Alternative Ideas for Written Assignments

It is critical that students are able to articulate their thoughts in writing – as writing is still the primary way information is recorded and disseminated. Written assignments are commonplace in academic settings and they often take on very similar forms that align well with academia (the traditional five-paragraph essay). However, most of the writing done for both personal and professional reasons is rarely in this traditional format.

While traditional writing formats can build students’ ability to organize their thoughts and craft an argument, other forms of writing should also be taught and practiced to build students’ skills in these areas. These written assessments can take a variety of forms, and building in choice for students will provide more motivation than the traditional academic writing fare.

**Examples**

**MEMO/E-MAIL**: Students can craft memos or e-mails, ubiquitous in the working world. This can be to explain a given topic within a content area, but could also be used as a creative assignment – for example, in English, have students craft a memo or e-mail from one character in the novel to another, or in history, between two historical figures.

**REPORT**: A classic assessment, but can be made relevant by having students follow existing structures and formats from the world of work, such as white papers, grant proposals, government reports, and corporate statements.

**ADVICE COLUMN/BLOG**: This can be done in pairs or groups, where students respond to each other’s request for advice on a particular concept or challenge. Further, students can imagine themselves in the role of a character, historical figure, or famous scientist/mathematician seeking aid on a particular subject important to them and then receiving comments and feedback that the students write. For example, students could imagine themselves as someone writing to Pythagoras for help with a particular problem, and the expert mathematician Pythagoras writing a reply.

**TWEET/SOCIAL MEDIA UPDATE:** This can be an excellent summarization tactic, by limiting students’ characters or words, ensuring they must learn to be both concise and complete. Have students write a tweet as an exit ticket for a quick and easy formative assessment!

**OBITUARY/EUOLOGY:** This is a familiar format to many students, and can be used in a variety of ways. For instance, students could write an obituary or eulogy for a particular concept, idea or character/historical figure. It could also be used for classroom management or motivating students, by having them write an obituary for foul or disrespectful language or for a particular mistake they have made in their writing/thinking in the past.

**BROCHURE:** This can be both done in paper and digitally. It encourages students to consider audience, and can be used in a wide variety of formats and topics.

**BUMPER STICKER/SLOGAN/MOTTO:** These can serve two purposes – first, to truly create a catchy slogan or bumper sticker, students have to fully understand the concept they are expressing. Second, these can be used to help students remember the concept by serving as a mnemonic device.

Can you think of others?

Using Verbal Presentation as an Assessment Alternative

Although educational accountability is measured almost completely through written testing, we know that employers value verbal communication skills and even complain that these are lacking in recent college graduates.

It is important that students practice making clear and convincing verbal presentations. Including at least one verbal presentation among required assessments, and allowing students to choose the option of verbal over written presentation for at least some assignments, is crucial for building student skills in this area.

Verbal assessment can take a variety of forms, and choice among various options is a good strategy for helping motivate some students. This could take place in front of an entire class, a smaller group, or just the teacher, depending on the circumstances.

**Examples**

**PERSUASIVE SPEECH**: The classic approach, but still useful. Students make a 3-5 minute verbal argument before the class. Almost any essay assignment can be adapted to fit this.

**DIALOGUE**: Two class members collaboratively create and present a 3 minute dialogue between two characters from course’s focal literature that either: 1) reflects something that could occur, given the way they are characterized in the work; or 2) reflects a transformation of their relationship in some way. The dialogue is followed by class discussion in which class members pose questions to the presenters about reasons behind what they chose to present.

**PODCAST/NEWSCAST**: Create (and record if possible) a 3-5 minute radio story that demonstrates understanding of a particular learning objective. This can be done in small groups, and story topics could include: a summary of a brief research project, modernization of a story event or character set in an earlier time, or a story that communicates significance of an historical or current event in a creative way. Most written assignments could be adapted in some way to fit this medium.

**PANEL DISCUSSION:** A group of 3-4 students organize themselves into a panel in which each plays a certain role (character in the book, historical figure, advocate of a certain position, etc.) and one person plays the moderator posing questions to the group and facilitating their interaction. The assignment requires specific structure for the types of questions that would be appropriate for the particular class setting.

**MINI-DEBATE:** A pair of students must take opposite sides in a debate relevant to course readings. One gets 3 minutes to present a PRO case, and the other gets 3 minutes to present a CON case. The class votes on which is most convincing. A student from each voting side is selected to present a 1 minute statement about why they were more convinced by the one argument than the other.

**DEMONSTRATION/EXPLANATION:** Student presents an explanation of a scientific process or of how to solve a problem (using visual props if desired).

Can you think of others?

Using Artistic Presentation as an Assessment Alternative

Although educational accountability is measured almost completely through written testing, we know that employers value critical thinking. There are numerous research studies linking artistic expressions to improvements in students’ creative and critical thinking.

Further, it is important that students practice making clear and convincing presentations, which can be often be represented graphically. Virtually all presentations in the work world have some element of visual cues and graphics – even if nothing more than a series of PowerPoint slides. Mind-maps and other graphic organizers are typical of the graphic approaches represented in classrooms, but a wider set could tap into student motivation that often springs from the arts.

Some students do find the idea of drawing, singing or otherwise expressing through art to be scary, and thus there should always be scaffolds and tools to support those students. For example, students should have access to magazines or computers, so they can find images rather than having to draw or craft them. Further, the teacher should model and explain that students will be graded on content, not aesthetics, so that students do not get too worried about making something aesthetically pleasing rather than focusing on demonstrating their mastery of the content.

Including at least one artistic presentation as a choice when completing assessments, and even allowing students to choose this option over verbal or written presentation for at least some assignments, fosters students’ thinking skills and can generate interest and motivation for students to complete the assignment.

**Examples**

**GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS**: The classic approach, but still useful. Students craft a visual representation of their ideas and argument. Almost any essay assignment can be adapted into a graphic organizer, and often these are used to help students organize their thinking before attempting a writing assignment.

**ILLUSTRATION/EXHIBIT**: Students can work collaboratively or independently to design illustrations that represent key concepts or ideas, and be able to express how the illustration does that. Students can work collaboratively to design exhibitions that showcase illustrations, designs, sketches, and more. For example, in social studies, students might design a museum exhibit; for science, they might design a poster presentation for a particular audience (younger students, a local community center or museum, a multi-school conference, etc.)

**SCRAPBOOK PAGE/COLLAGE/SOCIAL MEDIA PROFILE**: Creating a scrapbook, collage or social media page or profile for a particular historical figure or character in a novel, or even an idea or concept.

**PHYSICAL REPRESENTATION:** Students can construct some item that represents an idea or solves a particular problem. Some examples: students constructing a toy, game, t-shirt, recipe, wanted poster, or business card.

**COMIC/COMIC STRIP:** Crafting a cartoon that represents a complex idea (political cartoons are the most numerous example), or a comic strip where characters explain a concept, idea or relationship. For students who might find the idea of drawing a comic scary, there are numerous tools online that enable students to create comic strips without having to draw anything.

**RAP/SONG:** Create and present a short rap or song that describes a character or plot/event from a literary work or historical record, or a particular concept or formula from math or science.

Can you think of others?