# Incorporating Expressive Writing into the Classroom

**Doug Foulk &
Emily Hoover**

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles,
Series Editor

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**Preface**

"Incorporating Expressive Writing into the Classroom" investigates the effectiveness of "active learning" strategies, particularly short writing activities, which help students to make their thought processes visible.   Emily Hoover and Doug Foulk label these in-class activities "expressive writing" and provide many useful examples of the ways writing can be used in large, lecture-based classrooms.  Their findings indicate that students who engaged in the writing tasks asked more numerous and thoughtful questions in class and performed better on complex exam questions. Results such as these bode well for "writing-intensive" classes.

This study, together with ongoing Center projects, should result in improved undergraduate writing, the Center's primary goal. Along with colloquia, conferences, publications, and other outreach activities, the Center annually funds research projects by University of Minnesota faculty who study any of the following topics:

• characteristics of writing across the University's curriculum;

• status reports on students' writing ability and the University;

• the connections between writing and learning in all fields;

• the characteristics of writing beyond the academy;

• the effects of ethnicity, race, class, and gender on writing; and

• curricular reform through writing-intensive instruction.

We are pleased to present this technical report as part of the ongoing discussion about writing-to-learn in the classroom. One of the goals of all Center publications is to

encourage conversations about writing; we invite you to contact the Center about this

publication or other Center publications and activities.

Lillian Bridwell-Bowles, Series Editor
Holly Littlefield, Editor
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**Incorporating Expressive Writing Into the Classroom**

**So What's Wrong with the Way I Teach Now? Paradigms of Learning**

"Facts are stupid things until brought into connection with some general law."
                    Louis Agassiz (1807-73), Professor of Natural History, Harvard University

Chances are you've been teaching for some time now, and perhaps there are things you like about your teaching style and things you would like to improve upon. For example, have you ever felt that many of your students just don't get enough out of your lectures, even your best ones? Lecturing is, of course, an important tool in communicating a large amount of material in a short amount of time, and most instructors find lecturing indispensable and efficient.

However, lecturing has many shortcomings as well. First, anyone who has lectured for more than ten or fifteen minutes at a stretch can attest to the fact that interest can rapidly drop off among most, if not all, students in a class. Furthermore, lecturing only works in the transference of lower-level learning of factual information; more complex information that requires synthesis or integration of material is not conducive to transference via lecture. Finally, many students do not retain what they hear in a lecture, even if they attempt to take notes; lecturing does not give a significant number of students time to process what they hear. Lecturing, unfortunately, may often be described as a case of information traveling from the notes of the teacher to the notes of the student without entering the minds of either.

Numerous researchers, including Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (1991) have described the faulty logic inherent in the traditional paradigm of learning, in which the teacher delivers a body of facts to students, the learners, who are expected to passively

receive and store it. Unfortunately, despite our reliance upon this method of teaching, we have known for some time that simply memorizing a body of facts is not enough to turn the novice into an expert; learning really is, as Knoblauch and Brannon (1983) have asserted, "the process of an individual mind making meaning from the materials of its experience."  As teachers we should facilitate the active discovery and construction of knowledge by the students themselves, a process in which students take new information and integrate it into existing knowledge structures; only in this way can true, long-term learning take place. One of the tools at our disposal that encourages students to make such connections themselves is called "expressive writing."

In a hurry? Only want the main facts? Look for this symbol. It indicates a summary of the main points of the section, which follows it.

## What Is Expressive Writing?

Expressive writing is writing in which the writer is her/his own audience. It need be evaluated by no one other than the writer. Transactional writing, in comparison, is the communication of previous learning performed for others. Expressive writing is *not* creative writing; it *is* the thought process made visible. When one commits thought  to visible, written form, the learning process is enhanced.

Before describing what expressive writing is, it is important to dispel a myth: expressive writing is NOT so-*called "creative writing" in which the writer essentially "plays"* without purpose or structure. Expressive writing is the act of thinking on paper,

something you probably do every day in the course of your research, composition, and planning processes. Berghage (1991) kept a record of his writing for a two-week period and found that fully 60% consisted of paper reviews for his own use, and lecture, lab, and library notes. These types of writings contain observations, analyses, and insights intended for the author's own use or perhaps for sharing with a trusted audience. This is what expressive writing is—observations, analyses, and insights designed for a writer's personal use.

Let's say you are reviewing the literature within a specific area of interest and you get a sudden idea for further exploration. You write it down so you don't forget, right? Later, you flesh out that idea, jotting down some possible ways the new idea relates to research you've already conducted, then outline a possible means for testing your hypothesis. That's expressive writing. You used expressive writing to make a connection between what you were reading and that which you already knew. Expressive writing, then, is a means of making connections between the known and the new on paper.

Now let's say that your idea led to research, the results of which you intend to publish in a peer-reviewed journal; you know that others will read—and judge—your work. Therefore, you make certain that no unexplored ideas open to serious challenge remain; you only write what you are certain you know. This type of writing is important to you as a scientist, just as were the notes you took in preparation for conducting the research in the first place. But, whereas the original notes you took were part of the learning process, the published article itself is only the formal demonstration of your earlier learning process. This type of writing—writing designed for communication with others—is 'transactional.' Transactional writing is an important communication tool in

the academic community, but it is no substitute for the expressive writing necessary

during the learning process.


Examples of Expressive Writing

1) Observations on recent weather conditions and how they might be affecting an

   experiment in your research plot.

2) Notes taken during a seminar, including lists of facts, complicated descriptions,

   or even brief marginal points of disagreement or confusion you intend to bring

   up or look into.

3) Notes taken while reading a journal article, perhaps even just jotted in the

   margins.

4) A list of ideas generated from a discussion you had with a colleague.

5) A list of questions you'd like to ask the student with whom you're meeting in

   an hour.

6) A diagram or sketch designed to clarify a difficult or complex concept in your

   own mind.

7) A quick first draft of an article in which you allow yourself to write freely.


Couch (1991) has reported that as brief as a five-minute expressive writing session each

class period:

1) Allows students to see to what extent they have mastered the

   material that has been presented;

2) Permits instructors to see any points of confusion students

may have concerning lectures, projects, or reading materials;

3) Encourages feedback between individual students and the instructor.

If we can obtain such dramatic results from such modest means, we have no excuse for

not incorporating them into our classes.

**BUT HOW CAN I MAKE IT WORK FOR MY CLASS?**

**OPTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL SITUATIONS**



Options for making it work:

1)  You can have the class write at the beginning, the end, or outside

of class, depending upon your preferences and constraints.

2)  Depending upon class size and time constraints, have the class

meet in small groups to discuss their writing and to generate

questions for class discussion.

3) When possible, hold a class discussion once a writing task has been

completed.

4) In larger classes, encourage students to leave questions in a box placed in

the classroom, then answer as many questions as possible at the beginning of

each class session.

 5) Keep evaluation of expressive writing to an absolute minimum, while

requiring participation through pass-fail grading in which the task notebook

is merely scanned to verify attention to the assigned topics.

The use of an active learning strategy necessarily reduces the time you have to

cover material in lecture. However, Fulwiler (1987) and others have suggested that

educational approaches, which enable students to synthesize material for themselves,

increase the value of the material covered. In other words, students perform better in the long run if they are exposed to fewer topics, but are exposed to them in greater depth through thinking, writing, and discussion. Is your real goal to cover as much material as possible or to have your students *learn* as much as possible?

Depending upon your teaching style, content complexity, class size, and time limitations, you may have special needs in adapting the use of expressive writing to your own situation. You have several options in tailoring expressive writing and its related active learning strategies to fit your own situation.

1) <u>Writing Task Setting</u>

In class: You may elect to have your class write for five minutes or longer at the beginning or end of each class period. Writing at the beginning of each session helps students remember what came before and to focus on material to be covered next. Writing at the end of a session enables students to quickly review what has been covered and to put new information into their own words.

Should you elect to have your students write in class, be sure to write along with them. This deceptively simple action results in significantly improved student effort. Writing with the class validates the importance of writing and says, "I care enough about learning to want to do it too."  Set an example!

Outside of class: If you prefer that time in class be spent lecturing or discussing material, you may want to assign each writing task at the end of each session. Although such timing allows students to forget some of what they heard in lecture, it also allows them to spend longer than five minutes engaged in writing. The longer students write, the more processing and connecting they do.

2) <u>Small Group Interaction</u>

The purpose of placing students in small groups at the beginning of a class session is to provide them with an opportunity to share what they have written, whether that writing occurred in, or outside of, class. By sharing any insights and perspectives articulated during the writing process, students teach each other–a method of active learning first recommended by Aristotle. In addition, group interaction is intended to focus attention on important material, create a mood conducive to learning, and ensure that all students, not just the most outgoing, cognitively process the material to be learned.

To make small groups work, you must assign a specific task, limit discussion to a brief period (say, five minutes), and then circulate to facilitate discussion by answering factual or procedural questions and gently keeping groups on task. The discussion task we have found most successful in our courses has been, "Based on your most recent writing assignment, formulate at least one question for further discussion."  Such a discussion task effectively focuses the group on the previous writing assignment and provides a springboard for further learning.

While the use of the five-minute small-group discussion is optional, we highly recommend its use. Our experience is that such discussion benefits all members of the class.

3) <u>Class Discussion</u>

During the course of our original expressive writing research, we discovered that expressive writing assignments coupled with brief small group interaction had the potential to spark amazing class discussions. Because expressive writing resulted in

students who were more engaged and actively making connections, the questions they asked tended to be more complex and far-reaching than we ever saw without the use of the writing tasks. In addition, a major benefit of such discussion was instant feedback as to how well a topic area had been grasped; if a significant number of students got lost, this became clear during the class discussions.

An option we recommend, therefore, is to conduct a class discussion at the beginning of each class session, preferably preceded by a five-minute small group discussion as described above. In either case, we have found that the less the instructor intrudes on the flow of questioning, the more complex the level of inquiry becomes. While class discussion is the single component most likely to reduce the class time remaining for traditional lecture, our experience is that it is also the component, which provides the greatest potential for learning. Not only will you as an instructor be able to see the dramatic effects of expressive writing on your students, but the instant feedback you receive allows you to respond to your students' needs much more quickly than with a traditional lecture/exam format.

4) Question Box

We have successfully used small group and class discussions in classes ranging from 6 to 55 students; in much larger classes you may feel that such an approach is unworkable. In those cases you may prefer to keep a question box at the door(s) to your classroom; students are encouraged to submit questions or comments, anonymously if desired, at the end of a session. Simply by scanning the submitted questions, you can determine any general areas of confusion and select questions to be addressed at the

beginning of the next class period. Such a method allows students even in larger classes to feel that they have a personal stake in course content.

5) Evaluation

For our study, our goal was to encourage truly expressive writing by making sure that students knew their writing would not be evaluated. Our means for reaching that goal was to have students compile their writing tasks in a notebook, then turn them in at the end of the quarter for extra credit. However, because extra credit was not a strong enough motivator for many students, we concluded that expressive writing assignments should be a required component of a course. Because expressive writing is by definition for the author's own use rather than for submission to an authority, and because few instructors have time to grade fifteen or fifty notebooks, we recommend that they be evaluated as minimally as possible, on a pass-fail basis only. That is, the collected writings should be required in order to receive a grade, but the writings themselves should not be graded.

Pass-fail evaluation of collected writings requires only that you or an assistant quickly scan each notebook to verify that each student made an effort to address task topics; such verification involves only the briefest scanning of a few entries. Because it only takes a minute or two to verify acceptable attention to the assigned topics, and because the expressive writing notebook easily replaces in value and effort another writing assignment, your time grading each quarter may actually *decrease*.

Should you feel that you cannot afford even this brief time spent evaluating notebooks, be creative. Another possibility would be to hold 'open task notebook' exams. As a means of discouraging students from filling the notebook with direct lecture or reading notes, you could make it clear that notebooks would be randomly examined

immediately after the exam. If you elect to use such a method, you would want to notify

your students at the beginning of the quarter that exams would be at least partly based on

writing tasks; such an arrangement would provide strong motivation.

**AVOIDING REGURGITATION: FIVE TASK TYPES TO TRY**

Task types:

1) Summary

2) Compare and Contrast

3) Applied Problem Solving

4) Formal Invention

5) Informal Invention

When your students engage themselves in an expressive writing task, your goal is

to provide them with a forum in which they can make observations and connections of

their own. This active restructuring of one's knowledge base may be as simple as

restating a concept in one's own words or as complex as originating a new hypothesis.

Expressive writing tasks come in all shapes and sizes, and all of them can aid in this

process. Though certainly not exhaustive, the following list of five task types will get you

started.

1) *The summary task* is a restatement of information presented in class; in its simplest

form it provides no further synthesis or integration of information, although  students

 may exceed this minimum with or without your prompting.

Example:  To follow a horticultural science course lecture on site selection: "Based

upon today's lecture, where would you site a small fruit operation? Why?"

2) *The compare and contrast task* is the examination of two or more concepts (crops,

procedures, physiological pathways, etc.) side by side.

Example: To follow a lecture on the morphology and physiology of plant bulbs:

"Explain to your non-scientist uncle the differences and similarities which exist in

the storage structures of his crocus, daffodil and lily plants." Note that by specifying

the recipient of the information, you can influence the vocabulary and tone students must

use in their answers. You may, as in this instance, require students to use

nontechnical language; by specifying a peer-reviewed journal readership as the professor.

3) *The applied problem-solving tas*k is the utilization of information to tackle a real-

life situation.

Example: To follow a lecture in seed germination practices:  "A new nursery operator

has a problem. After three weeks, none of the *Abies concolor*  seeds he planted have

germinated. What questions do you ask him? Justify your reason for asking each

question."

4) *The formal invention task* is the synthesis of new ideas based upon recently

presented information. When this new information is integrated with an existing

knowledge base, a new whole is created.

Example: To follow a lecture on the growing requirements of grapes: "What are the

goals of a grape training system? Describe a system, existing or  invented, which will

best help you reach those goals in a specific geographical region of your choosing."

Note here that we began with a summary question and followed it up with a request

for invention. Summary tasks often work best as the introduction to a more complex

task; summary on its own has the potential to bore your more advanced students.

5) *The informal invention task* is similar to the formal invention task, but is more

playfully creative. It is designed to encourage your students to smile, relax and

perhaps stretch themselves a bit.

Example: To follow a lecture on basic genetic principles: "Use an analogy to explain

chromosomes to a group of 4th graders." Other informal invention tasks could ask

for posters or flow charts; you can inspire your students with your own creativity.

**GUIDELINES FOR TASK DESIGN**



Task-creation guidelines:

1) Prepare your students for your exams.

2) Prepare your students for the real world.

3) Keep tasks at the 5-20 minute complexity level.

4) Alternate task types and complexity.

5) When stuck for a task, write a summary-type task involving a specific

audience.

When creating a task for your class, ask yourself, *which concepts from this lecture

am I most likely to emphasize on an exam?* Then write the task so it reflects your answer.

As much as students may get excited about learning for the joy of discovery, most

students will tell you their main goal in your class is to get an 'A.'  If you make it clear

that the exam will look very much like the tasks you'll assign, you will motivate them to

participate—and perhaps even forestall those annoying "What's gonna be on the exam?"

questions. Similarly, write tasks, which reflect real-life situations. This convinces

students of the relevancy of the tasks to the real world.

Keep tasks relatively straightforward. Don't ask more than one or two questions per task, and don't ask a complex question requiring a great deal of forethought. It should be possible to address the topic of a task in 5-20 minutes—and it should be possible for the instructor to create the task more quickly than that!

Alternate tasks of different types and complexity. This approach prevents students from becoming fatigued or bored. Students have been taught that there is one "correct" answer to most things, and since many of your tasks require lists of possible solutions or the making of new connections rather than a simple answer, your students may become easily frustrated. Give them a break now and then; compare and contrast or informal invention-type tasks are especially good for a change of pace.

If your own creativity fails you and you are really, really stuck for a task idea, ask students to explain something from your lecture to a specific audience—photosynthesis to a poet, or supply-side economics to a Russian pen pal. Never underestimate the benefits to be derived from simply getting students to restate your ideas in a new way.

**GETTING OFF ON THE RIGHT FOOT: INTRODUCING YOUR STUDENTS TO EXPRESSIVE WRITING**

On the first day, tell your students:

1) What expressive writing is and isn't.

2) Why you believe in it and require it.

3) Different approaches they can use.

4) What tasks will look like, including a sample answer.

5) How the tasks will enable them to prepare for your exams.

6) That you will not be judging what they say or how they say it.

Because previous experience has been unlikely to prepare your students for active learning strategies, including expressive writing, they may require extensive guidelines at the beginning of the term. This information should include:

1) An explanation of just what expressive writing is and is not, and why you believe in it and require it.

2) Further explanation that the goal of expressive writing is reached in the *process* of writing, not in the absolute correctness of the result.

3) Examples of ways to approach task assignments, including lists, charts, and illustrations, as well as traditional sentence/paragraph-type entries.

4) Examples of the types of tasks they may expect, along with an answer you yourself have written for one or more of them (this action demonstrates your commitment to writing and your willingness to take a risk for your students).

5) A reminder that the exam will look very much like the tasks.

6) Reassurance that spelling, punctuation, organization or factual accuracy will not be graded when the task notebook is turned in (if you go that route). Instead, legibility and attention to the assigned topic are the only requirements for credit. Your students need to believe that they may write freely without fear of judgment.

Finally, we strongly recommend that your very first task assignment each quarter should be: *Describe your expectations for this course.* Then respond by listening to the feedback generated, and, if reasonable, negotiate changes in course content. This opens up a dialogue between students and instructor much earlier than normally occurs, in our experience, and creates a highly favorable learning environment in which students can

see that they have a role in their own education. A sample handout for the first day of class is included in Appendix A.

## CONCLUSION

Let's face it, the need to conduct research and to publish results is more highly rewarded at a research institution like the University of Minnesota than teaching will ever be. Teaching is often seen as purely secondary in importance, almost a nuisance to be dealt with.  Yet, thoughtful, effective teaching is the key to making certain that our students are well equipped for success in both academia and industry.  The use of expressive writing can be an important element of thoughtful, effective teaching.  The only problem is that thoughtful, effective teaching takes creativity, effort, and yes, perhaps even time.  Expressive writing as a teaching tool is most likely not a time-saver; it is, however, definitely more rewarding.  Hopefully it is the rewards of teaching, not the ease, which keep an instructor excited about doing it.

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**APPENDIX A**

**SAMPLE HANDOUT FOR THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS**

**Horticulture 1036**
**Winter, 1992**
**Workbook Requirement**

**Introduction:**     Research has shown that 'expressive' writing (writing in which the

writer is her/his own intended audience) enables students to think

critically within a subject area better than the type of writing

usually performed when writing a report or taking an exam.  When

you engage in expressive writing, you are truly 'thinking on

paper,' and, therefore, are writing for yourself.  We are conducting

a study to determine if expressive writing and peer discussions will

enable you to better integrate newly learned horticultural

information into your existing knowledge base.

**Procedure:**        You will receive a question at the end of each classroom period

based upon that day's lecture.  You may find that you can

complete the assignment to your satisfaction within a five minute

period; however, studies show that the longer you write about what

you know, don't know, wish you knew, etc., the better you will be

able to fit new information into the framework of what you already

know.

At the beginning of each class period, you will take five minutes to

share your previous day's writing with other members of the class

and generate questions for further discussion.  We will take the

time to discuss your questions in class before beginning a new

lecture topic.

**We Will** *NOT-.*          1) grade your writing.

2) evaluate your ability to write coherent sentences, spell or

punctuate properly, or even get your facts straight.  *Our intention*

*is not to teach you how to write!* You are thinking and writing for

*yourself,* not for us!

**We Will:**                 1) Require you to keep your writing—collected in a bound

notebook with all writings *dated* and in *chronological order.*

2) Collect workbooks once during the quarter (approximately week

3). On the day of the final exam, we will collect workbooks for

evaluation.  Workbooks will be returned to you by the end of

spring quarter, 1992.

3) Base your final grade upon your participation.  If we judge you

to have made an honest effort to perform the writing tasks, we will

replace another grade (up to 10% of total grade credits) with credit

for an 'A'.