Writing-Rich Ideas for Teaching at a Distance

The Bard College Institute for Writing & Thinking specializes in supporting faculty as they explore and incorporate a wide range of writing-based teaching practices into classes of any discipline. These practices are most often associated with in person learning communities, with the use of pen and paper. However, IWT's foundational writing practices also offer different ways to engage and involve students in remote learning contexts. **What follows is a range of activity and assignment ideas that involve online composition practices and strategies to facilitate written conversations and peer review.**

Please remember: Students who have participated in the Language & Thinking Program will already be familiar with these strategies (and their accompanying vocabularies). Students are often excited to return to these practices, and they work particularly well when inviting students to engage in a text-based environment, like a discussion forum.

These practices and activities **can all be done either synchronously** (writing together in a shared place at the same time) or **asynchronously** (writing and responding to each other at our own pace, keeping course deadlines in mind).

Table of Contents

Overview of Core IWT Writing-Based Teaching Practices

The following practices are the foundation of IWT's approach to writing-based teaching:

Private Free Writing, Focused Free Writing, and Process (Metacognitive) Writing.
These practices can then be creatively sequenced and combined so that students are interacting with one another while also fully engaged in the materials of the class.

Private Free Writing (PFW): The practice of writing for a certain amount of time without stopping. Private free writing is useful as a way to begin a class session, to prepare for the work we are about to do through clearing our heads by way of filling a blank page. This is writing that is always private, unshared. **When shifting to remote learning,** students might be encouraged to use private free writing regularly as a way to keep an ongoing journal or space to record thoughts in process. Private Free Writing is also useful for time management--students might use private free writing as a way to mark a shift from class to class, subject to subject.

Focused Free Writing (FFW): Like Private Free Writing, Focused Free Writing involves writing to a specific time limit without stopping. However, this kind of writing always begins with some kind of directive (or focus) in the form of a text or question and is often public or shared with others. **When shifting to remote learning,** focused free writing is useful in a range of different ways (discussion forums, reading responses) to help students articulate and discover their ideas about a text or a topic, stimulate or jumpstart discussion, or delve deeper into specific content.

Process (Metacognitive) Writing (PW): This practice invites students to reflect on the work they've just done in order to keep some kind of written record of thinking in action. Process writing helps students take stock of their own learning process and how their thinking changes as a result of work with colleagues and texts. **When shifting to remote learning,** process writing can be used to invite students to share their own reflections on the work being done--this might involve a discussion about how the class discussion forums are working, or an analysis of how one approached a specific assignment.

Guidelines for Online Discussion

When inviting students to participate in online discussions, or to share their writing with their peers online, it is important to outline some ground rules. Because one does not have the visual and audio cues that come with in-person work, it is crucial to convey to students that classrooms (and learning experiences) of all forms should be safe spaces where all participants are comfortable sharing ideas and questions, and working in the spirit of open discussion.

Here are some sample guidelines for students:
1. **Participate.** You are all expected to contribute to these conversations. Our remote learning community only works when everyone is engaged and sharing their writing and commentary.
2. **No Lurking.** We are all equal contributors to this remote learning space. This means that no one should be hiding in the background.
3. **Ask Questions.** If there is something you don't know or understand, please ask! This is a space that is very question-friendly. There is no such thing as a bad question, so let's agree to ask questions and respond respectfully. **Please ask questions that you are genuinely interested in**--this will help us to keep our space lively and engaging.
4. **Encourage Conversation.** When you respond to each other, you might begin by asking yourself what you hope to add to the conversation or how your own comment will complicate or move the conversation forward. You are encouraged to ask questions, offer new ideas, refer to other texts (with appropriate citations)--while always maintaining a respectful tone.
   - **Please remember:**
     - Your comments/contributions need to be more than "I agree". Why do you agree?
     - It is fine to disagree with your peers. When doing so, please make sure that you remember to be respectful--we disagree or critique ideas, not individuals.
5. **Prioritize Positivity.** You might begin your comments or contributions by pointing out something you enjoyed or found interesting in your colleague's work (or in the text). We want to foster challenging discussion without excluding anyone in the community.

<div align="center">Assignments & Activities</div>

Private Free Writing (asynchronous, low tech)
- **Journaling:** Invite students to keep their own **continuous document of private writing** for the duration of the course. This document is private, unshared, a space for them to keep track of what's on their minds.
- **Invisible Writing:** Ask students to set a timer for 5 minutes and **change the color of their font to white. Type without stopping or self-editing.** Once the 5 minutes is up, students change the font color back to black and read what is on the screen. Students are then invited to reflect on what they see/notice. What is it like to write without seeing the text as it appears? **This reflective (process) writing can be shared individually or in a discussion forum through your course site.**

Process (Metacognitive) Writing (asynchronous, low tech)
As part of the new routine of the course, invite students to do regular process writing in order for them to keep a reflective journal of their own thinking and learning.

What follows are some sample (generic) process writing questions/prompts. These can be shared or submitted individually to the instructor through the course site.

Reflecting on an Activity or Assignment
- How has your perspective on a text or a question changed?
- What new ideas do you have that you want to return to in the future? Describe a new idea or question that you've discovered that you had not noticed when engaging with the text on your own.
- How did you do what you just did (literally)?
- What did you notice in your colleagues' writing that changed or complicated your own thinking?

Reflecting on an Essay Draft or Peer Review:
- What seems to be lurking for you in your writing at this point?
- What are you now able to notice about your own writing process, perhaps focusing on something that either surprises or puzzles you?
- Tell the story of how you imagine your revision process will proceed. Feel free to be creative and approach this as a *story*.

Writing to Read (synchronous or asynchronous, low tech)
Writing to Read practices involve the sequencing of Focused Free Writing (FFW) and Process Writing (PW) prompts in order to help students explore a text by writing probatively about it.

What follows is an array of questions (and question types) that can be posed **synchronously (during a video class session) or asynchronously (through discussion forums and small group work)** in order to help students engage deeply with a shared text and work together to unpack the text and its implications. This taxonomy of questions was developed by Carley Moore, Alice Lesnick, and Nicole Wallack in collaboration with the Institute for Writing & Thinking.

First Approaches to a Text:
- First thoughts: Invite students to share their immediate reactions to a text in order to reveal apprehension levels, prejudices, misconceptions you may need to work with, what the student brings to the text—attitudes, judgments, etc.
- What do you notice?: Invite students to respond to this question by describing how they experience the text - language, form, content, etc. This kind of prompt helps students see the text's larger formal qualities and its discreet sentence and language level qualities.
- This text reminds me of...: Invite students to make both explicit and implicit connections to the text.
- Find a passage(s): Invite students to find a passage important to them and one that they think is important to the author. Write to explore these passages. This prompt helps make visible the distinction between reader and writer.
- Covering a text: Invite students to reflect on the materials that surround the text. Look at images and book covers. Write to explore what these materials suggest the text is going to be about?

Collaborative Learning Questions (asynchronous, small groups):

Organize students into groups of three. Each group is responsible for crafting and answering **three** questions about an assigned text.

Crafting Questions: Groups will meet through chat or video conferencing to create the following kinds of questions:

1. **Key Detail:** Locate an important and singular moment in the text that seems worth further investigation; aim for the smallest possible unit. Craft a question that will help us to think more deeply about this moment in the text and begin to consider how it may fit into a bigger picture.

2. **Formal Feature:** Locate a recurring stylistic move or structure that the author employs throughout the text. Referring specifically to this repeating move, craft a question that will help us to think about the way the medium of the text impacts or relates to its message.

3. **Big (Overarching) Question:** Locate a larger idea the text seems to circle/explore/take up./ Frame a question about that larger idea that seeks reflective understanding about the text– that is, find a few phrases that resonate with a concern of the text. It might be useful to think of this as a question that the text has for us (instead of a question we have for the text).

Share/Exchange Questions: Groups share their three questions online via discussion forum or shared Google Docs. Students can then be invited to answer another group's questions either in the same groups or individually. The goal is to involve students in the process of asking various levels of questions of a text, as well as working together to respond to questions posed. **If students respond to these questions individually**, this might be a first step towards a longer essay or assignment.

Collaborative Close Reading (synchronous / making of the video; asynchronous / sharing videos, responding to others', reflective writing)

The goal of this activity is to engage students in close, careful reading of a text in a way that mimics seminar style discussion. This should be modeled (or clearly prompted) by faculty (either via sharing example videos or through a step by step written assignment.
- Here's one example of a close reading of a poem—this video is a crowdsourced collaboration across countries done for the [Modern & Contemporary American Poetry MOOC.](#)
- Here's a [less video-centric example](#) via Cathy Davidson's HASTAC site

Process (for students):

Creating a Collaborative Close Reading Video:
- Divide students into learning community groups of 3-4 students.
- Assign each group a specific text or passage (along with a deadline) and invite each group to create their own close reading videos using a video conferencing/chat platform (Google Hangouts, Zoom, Blue Jeans) and "screen recording." These videos should not be overly long—the ideal is 5-10 Minutes.
- Zoom has an excellent screen recording option built in
  - [Screen Recording on a MAC using QuickTime](#)
  - [Free online web-based screen recorder that works with MAC and PC](#)
- Depending on the class (and the class's rapport), offer suggestions or prompts to guide or scaffold what the groups focus on in their close readings (i.e. word choice/style, figuring out meaning in context, etc.).
- Remind groups that the idea is to discuss and analyze a text in a way that mimics what would happen in an in person seminar—discussion is central.
- Each group either emails their video to faculty, or posts/submits it online. Sharing files of this kind is easy to do in most platforms, particularly if students upload to youtube/vimeo first and then share a link.

Responding & Reflecting:
- Once all videos are shared, invite students to spend time watching each group's video. If groups worked with different parts of a longer text, videos should be watching in the order of the text.
- Students then (individually) write a short reflective text (that is shared through a discussion forum) that analyzes their own experience making a collaborative close reading, and what was noticed or learned by watching the videos by other groups.
- The goal is to offer a prompt that will invite students to reflect on the process of the activity; synthesize a range of different approaches to close reading; and reflect on how their understanding of a text changed.

Dialectical Notebook or Written Conversation (synchronous or asynchronous, low tech)
This practice combines focused free writing and process writing with working in small groups, conversing through writing in order to come to a deeper understanding of a difficult text.

1. Divide class into small groups of 3 students and create a Google Document that each student can use to work with. **The easiest way to organize this is to create folders for each group, inside the folders each student has their own document.**

Writer (Name)	Responder 1	Responder 2	Process Notes (Writer)

2. Each student plays the role of writer, responder 1, and responder 2 once. Groups should decide if they would like to work together synchronously and complete the dialectical notebooks in real time, or asynchronously, with planned deadlines for responding to each other's work.
3. Begin by asking students to each complete a series of **Focused Free Writing responses in the first column ("Writer")** on their page.
    a. Sample sequence of prompts:
        ■ **1:** Find a passage in the text that you are drawn to, something you really understand--copy it into this column (or insert it via hyperlink) and write to explore your thinking. Describe what you believe you understand about the text based on the passage you selected.
        ■ **2:** Find a passage that puzzles or confuses you, something you have questions about. Copy or hyperlink the quote and write in order to try to come to a clearer understanding of this moment in the text. You might end this piece of writing with a question that needs answering to fully understand the quote (and/or text).

- **3:** What other questions does this text push you to ask?
4. Once students complete the "Writer" column, they should move on to respond to one of their group members' documents in the second column (**Responder 1).**
   a. Sample prompt:
      - Read what your colleague wrote in their "writer" column. Respond in the second column (Responder 1) in the following way:
         - Write to help complicate your colleague's thinking for each quote or question. Write to push their thinking further, to ask additional questions, to refer your colleague to other moments in the text.
      - Please make sure to respond thoroughly--it is not enough to simply write "I agree" or "I don't know". The goal here is to encourage your group member to keep thinking and reading deeply.
5. Students move on to the third person in their group's page, and write in column 3 **("Responder 2").**
   a. Sample prompt:
      - Read what both of your colleagues wrote in the first two columns. In column 3 ("Responder 2"), for each question or passage, write to:
         - Respond to the ideas and questions raised by both of your group members with the goal of continuing to expand and complicate their thinking.
         - In your responses, include at least one image or link to another text and make sure to write in order to make that rationale behind that connection explicit.
6. The last step of the dialectical notebook process is for the writer to read over the conversation that took place on their document, using the last column ("Process") as a space to reflect and take notes.
   a. Sample prompts:
      - What surprised you about the conversation that happened on your page?
      - What new ideas do you now want to explore and think about more?
      - What questions do you still have for either the text or your peers?

**A note on sharing: This activity can be shared by having groups report back in a myriad of ways. Groups can offer summaries of the conversations they had through writing. Groups might also be invited to create some kind of visual/textual representation that includes pieces from each of their pages. This could come in the form of a collaborative essay, poem, or short recording of their various computer screens.

Approaching an Essay

It is helpful to remind students that, although they are not meeting face to face, working together remotely still offers a range of different ways to scaffold the writing process so that students move from low stakes writing and brainstorming to drafting and revising to submitting a final essay, with ample opportunities for feedback along the way.

Students write in order to discover, examine, and test their ideas about reading assignments, class discussions, lectures, and essay topics. Such writing is usually informal, can take a variety of forms, and represents the kind of active thinking and critical engagement with course material that helps students prepare for more formal writing tasks. These kinds of writing can be done in small groups, discussion forums, or individually. It helps to remind students to keep their writing because it will later be used to work towards a formal (graded) essay.

Before the First Draft:

1. **Reading Journals/Reading Logs:** Invite students to keep a regular reading journal or log that is done through a shared document (Google Docs) or via discussion forums. The goal of this writing is to help students generate a significant amount of writing in response to a text, working to summarize, analyze, and ask questions of a text.
   a. Sample prompts/questions:
      - **Analyze the writer behind the text.** Who is the author? What does the text tell us about this author? What does the text show us about the writer's response to the subject matter?
      - **Passage Commentary.** Select a passage from the text that seems most important to you (or to the author), copy it, and write to explain why the passage is significant.
      - **Reflective Response.** Write a short response to the text that summarizes and analyzes its main points. Reflect on the text: What interested you? What connected to other texts you've read? What assumptions does the author make? What counterarguments (opposing views) seem important to consider?
2. **Microthemes:** Invite students to write a series of short (100 words), progressively more difficult assignments that involve summarizing, synthesizing, analyzing and drawing connections across texts. This is a practice that can be done through a shared document (Google Docs) or via discussion forums.
   a. Sample prompts/questions:
      - Write a short summary of assigned readings.
      - Write a short syntheses of short of ideas in several connected readings.
      - Write in response to the validity of an argument or string of related ideas (across multiple texts).

Peer Review (synchronous or asynchronous, low tech)

Peer review refers to a collaborative learning strategy that involves the practice of asking students to share their written work with peers for feedback that will then help them to revisit and revise their own writing. When peer review works it can become an effective way of helping students to learn to read more critically and actively, offer and accept constructive criticism, and see writing as a process that involves regular revision.

In order to ensure that peer review works well, there are a number of specific scaffolding and framing strategies that will help keep students focused and engaged. Setting realistic goals for the peer review process, and being fully transparent about these objectives, is crucial to conveying to students that this activity is one designed to help them to grow as thinkers, and learn to take full control over their writing process.

Peer Review Workshops Online:

1. **Create Groups:** Peer review (in class) is often done in small groups. The same should be true online. You might choose to create "writing groups" that stay the same all semester. Or, you may choose to have students work in different configurations each time they do peer review. The benefit of writing groups is that students will have a smaller network of peers who know their particular style, voice, and writerly concerns. **These groups should include 3-4 students per group, making sure that students know who is in their group and how to get in touch with them.**
   a. **Group Folders:** In Google Classroom or Moodle (or your LMS), create a folder for each group, labeled clearly. Inside that folder students should upload their essay drafts. All peer review work will happen inside of these group folders. It is helpful to create clear deadlines to keep the process moving forward.

2. **Dear Reader Letters:** The "Dear Reader Letter" is a self-reflective process note that gives students the opportunity to compose a letter to the person reading their draft, asking for the specific feedback that he/she feels will be most helpful at this point in the writing process. In other words, this is a letter that narrates what the writer thinks his/her paper is accomplishing, what he/she aims to accomplish in this paper, and what specifically he/she needs help with. The letter helps the student take control over the kinds of feedback he/she wants out of the peer review process. **Students should include this letter along with their draft so that each student in the group uploads 2 files--a draft and a letter, clearly labelled.**

3. **Voice Recording:** When participating in peer review in person, students often read their essays out loud to one another in order to hear what the text sounds like. The same can be

done online using a free tool like [Online Voice Recorder](#) or [Audacity](#) and then uploading the mp3 file into the group folder.

<u>Once Student Materials are Uploaded for Peer Review:</u>
Suggested Steps/Ways of Responding:
(adapted from Peter Elbow and Patricia Belanoff's *Sharing and Responding,* McGraw-Hill, 1989)

Directions for Students:
1. **Read your peer's essay and listen** to the accompanying recording (if there is one). This first reading should be done without commenting.
2. **Read your peer's "Dear Reader Letter".** Take note of the kind of feedback that your peer is asking for. That should guide how you respond to your peer's essay.
3. **Reread the essay a second time, taking notes and making comments** directly on the essay..
   a. In Google Docs you can add comments and highlight text. Another option is to use an online annotation tool like [Hypothes.is.](#)
   b. Feedback should always focus on the positive, what the draft accomplishes, does well, etc. Constructive criticism should always be framed as a question.
   c. Offer students specific strategies to use when responding to one another including:
      ■ **Sayback/Summary:** Summarize or sayback what you just read. This will help the writer be able to see discrepancies between what they "meant to say" and what readers "heard."
      ■ **Pointing/Center of Gravity:** Point (through highlighting or leaving a comment) to a specific moment in the text that seems especially important, interesting, or generative. This is not necessarily the thesis or main idea. Instead, you are trying to point out potentially rich elements of the draft that might be developed further.
      ■ **What's lurking? What is almost said? What do you want to hear more about?** Help the writer see what's missing in their text or what is left unclear by asking questions.
4. Once you've read your peer's essay a second time and commented, your final step is to return to their "Dear Reader Letter" and **respond with a letter of your own**. This letter should aim to address any questions asked in the original letter and point out moments in the essay that you think are working well. **This letter should be uploaded and shared to the same group folder.**

Effective Revision as Radical Revision
(N. B. Wallack, Columbia University & C. Moore, New York University)

Introduction For Instructors: This handout has been designed to use with students in class once they have received feedback of some kind on a draft of their writing assignment. Radical revision works best when students have some sense of what they need to work on.

What follows are a series of radical revision prompts and principles. The prompts guide students to do specific kinds of work; the principles articulate the beliefs that have informed the creation of the individual prompts. Students are more likely to choose prompts that will suit their own goals as revisers if they understand what the prompt is meant to help them accomplish. Students often benefit from having their teacher choose one prompt for them, and then choosing one or two others for themselves.

These revision prompts can be assigned for homework and then shared via email or LMS. Students can also share their radical revisions in peer groups using the same process as the Online Peer Review Workshop.

Introduction for the Writer: Radical revision is an approach to drafting that presumes the first draft—even a well-crafted one—is likely to need deep reconsideration and restructuring. Revision is a process by which a writer can *generate* missing thinking on the page, *rewrite* (from scratch) parts that are not yet doing the work the writer needs them to do, and *sacrifice* anything in the draft that is not contributing to the writer's project. While some writers love revision and find it to be the most satisfying part of the composing process, many others find it challenging and even upsetting. After all, it is hard to let go of work that one has taken effort to create.

Getting started: Note what responses or comments your readers have given you on your draft, and consider what concerns you have about it yourself, then try a few of the approaches outlined below. Each prompt is followed by a principle so that you will understand the goal of the prompt and the writerly beliefs or values that generated it.

Prompts for clarifying an essay's focus or argument

1. **Rewrite completely the beginning of your draft to articulate specifically the problem your essay is exploring, or to change its focus, tone, or contract.** Principle: Early beginnings are often just placeholders. Writers often need to create a new beginning to accommodate new thinking.

2. **Rewrite completely the ending of your draft to account for how your thinking has changed from the beginning and middle of your essay.** Principle: Similar to the previous one, but endings are often even more difficult for writers than introductions.

3. **Find an arbitrary (six to eight) number of claims, concepts, or questions in your draft that are most important to what you have written. Write a six to eight line poem that demonstrates how these claims are related to one another.** Principle: Sometimes shifting genres can clarify your thinking once you return to your original genre. This process can also help you to distill your thinking. Sometimes you might even make another related piece of writing.

Prompts for generating missing text

1. **Go to a place in your draft where you need to explain or define key terms. Write to explain. Exhaust yourself.** Principle: In early drafts, we often make associative leaps between things, but we don't explain our terms fully. But why exhaust yourself? When you write a little bit too much, you force yourself past what you already know to discover new ideas.

2. **Go to a place in the draft where you could articulate explicitly an important claim, clarification, or question. Write to make this claim or question visible to readers.** Principle: Since we know that many writers get to their ideas only at the end of their drafts, this reminds you that you have work to do in other places in the draft. It can also help you to substitute specific claims, questions, and observations for in places where you're making generalizations.

3. **Write to present of one of the texts you are working with. Find a place for it in your draft.** Principle: Good writers tend to provide context for their audiences who may not have not have read what they've read.

4. **Find a key image or key language in your draft. Write to explain what this image or language might mean.** Principle: Images and even individual words often contain ideas and questions that reveal themselves with closer reading and writing.

Prompts for making connections

1. **Write an unexpected, but connected story that comes to mind as you read your draft. You may not know how it fits, but write about it anyway.** Principle: Writers often need help with the show/don't tell problem. A surprising story can also offer a tension or highlight a dilemma that you may be ignoring or can't see.

2. **Find a place in a published text that helps you think about your idea. Copy the passage out and explain how it connects. Find a place for it in your draft.** Principle: In early drafts you

often don't know why you've chosen a particular passage to quote. Once you have prepared a draft, you are probably ready to choose texts and passages that really speak to what you are discovering.

3. **Use a passage from a published text to further a claim of your own. Write to analyze and reflect on the significance of the writer's choice of language or ideas.** Principle: In early drafts, we often include quotations from texts without demonstrating to readers why we need that language or those ideas. Once you know your own goals for a paragraph or section, you can get the texts you cite to do some of your argument work for you.

4. **Use a passage from another text to resist or doubt something you are writing about. Write to explain the counterargument.** Principle: Good writers often include counterarguments to demonstrate that they understand the complexity of the issue they are exploring.

5. **Write a paragraph in which you incorporate two texts. Put these texts in conversation with one another. (How do they extend, confirm, complicate, contradict, correct, or debate one another?)** Principle: Typical compare and contrast paragraphs or essays often fail when writers simply lists similarities and differences, without saying why they are important to notice. Putting texts in conversation around an idea or a question can give you something to use as a springboard for your own ideas.