
Writing to Learn Economics

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From its inception, the PSC Writing Across the Curriculum program has involved students in the learning process through a variety of writing activities. The program has proven particularly well-suited to the economics classroom. While all writing assignments (short or long, graded or not graded) provide invaluable practice in basic writing skills, the primary focus of those assignments is to improve the learning of economics—to have students start thinking like economists. In the process, student writing skills do improve significantly. More importantly, however, students are converted from passive notetakers to active learners.

The examples of student writing assignments discussed below require little, if any, additional work on the part of the instructor. What they do require is a different type of work and a willingness to try new approaches to achieve a given goal.

Sample Writing Activities

The following list provides an overview of the types of assignments used:

1. **Classroom Freewrites:** Toward the end of a class the students are asked to briefly explain the topics covered in the lecture or to illustrate how these tools could be applied to a current issue in the newspaper. These writings are collected but not graded. At the beginning of the next class an overview of these freewrites is used as a summary of the last lecture or as an

introduction to the current topic. This feedback is important because it allows the students to see how their writings help to tie together the various parts of the course. Some typical freewrites would be to ask the students if Larry Bird is worth \$1.5 million to the Celtics or what impact will a \$10-a-barrel tax on imported oil have on sales at the local mall.

2. Question/Suggestion Box: Near the classroom exits a box is placed into which students may put their questions, comments or suggestions. This box was originally only used in large freshman classes as a way to get some quick feedback from those reluctant to participate orally. The success of the question box in getting students to put their questions into writing has led to its use in all of my classes. Comments received have ranged from "Please slow down" and "I need help" to several pages critiquing McConnell's treatment of fascism. Responding to the questions at the beginning of the next class is crucial.
3. Thought Questions: About once a week I give each class an optional question or paradox to answer. (For example, comment on and evaluate the following statement, "Economics should teach you to think marginally and not marginally think.") The students must submit their answers before the next class. These answers are *not* graded, but students do receive comments on how their answers could be improved. Some of these questions are found on future exams.
4. Letters Home: Students in the survey course are required to write three "letters home" to explain the Economics of. . . . The assignments are keyed to the book of readings, but they could be based on any of a variety of sources. Before submitting their letters the students must have them reviewed by a specified classmate. A grade is given (+,0,-) to each letter and to the peer review. After the letters are submitted, the topics are reviewed in discussion classes. Some of the issues will then be repeated as exam questions.

5. **MICROSIM Reports:** Students in the microeconomics and intermediate microeconomics classes are required to write three brief reports on their current status and future plans for the MICROSIM market simulation. These assignments ask students to explain how the student-managed firm arrived at its current position and what their plans are for the future. In order to write these letters, the students must do detailed analyses of production, pricing, advertising, capital investment, and product development.
6. **Journals:** Students in the introductory courses are asked to keep a journal in which they explain or evaluate a current article from a newspaper or magazine in light of that week's material. These journals are collected and reviewed on a monthly basis. The students receive a grade (+,0,-) depending on how complete their journal is. Journal entries range from reviews of housing for the homeless in Washington, D.C., to the impact of increasing user fees as a means of balancing the budget.
7. **Exams:** All exams have at least twenty-five percent of their content devoted to summary evaluations of readings and/or lectures.

Responding to Writing is Essential

The key to effective usage of these and all Writing Across the Curriculum related writing assignments is to respond quickly to the students. For the non-graded types of assignments (1,2,3), brief class discussions will typically suffice. What is important is that the students recognize that the assignments are an integral part of the learning process.

The graded assignments (4,5,6,7) are critiqued in more detail on the papers themselves. Usually, I share with the class some of the better examples of these assignments so they can use them as guides for their future efforts.

Assessment of Writing Across the Curriculum in Economics

The Writing Task Force will not complete a formal assessment of Writing Across the Curriculum at Plymouth until the end of 1989. Nonetheless, I know the "writing for learning" assignments have made a significant difference in my economics courses, for my students are beginning to think like economists. I am most pleased, however, when recent graduates tell me, "You were right. In my job I not only have to work with statistics but explain their meaning in a report people can understand."

John Gregor is an associate professor of Economics in the Business Department. A recent convert to the Writing Across the Curriculum program at Plymouth, he is currently a member of the Writing Task Force.