

Cognitive Writing

Overview:

Cognitive writing engages students in extended writing assignments and supports their comprehension and critical thinking skill development through high-level processing of new learning.

Purpose:

Cognitive writing experiences provide students the opportunity to process their learning while developing and practicing critical thinking skills. These tasks require students to explain processes and phenomena, analyze and evaluate evidence, develop original ideas, and defend arguments with evidence. (Goodwin & Rouleau, 2032). Cognitive writing experiences are not limited to English/Language Arts instruction; they are powerful learning experiences for students in all academic disciplines. Research has provided evidence that cognitive writing is an effective learning intervention for a wide array of diverse learners, increasing their engagement, deepening their learning of content, and developing critical thinking skills across content areas.

Cognitive writing not only serves to deepen student learning, but it makes that learning visible meaning that both the teacher and the student can go back to it, analyze it, and build on it for future experiences.

Application: When and where can I use it?

Cognitive writing can happen at any grade level where students have the ability to put their thinking into words. At the K/1st grade level, a cognitive writing task could be modified to include student dictation to an adult about their learning and thinking.

Students can, and should, be expected to engage in cognitive writing as a routine part of all content area instruction.

Getting Started: What are some tips for starting and using this routine?

These tips for engaging students in Cognitive Writing come from the work of Bryan Goodwin and Kristin Rouleau in their 2023 book, *The New Classroom Instruction that Works* (Goodwin and Rouleau, 2023).

Start with what you want your students to think about. Before asking your students to write, be explicit about what you want them to think about, relative to their new learning: enduring understandings, essential questions, core concepts, and big ideas. Then, create a writing prompt that will engage them in high-level thinking (comparison, analysis, synthesis, evaluation) connected to that big idea.

Directly teach and model thinking skills. Like any other skill, thinking skills need to be named, explicitly taught, and modeled. For example, if you want students to reflect on

their prior knowledge, you need to model tapping into and reflecting on prior knowledge in light of new evidence discovered in the learning task.

Develop tools and guides to structure the cognitive writing. Make use of graphic organizers or notecatchers to help students organize the information they are expected to write about. Find a place on the guide to be explicit about the key thinking strategy (i.e. compare, synthesize, analyze) that you expect them to be demonstrating as they write. Scaffold the support for based on the needs of different learners in your classroom.

Develop and provide rubrics for all cognitive writing assignments. Rubrics make the learning expectations clear for students. They should be designed to promote a growth mindset in students. Note – you don't need to grade every piece of cognitive writing done by your students. The rubric is there, primarily, to make the learning journey transparent and empower students to improve their work.

Provide students with opportunities to share and revise their writing. Engage students in both self and peer assessment of their writing and encourage them to use feedback to dig deeper, express their ideas more clearly, or refine their thinking.

Read more about this Instructional Move:

[Writing to Think: Critical Thinking and the Writing Process – Purdue Global Academic Success and Writing Resource Center and Blog \(purdueglobalwriting.center\)](#)

[How to Create Authentic Writing Opportunities in Science Classes | Edutopia](#)

References:

Goodwin, Bryan, and Kristin Rouleau. The New Classroom Instruction that Works. Alexandria: ASCD, 2023