

# SCALES FOR GRADING EXPLORATORY WRITING

## Explaining Exploratory Writing to Students

1. *Explain your time or length requirements for an exploratory piece.* Some teachers say "15 minutes of freewriting" (or 5 or 10 minutes—whatever works best in your situation). Some specify a length limit: "one full page of single-spaced, typed freewriting using a 12-point font." It is easier to score a thinking piece if you specify a length limit rather than a time limit.
2. *Explain that an exploratory writing means "thinking aloud on paper."* Tell students that you won't count off for organization, grammar, spelling, and so forth. The purpose of exploratory writing is to get thoughts down on paper—to use the discipline of freewriting to generate thought.
3. *Explain that the best ideas in an exploratory piece often come late in a freewriting session.* At the start of an exploratory piece, writers often spill out the most obvious ideas. The writer's own voice and perspective often begin to emerge after a writer runs out of initial ideas. Therefore it is important to keep going—fill that page!
4. *Explain that what you are looking for is engaged thought.* Explain that you will reward the process of thought rather than the product. The key question is not "How well written is this piece?" but "To what extent does this piece reveal engaged thinking about the topic?" Explain that you are looking for evidence of dialogic thinking—seeing issues, finding cruxes and puzzles, confronting inadequate explanations, wading into complexity.

## Time saving strategies for scoring exploratory writing

1. *Don't read everything your students write.* Just as piano teachers don't listen to their students' practice sessions, you don't need to read all your students' exploratory pieces. Work out a strategy of sampling.
2. *Create incentives for doing exploratory writing other than grades.* Weave regular exploratory tasks into the fabric of the course so that students' explorations prime the pump for class discussions and help students generate ideas for formal papers or examinations. Make the tasks interesting and relevant.

## Scales for scoring an exploratory piece

### Check/plus/minus scale

1. *Check:* Indicates the piece meets your expectations for length (or time on task) and for engagement.
2. *Plus:* Indicates a strongly engaged, especially high quality exploration.
3. *Minus:* Indicates that piece is too short or too superficial

### Five-point numerical scale

1. *Score of 5:* Meets or exceeds required length limit; strongly engaged, especially high quality exploration.
2. *Score of 4:* Meets or exceeds required length limit; meets teacher's expectations for engagement
3. *Score of 3:* Strongly engaged, high quality exploration, but too short; fails to meet length or time-on-task requirements. OR Meets required length limits but is too superficial.
4. *Score of 2 or 1:* Too short and too superficial.

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*).