from a pasture. So, he drove out to the pasture, lit a stick of dynamite and tossed it near the base of a stump. Fred's playful dog Boomer saw his master throw the "stick" and scampered to fetch it. Boomer picked up the stick. Fred yelled at the dog. Boomer, thinking he was going to be punished, ran under Fred's pickup truck. Boomer dropped the dynamite stick. The dog escaped harm just as the truck was totally destroyed by the blast. Fred wonders if he can deduct the loss of the truck for tax purposes.

Write a letter to Fred O. McDonald to answer his question.

5. Think of ways to give students raw data (such as lists, graphs, tables, etc.) and ask them to write an argument or analysis based on the data.

Example: To what extent do the attached economic data support the hypothesis "Social service spending is inversely related to economic growth"? First create a scattergram as a visual test of the hypothesis. Then create a verbal argument analyzing whether the data support the hypothesis.

6. Think of opening "frame sentences" for the start of a paragraph or short essay; students have to complete the paragraph by fleshing out the organizational structure predicted by the frame.

Example: To solve the problem of homelessness in America, we must realize that not all homeless fit into the same category. In fact, we ought to specify X categories of homeless people. First [develop with details]. . . . Second [develop with details]. . . . Third [?] Fourth [?]

7. Think of ways to ask students to role-play unfamiliar points of view (imagine X from the perspective of Y) or to encounter "what if" situations.

Example: Assume that Nike has invented a space suit that will let you run and throw freely enough to play baseball on the moon. Lay out the dimensions for a baseball park on the moon and justify your park design by explaining how the reduced gravity and the lack of atmosphere will affect the pitching, batting, base-running, and fielding.

8. Select several important articles in your field, put them on reserve in the library, and ask student to write 100-word or 250-word summaries or abstracts of them. (Or ask students to write a summary of one of your lectures.)

Example: Write a 250-word summary of the attached article from Scientific American. Your summary should make the main ideas of this article clear to someone who hasn't read it.

9. Think of a controversy in your field and ask students to write a dialogue between characters with different points of view.

Example: "In order to reduce the illegitimacy rate in the United States, the federal government should enact Charles Murray's proposal that welfare payments to single mothers be eliminated." Write a mini-play in which two or more characters of your choice disagree about the above proposal. Make their arguments reflective and rational.

10. Create cases that place students in a realistic situation relevant to your discipline where they must reach a decision to resolve a conflict.

Example: Based on the attached case, explain what course of action you would take and justify your decision with a reasoned argument.

Source: Bean, J. C. (2002, October 16). Low cost writing assignments: How to use writing to enhance learning and critical thinking without increasing the teacher's burden. Presentation given at Kansas State University as a Faculty Swap Session. (*Permission to post was granted by the author*).