

Teaching with Reading Journals

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What is a reading journal? More reflective than a lecture notebook, a journal is a place where students can record their efforts to engage and come to terms with a course, without worrying unduly about being evaluated (though I touch on the question of evaluation below). Calling for informal, expressive writing, journals allow students to explore ideas, pursue insights, tap undiscovered interests, and experiment with unfamiliar perspectives with a freedom rarely possible in papers and exams. Moreover, journals allow students to register subjective preferences and inherited assumptions, making them available for scrutiny and revision. Above all, journals can help students develop a regular practice of listening attentively to their own thinking in a course.

There are many ways to build a journal assignment into a course. Some teachers ask students to manage their journals independently; others prefer to monitor student journals very closely. Journals can be focused exclusively on the course subject, or they can incorporate students' extracurricular experiences. I have found that some combination of these options works best. In my classes, I ask my students to write three full-page entries a week on any aspect of the week's readings, discussions, or lectures that interests them—a character, passage, theme, and so on. In addition, to suggest the possibility of resonances between our course and other parts of their lives, I invite students to connect our course to other classes, current events, and experiences beyond academics. The guiding rule is only this—that each entry should be anchored in a serious consideration of the readings.

To complement this semester-long assignment, and to encourage students to stay actively engaged in their journal writing, I make the journals a platform for a variety of short reflective exercises. Here are some activities teachers might try:

- Start a discussion by asking volunteers to read pertinent entries from their journals to the class.
- Have students write for five minutes to start a class discussion. In-class writing on a specific question can focus students' attention and give each student time to formulate substantive thoughts.
- Have students write in-class entries to summarize a discussion or lecture, respond to a classroom activity (a film or presentation), or generate questions for further exploration.
- Assign take-home journal topics designed to help students synthesize difficult material or grapple with the larger implications of an idea or text.
- Have students exchange and respond to selected journal entries. Students will see that the same material can be approached in illuminatingly diverse ways.
- Towards the end of a semester, ask students to read their journals and write entries reflecting on the development of their thinking and knowledge.

Assignments like these—they can be easily adapted to courses in many disciplines—can have valuable pedagogical benefits. By writing consistently (both in and out of class) to formulate responses to their course's materials, students can discover what they think and learn to become invested in their own ideas. Students also come to class prepared to contribute richly and substantively to discussions. Equally important, consistent journal writing throughout a semester helps students immerse

themselves in a course and equips them to make increasingly complex insights and connections. An additional benefit is that journals offer teachers a privileged view of their students' interests, difficulties, and intellectual energies, which might otherwise remain hidden. Thus the journals can form the basis for meaningful intellectual exchange between student and teacher.

More reading on this topic can be found in the CTL Library located in the Mason Room at the Smith House.