

Informal writing exercises

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Example 1: Ticket in and ticket out (objective: summarize and synthesize class material). At the beginning of class I tell my students that if they want to stay in class, their “ticket in” is to write down in one sentence what they remembered from the previous class. They also have to make sure that what they report is something that was not mentioned by a previous student. I do a similar writing exercise at the end of class for their ticket out of the class (note: they all stay and all leave eventually). I then go around the classroom to allow each student to read their sentence. Having to write that sentence and then come up with alternatives in case other students have the same thought forces students to review their notes, quickly organize their thoughts about the class material, and figure out if there are any holes in their understanding (I got this idea from the AQPC book *Like long Learning for Postsecondary Instructors*).

Example 2: Walk in the shoes of someone with Schizophrenia (objective: elicit perspective-taking). In this class activity I do with my general psychology students, I make students watch a short clip that makes them experience what it feels like to have schizophrenia (www.liveleak.com/view?i=e3e_1279725221). In a first-person camera angle, this video shows the viewer some everyday routine events in the skin of someone with Schizophrenia (getting dressed, getting a cup of coffee, watching TV, paying a pizza delivery man, etc.). I then explain the three major symptoms of schizophrenia (positive, negative, and disorganized symptoms) to the students, and show a video of a patient exhibiting all these symptoms (www.youtube.com/watch?v=gGnl8dqEoPQ). As a writing exercise, I ask them to write a script of what happened in the first video that explains what happens as if they themselves have schizophrenia, and have all three types of symptoms. Students found it very challenging (they had a hard time thinking and writing in a disorganized fashion, despite what some teachers believe!) and they took it very seriously. This worked really well in engaging their thinking about this devastating and misunderstood disorder, and in eliciting their empathy and perspective-taking skills.

Example 3: write and present a proposal for an attachment program (and then reject it). (objectives: application of theoretical concepts in real-life, analyze evidence-based arguments from two perspectives). Attachment is an important topic in developmental psychology. After discussing the propositions of attachment theory and the different attachment styles with their incidence and related outcomes, I share with students a video of an attachment-based program that help at-risk parents and their infants develop a secure attachment ([www.amnh.org/explore/science-bulletins/\(watch\)/human/documentaries/attachment-theory-understanding-the-essential-bond](http://www.amnh.org/explore/science-bulletins/(watch)/human/documentaries/attachment-theory-understanding-the-essential-bond)). I then give the following instructions to students to complete in teams: *Pretend you're a team of lobbyists pushing to create a similar attachment-based parenting program in Mtl for which you want the government to issue vouchers for parents to attend. In teams of 3 or 4, write a proposal that highlights a) the evidence that back up your claim that these vouchers are money well spent, b) the positive impact on society at large, c) the best way to disseminate knowledge*

*about this program to a wide audience, and d) the detailed procedure on what and how your program would teach parents to help them develop a secure attachment with their child?. In a low-tech active learning classroom, I ask them to write their proposal on the glass board (20 minutes). Then we quickly go around the room to look at everyone's proposal. At this point, most students become strong advocates for attachment-based programs. To challenge their critical thinking skills and experience the real-life constraints of this kind of situation, I then ask them to individually do the following: *Now I want you to respond to the lobbyist as a policy maker who is against the program. Write a persuasive argument drawing on what you have learned about attachment and using your skills of analysis and reasoning to explain why these parenting classes are unlikely to be effective (10 minutes).* As a reflective exercise (and for me to collect their impressions), I ask students to write down how easy or challenging they found this exercise and why. The consensus is that they find it quite difficult, especially the rebuttal part and that it made them more critical of class material.*

Example 4: Free-writing on Tell an Alien why humans survive so successfully (Objectives: elicit prior knowledge, critical thinking and prepare discussion on cultural learning). I have used several free-writing exercises which I think is a great way to get students to start thinking about an issue without constraints. Free-writing involve having students answer a question or reflect on an idea freely for a predetermined amount of time (3 to 5 minutes work best for me). The only rule to free-writing is that the student keeps writing: no erasing or deleting, no pause. The result is usually messy, disorganized and difficult to decipher, which is reflective of anyone's thought process about a new complex topic. Once students have something written down, they are prepared to discuss their thoughts with others (in small and/or large groups). One of these free-writing exercises that elicited lots of interesting ideas was one I used before introducing the topic of cultural learning in my cultural psychology (401) course: *You've just been kidnapped by Aliens and they refuse to let you go until you tell them why humans have been so successful at survival? You have only 5 minutes to respond to the Alien in this free-writing exercise.*