

Assigning Student Journals

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Many faculty members have found journal writing an effective method for teaching writing and deepening students' learning of a topic. When used properly, journal writing gives students practice writing informally on a regular basis and can help them to synthesize their reading, critical thinking and writing skills. Because journals are reflective in nature, they can prompt students to be self-conscious of the learning they are doing in the course.

Yet, journals also pose a number of important challenges. If students are not given clear guidelines, they can veer into diary-writing creating boundary problems between student and professor. Also, if the journal entries do not demand different thinking and creative skills, students can quickly become bored with them; and faculty can find them tedious to read. To help students make effective use of journals, follow these guidelines:

Put journal objectives and requirements in writing.

Be clear about the goals for journal entries. Know yourself what kind of writing you expect to happen in the journal (e.g., summarize a reading, critique a viewpoint, illustrate a concept, air grievances). Rarely does the "anything goes" strategy motivate a student or accomplish what you have in mind.

Vary the journal prompts that you give students.

In order to continue motivating students, find ways to encourage students to write different types of journal entries. You can issue daily or weekly prompts that ask students to practice different thinking skills (e.g., summary, description, analysis, evaluation, application). Or you can simply specify that over the course of the semester they should create entries that fall into a number of different categories (e.g., telling a story, critiquing a text, summarizing a text, comparing two texts).

Read the journals on a regular basis.

Although reading journals is very time-consuming, it is necessary to do so in order to prevent students from perceiving journals as "busy work." Students will determine the value you place on writing in large part on the responses they receive. IF you cannot read everything that they write, then try to find ways for classmates to give each other comments. Posting journals on a class Web site can be a great way to do this.

Inform students that journals are not a "private" forum where they can write anything they want.

Allowing students to write anything in a journal encourages misunderstanding and misconception. Not only will it invite students to give you personal information that you may not be equipped to handle, but it will not encourage them to keep their entries focused on course learning goals.

Use journals in class activities and discussions.

One way to ensure that students are tying the journal entries to course content is to incorporate the journals periodically into the seminar. For example, you can invite students to complete an entry in class using a specific prompt. Or as you are reading journals, write down intriguing passages you find and bring them into class and use as discussion starters. Finally, when you read an impressive entry, encourage the student writer to use that as the basis for the next paper assignment.

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