Classroom Tip Sheet: Reading and Writing

Every month in our email newsletter we ask our instructors to provide us with a classroom-focused teaching tip. Their tips are a reflection of the Teaching for Understanding strategies that are taught in WIDE World courses. We hope these tips prove valuable to you in your own teaching practice.

Carol Adams, Instructor  
Writing in the Content Areas: Strategies for Middle and High School Teachers

How do I engage my students? Motivation is central to adolescent learning - writing can not only serve as a motivational tool in any content area class, but also as a “way in” to the content material. One of the things that I like about writing-to-learn activities is that they often help teachers make the best use of classroom time. They can focus classroom discussions, cut down on wayward behavior, and fill in transition gaps.

Here are two of my favorite writing strategies that serve all three purposes: Admit and Exit Slips. Some teachers choose to make these slips anonymous if they worry their students do not feel free to express their thoughts and opinions. Anonymous or not, taking them seriously sends the message that the students’ words are valued.

**Class Activity 1:** Admit Slips can either be employed as a “ticket” into the classroom or as a bell activity. I advocate for making these reflective as opposed to quizzing tools. Ask students to reflect on the content from the previous class or write a question that they would like to see addressed in class. This can either be something students bring to class or work on in the first five minutes of class.

**Class Activity 2:** Exit Slips are a wonderful way for content teachers to check in with students at the end of the class period. Again, focus on students’ thoughts instead of asking for recall of material. Have students reflect on their understanding of the lesson, or how well they did in the lab. You can also ask students to pose questions that might begin the next day’s class.

Jacy Ippolito, Instructor  
Reading in the Content Areas: Strategies for Middle and High School Teachers

When having adolescent students read any text (from a Science, Social Studies, Math, or Language Arts class), teachers must consider not only the difficulties inherent in each text, but also the level of vocabulary and background knowledge that their students possess. As students grow older, wider gaps appear between students' vocabulary and background knowledge. Before reading a new text with a class:

1. Ask students to make connections between the subject matter and their own lives. By asking students to brainstorm questions and anecdotes arising from their own lives, background knowledge can be activated, and students may be more ready to read a challenging passage. Also, students with less background knowledge may benefit from hearing other students’ connections.

2. Ask students to brainstorm words connected to the subject matter. Before reading a new passage, ask students to predict words that they might encounter. Categorize these words on a board, and help the students to organize the words in such a way that they will be able to integrate new words into the existing categories. Introduce a new word or two (from the new text), and show them how to categorize the word. By making semantic categories, students will hopefully be able to make connections between new words and words they already know.