

Examples of Team Tasks for Teaching Writing

Having students work with samples of writing can present a powerful way for them to practice the analytical and evaluative skills our assignments require. When they do this challenging work in small groups, students have the opportunity to articulate their expectations about effective writing in a given domain or context, examine and practice the kinds of decisions writers make, and use the criteria and expectations that guide evaluation of writing in context. Most importantly, effective writing tasks conclude by prompting students to commit to acting on their new ideas in their work on upcoming assignments.

Below are three examples of group writing tasks that can help students do this important work. Note that all of these tasks can be done at any stage of preparation for an assignment, from early in the writing process when students are more naïve to late in the writing process when they are more informed.

Choosing the best/most effective example

Students are given three or four samples of a short piece of writing or an excerpt from a piece of writing that is similar to an assignment they are working on. They might receive, for example, three or four introductory paragraphs, concluding paragraphs, sections of a paper where the writer presents evidence, sections that present explanations of data, etc. Ideally, these samples come from or simulate student work (but not from students in the current course!).

1. Students read the samples on their own and choose the one that they think is most effective based on their understanding of that genre of writing or the expectations for the assignment. They commit to their choice by writing it down.
2. Working in small groups, students share and explain their choices to each other. They come to consensus on a group choice.
3. Each group holds up a card that shows their choice. The instructor manages a debrief of the task, asking groups to explain their choices, pulling out big themes that emerge, and making comparisons and connections across ideas.
4. The instructor refers students back to the samples under discussion and clarifies where they do or don't meet the expectations of the assignment, helping students see where their choices were on target or misguided. The big principles guiding effective writing of this kind should be articulated here.
5. Students spend a few minutes writing about (1) how their thinking about these samples and/or this kind of writing have changed as a result of the task and subsequent discussion and (2) two big ideas from this discussion that they will use in their upcoming work on the assignment. They might be asked to share some of these ideas in their small groups or with the whole class.

Scoring / Evaluating

Students are given a sample of a piece of writing that is similar to an assignment they are working on. Ideally, this is an example or simulation of student work (but not from a student in the current course!).

1. Students read the sample on their own and use the grading rubric to assign a score. They commit to their score by writing it down.

2. Working in small groups, students share and explain their scores to each other. They come to consensus on a group score.
3. Each group sends a representative to the board to write their score. The instructor manages a debrief of the task, asking groups to explain their scores, pulling out key distinctions that emerge, and making comparisons and connections across ideas.
4. The instructor refers students back to the sample under discussion and clarifies where it does or doesn't meet the expectations as articulated in the rubric, helping students see where their scores were on target or misguided. The instructor may reveal what score she or he would give this assignment. The big principles guiding effective writing of this kind should be articulated here.
5. Students spend a few minutes writing about (1) how their thinking about the expectations for the assignment has been clarified as a result of the task and subsequent discussion and (2) two big ideas from this discussion that they will use in their upcoming work on the assignment. They might be asked to share some of these ideas in their small groups or with the whole class.

Ranking

Students are given three or four samples of a short piece of writing or an excerpt from a piece of writing that is similar to an assignment they are working on. They might receive, for example, three or four introductory paragraphs, concluding paragraphs, sections of a paper where the writer presents evidence, sections that present explanations of data, etc. Ideally, these examples come from or simulate student work (but not from students in the current course!).

1. Students read the samples on their own and rank them from most to least effective based on their understanding of that genre of writing or the expectations for the assignment. They commit to their rankings by writing them down.
2. Working in small groups, students share and explain their rankings to each other. They come to consensus on a group ranking.
3. Each group sends a representative to the board to write their ranking. The instructor manages a debrief of the task, asking groups to explain their rankings, pulling out big themes that emerge, and making comparisons and connections across ideas.
4. The instructor refers students back to the samples under discussion and clarifies where these samples do or don't meet the expectations of the assignment, helping students see where their rankings were on target or misguided. The big principles guiding effective writing of this kind should be articulated here.
5. Working on their own, students spend a few minutes writing about (1) how their thinking about these samples and/or this kind of writing have changed as a result of the task and subsequent discussion and (2) two big ideas from this discussion that they will use in their upcoming work on the assignment. They might be asked to share some of these ideas in their small groups or with the whole class.