

Student Guide to Writing-Based Teaching Practices

Overview: In the Bard College Language & Thinking Program, we use in-class writing as way to enter into conversation with texts and with one another as instructors and students. In-class writing can help us to focus our attention in a moment of private reflection, or help us to generate dialogue with a partner or a group, or allow us to hear the language of a text in a completely new and surprising way. What follows is a brief overview of the three core writing practices and a series of examples of how these practices might be used in your own classroom or writing workshop.

Core Writing (& Reading) Practices:

1. **Private Free Writing:** Alone or in a group, this practice involves writing whatever you like, for a set period of time (say, 5 minutes.) Keep your pen moving across the page, without stopping to think about what you're writing. Let your thinking follow your writing. If you get stuck, put any unrelated words on the page until something like a chain of thought emerges for you. Stick with the discipline of writing to time, and push yourself to keep going even after you've come to the end of an idea and find yourself chasing after a new one. Write until the time is up. If you're writing in a group and keeping time for others, give everyone a one-minute warning before stopping. *This practice is particularly useful as a way to begin a class session or to offer a group the time to clear their heads before embarking upon a shared learning experience.*
2. **Focused Free Writing:** Focused free writing is what it sounds like—free writing with a focus. As with private writing, you want to keep your pen moving and write to a time limit (perhaps 7 minutes), resisting the urge to think and then write. Focused free writing always begins with some kind of directive (or focus) in the form of a text or question—you might invite students to write their first reactions to a text (or a moment, a piece of language, or an image within it), or you might offer several interconnected prompts or questions intended to help to open up a topic or text to a wider range of interpretation. *It is important to remember that focused free writing is intended to be generative and exploratory, not a carefully plotted out paragraph. This kind of writing is also often public (shared) and can be used to help students articulate and discover their ideas about a text or topic, stimulate or jumpstart discussion, or to delve deeper into specific content.*
3. **Process (Metacognitive) Writing:** This practice creates space for you to think about the writing done individually and as a group over the course of a single workshop session or an entire day. In other words, you might as a group to write about the writing (or their own writing) for 5 minutes. *Process writing invites us to reflect on the work we've just done in order to keep some kind of written record of thinking in action. Some common process writing*

prompts include: How has your perspective on a text or a question changed? What seems to be lurking for you in your writing at this point? What are you now able to notice about your own writing process, perhaps focusing on something that either surprises or puzzles you? What new ideas do you have that you want to return to in the future? How did you do what you just did? If you had more time, what would you do next?

4. **Text Rendering / Collaborative Reading:** The simple practice of reading a selected passage out loud makes it possible to get both the language of the text and the voices of its readers into a room. It also helps to focus attention on voice, tone, inflection, and the acts of interpretation that underlie all of these things. Try a group reading of a longer passage of text, having each person take a line or two in sequence. When that is done, consider reading the same passage backwards by line. You might also try reading in different moods, voices, or genres (tragedy, love letter, alien visitor, jazz solo vocal). *Text rendering is a practice that invites students to collaborate and play with a text, while also encouraging the habit of reading all texts multiple times. Text rendering is also performative, inviting students to engage their bodies in the reading of a text.*

Sharing Our Writing Key to these writing practices is how the informal, often messy, texts are read out loud. In order to maintain the safe space of the classroom or workshop, students should never be forced to read anything that feels uncomfortable (and private writing is never shared). With this in mind, here are a few suggestions for how to facilitate the sharing process:

- **Bracket & Share:** Give everyone some time to read over their focused free write or process write (about 5 minutes) and then ask them to look for some portion of what they've written to read out loud to the group. When people find what they want to read, they should draw *brackets* around the selected language and *only read from within those brackets*.
- **Privilege the Written Word:** Remind the group to avoid the temptation to extemporize, or to give an impromptu spoken presentation, or to preface the selection with apologies or introductory remarks of any kind. Simply read what is on the page exactly as it is written.
- **Active Listening:** Remind the group to listen to each other actively—this means that everyone is concentrating fully on the person reading, and perhaps even taking note of words and phrases that they find exciting or interesting.
- **Popcorn or Quaker Style Sharing:** While you can certainly ask the group to share by going around the seminar table or circle, you might also suggest that the group share in other ways.
 - With “popcorning,” one student begins and others voluntarily share their writing at random, organizing themselves with nonverbal cues.
 - Quaker style sharing involves listening carefully and then jumping in to share writing when one hears something in another’s work that connects (or challenges) what they wrote themselves.

Additional Writing Activities:

1. **Loop Writing:** Loop writing is a sequence of interconnected focused free writes that aim to approach a single topic or inquiry from a range of different angles. This practice is useful when working towards a longer, more “polished” piece of writing because of the way students are pushed to generate a lot of “raw materials” that can later be revised. Loop writing is also useful as a close reading (writing to read) practice because of the way it asks students to write in response to someone else’s language and engage with it on a variety of different levels. The sequence of the focused free writes is particularly important with loop writing—there needs to be a progression from brainstorming to storytelling/experiential to expository and critical writing.

Sample sequence of “loops”:

- **First thoughts:** Take 2-3 minutes to write down your immediate responses or reactions to the topic or text.
 - **Stories & Portraits:** Take 5-7 minutes to tell the story of a situation or experience that is somehow connected to the topic or text. Make sure to include as many details and description as possible in your story or portrait. The goal here is to use one’s own experience (and associations) in order to find a way in to a topic.
 - **Dialogue with the author:** Imagine that you are able to have a real conversation with the author—write that dialogue (taking 5-7 minutes to do so). What questions would you ask? How do you imagine the writer would respond? These dialogues can even be performed as short plays.
 - **Vary the audience:** Take 5 minutes and write to explain your topic or text to someone who is completely unfamiliar with it. Be as clear and concrete as possible.
 - **Record your own reading process:** Tell the story of your reading of the text. This might be literal (what did you do in order to get through the text?), or you might keep track of your thoughts as they shift and change during your reading process. This prompt is also a moment where you might ask students to use their visual literacies to create maps of what happened as they read, using images and metaphors to convey the sensations experienced (i.e. a road map with potholes and construction). *This loop is often assigned outside of class as homework, but can be done during a workshop session if given at least 10 minutes.*
 - **Imagining Key Questions:** What question is this text answering? What problem does it address? What’s at stake for the writer? For the reader? Ask the group to take 5 minutes to focus on what the text is trying to accomplish and why.
2. **Writing from Images:** This practice involves a series of interconnected focused free writes that are useful when working with a group on a visual text. By using writing to works of art, students are encouraged to practice spatial noticing, enhance sensitivity to forms and conventions of representation.

Some prompts that are useful when working with visual texts:

- Make a list of everything you see in the image/text. This should be a list and each entry on the list will begin with “look at the...”

- Look at the image again and make a second list, this time each entry on the list should begin with “**where is the...**” The goal here is to focus on what is not visible in the image/text.
- **Analogies:**
 - o If this image was a story or poem what would its title be?
 - o If this image was a piece of music, what kind of music would it be? What song would it be?
 - o If this image was an advertisement, what would it be advertising? What would the slogan be?

3. *Dialectical (Dialogical) Notebooks*: This practice combines focused free writing and process writing with working in small groups, conversing through writing in order to come to a deeper understanding of a difficult text.

- Ask the group to turn to a clean page in their notebook and **divide it into 3 vertical columns.**

Writer	Response	Reply/Process

- **Writing only in the left column (“Writer”)**, ask the group to respond to a series of 2-3 focused free writes (FFW), writing in response to a shared difficult text. For each, students will write to time, usually about 5 minutes per prompt.
 - o **Sample sequence of focused free write prompts:**
 - **1:** Find a passage in the text that you are drawn to, something you really understand—copy it into your notebook and write to explore your thinking. Describe what you believe you understand about the text based on the passage you selected. *Introspective observation and reporting.*
 - **2:** Find a passage in the text that puzzles or confuses you, something you have questions about. Copy the quote and write in order to attempt to come to a clearer understanding of this moment in the text. You might end this piece of writing with a question you need answered to fully understand the quote (and/or text). *Critical thinking and meaning making.*
 - **3:** What other questions does this text push you to ask? *Open, reflective questioning.*
- Once the group finishes responding to the focused free writes, ask them to **exchange notebooks with a partner, or, arrange the group into pairs.**
 - o The partner should read over what is written in the left-most column and then respond to it in writing in the middle column (about 12 minutes or so).
 - o Remind the group to respond thoroughly—they might ask their partner questions in order to help push their thinking further, they might refer to other moments in the text, etc.
- **Switch the notebooks once again** so that everyone has their own notebooks back.

- **Read your partner's writing** in the middle column and **respond to it** in the right-most column. You might think of this as a process column—you can respond to your partner's thoughts while also taking note of how your own thinking grows and changes.
- **Keep spoken conversation to a minimum** and concentrate on responding in writing.
- When this is finished, everyone **brackets and shares a sentence or two from each of the three columns** in order to share the conversation that took place on the page with the larger group.