

end of a grading period. Have students share ways of organizing learning with each other instead of insisting on only one way.

2. BELL-RINGER QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

Bell-ringer questions prime students' brains for academic tasks, often jolting their minds away from the conversation they had in the hall before class or their intriguing plans for lunch. This type of informal writing is probably also the best type of practice for "writing for the test," as it eases writer's block and counterproductive overthinking.

How It Works

Before class, place a question on the screen—not a typical textbook question, but a question that builds background about your content and the world students inhabit, a question that requires thinking, evaluating, and making decisions, which, by the way, also encourages independence (see Figure 3.4 for examples). Students write in their learning log (either electronically or on paper) in response to the query. For this activity, students simply pen a flood of words in an effort to craft some sort of answer to a less-than-simple question. Books such as *Super Freakonomics* (Levitt & Dubner, 2009), *What If?: Serious Scientific Answers to Absurd Hypothetical Questions* (Munroe, 2014) or websites featuring the latest news in science (National Science Foundation, www.nsf.gov/discoveries), social studies (the history website at www.history.com/news/ask-history), math (the math section of Scientific American at www.scientificamerican.com/math), or Smithsonian's Tween Tribune (tweentribune.com) are great sources for questions. After discussing and modeling how to craft good questions, students can begin submitting bell-ringer questions for their classmates to address in writing.

Why It Works

An often overlooked but important part of writing is fluency, the ability to write without anxiety or fear, allowing words to flow unimpeded on the page or screen.

Fluency develops when students are provided with frequent opportunities to jot down their thinking with no assessment attached.



Figure 3.4

Sample Questions for Bell-Ringer Writing

- The Curiosity's journey to Mars cost eight billion dollars. Was that money well spent? Why or why not?
- What should the United States do to make sure contagious diseases don't spread to major cities?
- What young adult novel would you recommend be made into a movie? Why?
- Why is immigration such a complex issue?
- Explain this statistic: Ratio of seriously mentally ill people held in US state prisons and jails to those held in state psychiatric hospitals: 10:1. (harpers.org/archive/2014/06/harpers-index-362) What should be done about this problem?
- What conflict do many characters share in novels or short stories? Is it a realistic conflict based on your own experiences?
- Why do people engage in forms of rioting that bring about more harm than good to their causes?
- Cemetery space is becoming a premium in many areas, especially large cities. Should cities pass laws that allow only cremation?

Many inexperienced writers fall into the trap of sitting for long periods of time before beginning to write as they compose in their heads. They then try to capture their ideas on paper, turning writing into a mechanical process of recording thoughts instead of utilizing writing as a tool for thinking. The daily practice of writing in response to open-ended questions supports fluency and gives students ideas for future essays in addition to helping them think deeply about content-area topics.

Extend and Adapt

Follow writing sessions with a reading connection in the form of a brief read-aloud from a text related to the question, giving students

just enough to make them want to find out more on their own. Provide a link to the article or make available copies of the printed article for those who want to read about the topic. For instance, post this question in a science class that has been studying alternative fuel sources: A bus in the UK went into service that runs on an unusual type of fuel. What type of fuel do you think the bus is using? Defend your answer.

The fuel? Human waste from a sewage plant. After students express their disgust, provide the article for their reading pleasure.

3. READ/THINK/RESPOND

A response differs from an analysis in that writers interpret the text through a subjective stance, making connections and bringing background knowledge as they seek to interpret the author's message. The goal is to eventually move students into analysis, but often a response is the first and best way of getting to that point. As the term implies, students react to what they are reading in any way they can, often beginning such writing with "I think" or "It seems like" in an attempt to understand the text. In some cases, the text may be so complex that students don't know how to respond, but with this low-risk activity they feel they can say *something*, opening the path for more in-depth writing later.

Math students in particular often find "a place to start" by wrestling with a problem through a response. In fact, research shows that some writing activities have a greater impact on reading comprehension than reading strategies (Lewis, Walpole, & McKenna, 2014). This may well be one of those activities.

How It Works

This activity is easy and effective.

1. Students read a short piece of complex text related to your discipline.
2. They think for a few moments about the text.
3. They write a response to the text.



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