

Using Writing Activities Effectively

In the past year I have mentored several teachers seeking to improve their scores and improve their instruction by utilizing the writing activities that I have been developing for the course. This document provides teachers with my basic approach to lesson planning, which includes how I use the writing activities. My evolving collection of activities is housed on my website, FFAPUSH.com.



Objectives:

The main objective of the activities is to help students learn and master the historical thinking skills necessary for success on the AP exam (and the course in general). The skills are just as important as content. © Another objective is to provide additional insight into the course by providing primary and secondary source supplements as well as other supplemental review material. Some of the activities are brief, while other are more involved.

General Advice:

1. My collection is quite large... *and growing!* I aim to have at least one activity per skill per unit that I will coach/facilitate in class. There is not time to complete all the activities in class. I advise teachers to select those items that best meet the needs of their students. Which skills do they need to practice? Which topic needs reinforcement?
2. Incorporate the activities into class time so that you can monitor and coach skill development and provide support as needed. [My approach is based on the flipped model of teaching where the “homework” becomes the “classwork.”]
3. I have students work collaboratively, although some will prefer to work individually. I recommend group collaboration. High performing groups will go beyond expectations and low performing groups will have more time being coached by the teacher. I allow my students to select their own groups, however I make changes if groups are unproductive. [I have tried many strategies over the years for grouping, and self-selected almost always yields higher productivity.]

My typical day / lesson includes:

- a. **Homework** → **read a chapter of the textbook or AMSCO**; reading guide is optional... incentive for completing the guide includes bonus points on reading quiz, the ability to use the guide as a resource on reading quizzes, and the general benefit of increased comprehension and retention by taking notes and processing information as they read. Some students can simply read a chapter and be prepared... others need help processing. I make the guides optional, because I do not want to create busy work for those who do not need them. Some students will not read, even the concise AMSCO chapters. They can watch video lectures or crash course videos on YouTube or perhaps read outlines or quizlet sets they find online. I advise against outlines and quizlet, however those seeking the easiest path will depend on them anyway... almost always with poor results.
- b. **Beginning of class next day** → **5-10 minutes to debrief the previous reading quiz**. Students sit in groups of 4. Graded quizzes are passed out, students review and discuss questions and answers in their groups. After I take attendance, I go table to table answering questions and providing any additional feedback needed. If there was a question missed by more than half the class, I debrief as a class. If a student fails a quiz, they can correct their quiz during the debriefing time to raise their grade to a 70.
- c. **10-15 minute reading quiz**. This is how I hold students accountable for reading. They are aware that I expect them to acquire the information ... I will not spoon feed them. Quizzes usually have one SAQ and 4 to 7 multiple choice questions. I write 4 versions of each quiz so students at each table are exposed to different questions (also reduces cheating). Having different versions also encourages students to take the quiz debriefing time more seriously, as they usually need feedback from peers to understand what they missed or simply to review other questions/themes that they may see on the unit test.
- d. **15-20 minutes** → **lecture / discussion** over major themes or events from reading assignment. I do my best to avoid detailed lecture... it is more about overall causation, changes, etc. I also try to connect eras; for example, if the reading assignment was over progressivism I will review populism as well as discussing progressivism. If lectures go beyond this time limit, research shows (as does my experience) students will disengage mentally and/or behaviorally.
- e. **45 – 50 minutes** → **group collaboration**... students (groups of 4/tables) work on analyzing history by completing historical analysis activities that align with the content outline and thematic learning objectives. While they work, I move table to table coaching and providing feedback. For students who are low-performing, I spend more time walking through activities step by step. I don't grade each activity (no time for that!) but I do assess as I move about. Students are motivated to complete these activities either intrinsically or simply to prepare for the unit test. All of my long essay and DBQ prompts on unit tests are linked to these activities. I also give a unit activity grade which includes these activities... this is to prevent the unmotivated students from zoning out or focusing on their phone or physics homework in class. Some students just won't do an assignment if there is not a direct grade attached. For these students, I will spend a little more time grading activities in an effort to maintain their extrinsic motivation while also encouraging them to move to intrinsic motivation by reminding them of the benefits of the activity and connecting those benefits to their individual goals for the course.
- f. **Last thing** → **discuss student sample** such as a thesis or conclusion from one of the activities... or I will lead the class in a **closure/new activity** that focuses on periodization.

These strategies have been successful for me... my passing rates have moved from the 60s to the 80s since I started developing this approach. This past year my passing rate was 85%.

My approach is time consuming, especially the reading quiz/grading/feedback piece (letter b. above). Teachers who have implemented my strategy often feel overwhelmed with the grading time, but even those who simply do completion grades for activities have seen their scores increase.

Fight Fiercely!
Beckie

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