

Journal Assignments

[Adapted from Fulwiler, *Teaching With Writing* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, Boynton/Cook, 1987)]

For ***Starting Class***. Introduce a class with a five-minute journal-write. You might suggest a topic related to the day's lesson (e.g., a quote from the reading assignment that even you have trouble with). Allow those first few minutes for students to compose their thoughts and focus them in a public direction. Afterwards, you can use the journal entries they have written as access into a discussion of the material. You might have some of the class read their journal entries aloud to start people talking. Make sure they understand that you and the rest of the class are not expecting smooth, brilliant prose. You realize that their writing for just five minutes will result in awkward, halting, even at times fragmentary sentences. What you are looking for is their thinking on the subject.

For ***Summarizing***. End a class with a journal-write. This exercise asks students to summarize the information or ideas they have learned during class. You might want to give them ten minutes, depending on the difficulty of the material. The purpose of the summary entry is to find out what they learned that day and to discover what questions are still unanswered. The summary entry also helps students synthesize material for themselves and thus, increase its value to them.

For ***Focusing***. Plan a five-minute writing task in the middle of class to give focus to an idea or problem. This is an especially good assignment for lecture classes. Listening can become passive and note-taking mechanical. This kind of journal-write gives students a chance to re-engage themselves with the material by shifting them into a participant role.

For ***Problem Solving***. Use journals as a vehicle for posing and solving problems. The reading for the class may include particularly difficult parts that need exploration or contradictory perspectives that should be problematic for the reader. Assigning a journal-write on a particular problem highlights the problem as a problem and gives students the opportunity to work through it on their own.

For ***Responding***. Use journals to sharpen student responses to their academic experience. Using the journal as the place to write their reactions to class material asks students to go one step beyond vaguely thinking about their responses. It allows them the opportunity to explore their responses without having to make a formal commitment in a paper.

For ***Progress Reports***. Use journals to monitor progress through the course. You might ask students to summarize readings on a particular concept or event as a way of telling how much they are learning. You might ask students to reflect upon the course in process to give them the opportunity to complain or to tell you what you are doing right.