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You may feel that the information you find in your textbooks and class handouts is enough to handle. Add to that a whole library full of books, plus the sea of Internet sources, and it can all become overwhelming. However, with the right 21st century learning tools, you can be ready for this challenge.

Writing is one of these important tools because it helps you remember, analyze, and evaluate information. It also helps you demonstrate what you have learned and share your personal discoveries. In short, writing helps you gain control of information, turning it into knowledge. This chapter explores different reasons to write and introduces you to the writing process. Once you understand the scope and power of writing, you will appreciate what a valuable learning tool it truly is.

Learning Outcomes
Write to learn.
Write to share learning.
Use the writing process.
Write in personal journals or blogs.

“We're not in an information age anymore. We're in the information management age.”

Chris Hardwick

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Writing to Learn

Gertrude Stein was a twentieth-century writer of great stature. The special place that writing held in her life echoes in Stein's own words: "To write is to write is to write is to write." For her, there was nothing more to say about the subject.

Why was Stein so taken by writing? Was it the recognition she received from it? Probably not. What Stein valued most was the special opportunity that writing offered her. It made her think, deepened her understanding of new subjects, and helped her to form interesting connections. In other words, writing helped Gertrude Stein to learn.

The Proper Approach

If you approach writing as just another assignment, you may miss its true value. Writing is actually a way to learn. Brief notes, a lengthy list, a series of questions about a topic—these are all meaningful forms of writing that connect you to the subjects you are studying. As you include writing in your learning routine, you will discover its value.

When you write to learn, write freely and naturally. Most writing-to-learn activities are short, spontaneous, exploratory, and almost never graded or shared with others. This kind of writing is not about showing how well you can write or how much you know. Instead, it is about increasing your understanding. Some educators believe that writing to learn is the key to mastering any subject—science or social studies, English or electronics.

The Payoff

Writing to learn offers these immediate, long-lasting benefits:

- Deeper connection with course work
- Ability to understand new concepts
- Thinking at higher levels (analyzing, evaluating)
- Positive attitude about course work
- Lifelong learning technique

“You must recognize that meaningful writing doesn’t have to lead to an end product.”

Todd Capewell

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Keeping a Class Notebook

Keeping a class notebook, or learning log, is a good way to incorporate writing into your learning routine. You can take notes as well as reflect on new concepts and subjects. It is a place where you can dig deeper into what you have learned from letters, class discussions, group projects, and experiments. The free flow of ideas promotes true learning. Here are some specific ideas for using a class notebook.

Using a Class Notebook

- **Write a summary of a learning experience** (a lecture, a discussion, a project). Add your own conclusions, telling what information you found most valuable or interesting, what opinions you agreed with or disagreed with, and why.
- **Personalize new ideas and concepts.** Consider how this new information relates to what you already know.
- **Write about what you still want to know about a topic.** Then brainstorm ways to find this information.
- **Discuss your course work with a particular audience.** Write as if you were talking about these topics with a young child, a foreign exchange student, an alien from another planet, an object.
- **Question what you are learning.** How important are the concepts you are learning? One way to discover this is to write a dialogue.
- **Express ideas and information in pictures, charts, and maps.**
- **Start a glossary of important and interesting vocabulary words.** Use these words in your log entries.
- **Argue for or against a topic.** The topic can be anything that comes up in a discussion, in a lecture, or in your reading.
- **Write about how you are doing in a certain class.** Are you learning as much as you can, or doing as well as you had hoped? Is some of the material hard for you? What can you do to improve?
Sample Notebook Entries

The sample learning-log entries below were written in response to a science article and a chemistry lecture. Notice how both entries are personalized.

Response to a Science Article

I just read an article in a science magazine about mosquitoes and the diseases they can carry. I thought flies and mosquitoes were a pain just because they bite. But it turns out that you can get more than an itchy bump from a mosquito. They can carry viruses that cause serious diseases such as malaria and encephalitis. Doctors think that, in all of history, more people have died of malaria than any other disease. Malaria was even one of the reasons why the Roman Empire fell. In 1999, seven people in New York City died from encephalitis caused by mosquito bites. Health officials are very concerned about similar outbreaks in the future.

Response to a Chemistry Lecture

Noble Gases and the Hindenburg

Our teacher used the Hindenburg as an example of how noble gases are different from other elements. The Hindenburg was a zeppelin—a huge, cylinder-shaped, flying balloon that could carry passengers. It was filled with hydrogen—which is not a noble gas—and reacted with oxygen in the air, causing the zeppelin to burn. Thirty-six people died. If helium had been used instead, it also would have kept the zeppelin airborne, but it wouldn't have burned. This is because it is a noble gas, meaning it doesn't interact with other elements. That's why balloons and dirigibles use helium now, not hydrogen. This got me thinking about how what you don't know can hurt you. I guess chemistry can actually be useful in real life!
Writing-to-Learn Strategies

Writing to learn is essentially exploratory writing. What form it takes is strictly up to you, as long as it encourages thinking and learning. You may prefer free, nonstop writing, or you may decide to try some of the following strategies.

**Debates** • Imagine yourself split into two persons. One of you defends an opinion about a topic, and the other disagrees with it. Keep the debate going as long as you can.

**Dialogues** • Create an imaginary conversation between yourself and a character (perhaps a historical figure) or between two characters (perhaps from a novel).

**First Thoughts** • In order to focus on a new topic, write down your immediate impressions about it.

**Nutshelling** • Write in a nutshell (one sentence) the importance of something you’ve heard, seen, or read.

**Predicting** • Stop at a key point in a book or lesson and write down what you think will happen next. Predicting works especially well with materials that have a strong cause-and-effect relationship.

**Pointed Questions** • Keep asking yourself why? in your writing until you run out of answers.

**Stop 'n' Write** • At any point in a reading assignment, stop and write about what you've just read. This allows you to evaluate your understanding of the topic.

**Picture Outlines** • Instead of writing, organize the main points of a lecture or reading assignment into a picture outline.