Compiled by the Research Academy for University Learning



**Graduate Teacher Assistants: Getting Started with Teaching and Learning**

The following material is intended only as a guideline to help you begin teaching. As you progress through the "nuts and bolts" of teaching, you may begin to think more deeply on how you structure your course, how you present/deliver your course content, and what learning outcomes you expect students to take away from your course. You may begin to research and explore ways to more fully engage students, to experiment with new technology or to try out practices that will expose students to different perspectives and challenging ideas within the context of your course.

As such, the beginning of this handout provides tools to get you started, and then progresses into more sophisticated concepts of how to foster student learning and how best to achieve your teaching and learning goals. The following material is presented as possible tools, research, and practice to aid you as you begin your teaching career; it is not meant to be exclusive or inclusive, that is, use only what works best for you as an individual educator and that suits your disciplinary and pedagogical goals. There is a wealth of research, theory and practice that is not covered here but is available through the Research Academy for University Learning, located in Sprague Library, Montclair State University.

## A Systemic Approach to Teaching

**Fundamental Questions to Define the Course Intellectually**

What do you want your students to be able to do - intellectually, physically, emotionally or socially - as a result of taking your course?

What important skills, abilities, theories, or ideas will your discipline help students to develop or obtain? What should they be able to do - analyze? synthesize? Interpret? Apply? What big questions will your course help students answer?

What will we do as instructors to foster their learning?

How do you communicate to your students what you expect them to know and do as a result of taking your course? What teaching strategies do you use to foster the learning goals you have set - discussion? lecture? case studies? How do your course materials, assignments, and exams contribute to achieving those learning goals?

What approaches to learning will our students use to achieve course requirements?

How do you create a learning environment in which all students are most likely to take a deep approach to their learning and achieve learning objectives in a way that makes a sustained, positive, and substantial difference in the way they think, act, or feel? What is the nature of that environment?

What social factors influence the learning of our students?

What personal contexts do our students bring to class that may affect their learning? What mindsets do we, as instructors, bring to class that may affect our ability to teach effectively? How do we bridge divergent social dynamics in order to achieve equity, balance, and deep learning for all of our students?

How will both you and your students assess the nature and progress of their learning?

How do you measure student learning in your courses? How do you measure your own progress in helping students achieve the learning objectives you set for them? How do you know whether your efforts have helped or hurt their progress in your discipline?

**First-Day of Class Handout /Ice-Breakers**

Primary Source: Departmental GSI Development: A Handbook for Faculty and GSMs Who Work with GSIs, Edited by Mary Wright and Matt Kaplan  
  
Adapted from Gach, M., Black, B., Kaplan, M., Kardia, D., Saunders, S.,  
& Williams, G. (1998). Handbook on Departmental GSI Development.  
CRLT, University of Michigan.

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Icebreakers can be a good way to help you learn about your students, reduce anxiety, and introduce students to the course content. Below are some examples of general and course related icebreakers. Feel free to adapt them to suit your needs or create your own. Although icebreakers are often used in the first days of class, they can be useful throughout the semester. If a student says a couple of words in front of the class in the beginning of a section meeting, she or he will be more likely to participate during the session.

**GENERAL ICEBREAKERS:**

* Students introduce themselves and answer a question about themselves. For example, you might ask them to state their hometowns, favorite television programs, what they did (or wish they did) over break, etc. I sometimes ask about the best and worst items in the cafeteria.
* Divide the class into pairs. Each person talks about him/herself to the other, sometimes with specific instructions to share a certain piece of information. For example, “The one thing I am particularly proud of is…” After five minutes, the participants introduce the other person to the rest of the class.
* Students introduce themselves and tell what they know about why they have their name (their mother wanted to name them after great aunt Helen who once climbed Pike’s Peak in high heels, etc.)
* Have students come up with 3 statements about themselves, two that are true and one that is false. (You may want to set some sort of limit on what kind of information is disclosed. Might not be appropriate in all classes)
* Divide the class into groups of four. Explain to the groups that they must come up with five things they all have in common. The only restriction is that the students can’t use school or work related items.

**COURSE CONTENT ICEBREAKERS:**

* Write a provocative question regarding the course content on the board/overhead. Have students discuss in small groups (3-5) and then as a whole class. Relate this question back to what students will be studying during the semester.
* Select a key word from the course title and have students do an “association exercise” by reporting what first comes to mind. Record answers on the chalkboard/overhead and use these to give an overview of the course.
* Prepare a short true/false quiz on topics that will come up in the course. Include questions that don’t have real true/false answers and will elicit discussion. Have students complete alone, then get into smaller groups to discuss them. Once one group is done, start discussion with entire class.
* If you are going to have your students set up study groups, divide up the class (for instance by times they are available for out-of-class study) and have people exchange names/phone numbers. Get them working together on a problem with the course material, and have member of the group report back to the class, write on board, etc.
* Have students create sentences regarding the course material by asking each successive student to contribute one word to the sentence. You might start the exercise with a word/name from the course and then let the students take over.

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PLANNING THE LESSON

Systematic preparation of each day’s lesson is essential to the smooth functioning of the class. Too often teaching is seen as going from one item on a checklist to another, with little thought given to continuity or follow-up.

In your lesson planning, take the following factors into consideration:

WARM-UP Always begin your class with a 5-minute warm-up. This should always involve material that the students have studied already. You can do the warm-up by simply having short conversations with the students as they enter class, by a personalized (not personal) question/answer segment, by having students talk to each other while they circulate around the room (give them precise instructions on what they should do), or by participating in small-group conversations.

ATTITUDE always have a positive attitude toward students, the textbook, your role, visual aids, activities, etc. DO NOT speak against the textbook or about the exercises, material or work you need to do in class. DO NOT speak against the language requirement. Help students understand why learning a foreign language can be an enjoyable and rewarding experience. Much of this will communicate itself to them if you are energetic and enthusiastic about what you do.

USE OF BOOK Don’t bury your nose in the textbook. Place activities on INDEX CARDS or on TRANSPARANCIES. The text should serve two purposes: 1) General guide and reference, 2) homework assignments and home use by the students. You should have your hands free in order to use gestures, and students should be looking at you, not at the textbook, unless the activities is a task that requires them to read the material in the book. Most classroom materials can and should be conducted with books closed. Get them used to this from the very beginning.

VARIETY Incorporate different types of activities. Try not to spend more than 10-15 minutes on any one activity, including any quizzes. This is especially important at the first and second levels of language study when the attention span of students is highly reduced. In going from one activity to another, try not to repeat the same TYPE of activity even though the content may.

\*You should have at least 3 different activities per class period, preferably more if some activities last less than 5 minutes or so. Moving from one grammar point to another grammar point does not constitute variety.

\* Pacing: Vary your pacing from one activity to another. Alternate between slower moving activities and more rapidly paced activities.

MOVEMENT Each class period should include at least one activity where students have to get out of their chairs and move around the room.

GROUP WORK Make frequent use of small-group/pair activities.

TRANSITIONS Build transitions into the lesson plan. Smooth transitions from one activity to another are crucial to the cohesion and coherence of the lesson. Until you’ve learned to make transitions automatically, plan them ahead of time. Helpful hint: the easiest transition is to use the last element of one teaching segment as the first element of the next segment.

BLACKBOARD USE Use the blackboard judiciously. Don’t write everything you say on the board. Avoid reproducing on the board something that the students can refer to in the book while studying at home, such as verb paradigm, or a list of adjectives.

VISUALS Use visual materials whenever possible (videos, transparencies, slides, magazines, etc.)

DON’T TEACH SITTING DOWN You should always move around the room, in the front and on the sides, even in the back. Try to move as close as possible to the students whom you are addressing.

\*CAUTION: Students should be relaxed, not frantic and tension-ridden. Moving around does not necessarily mean tension. Neither should the student be so relaxed that the purpose of the activity is misdirected. Know why you are doing that particular activity and what the expected outcomes are, and keep it focused for the students.

ERROR CORRECTION Know when to correct the students and when to leave them alone to communicate ideas. Correct them when you are doing more structured activities; let them talk when the activities are open-ended.

IMPORTANT Teach students how to ask questions as well as answer them.

WIND DOWN Always end the class with a 3 to 5 minute wind-down so that the students leave the class in an “up” mood, not with the memory of having made mistakes. Never end the class at a point when students are struggling.

LESSON PLAN WORKSHEET

Course: Date:

1. Lesson Topic(s):
2. Lesson Goal:
3. Lesson Objectives (for students):
4. Rationale for the lesson:
5. Procedures:
6. Focusing event, advanced organizer, or problem:
7. Instructional methods:
8. Student participation (groupings?):
9. Check for understanding:
10. Concluding wrap-up:
11. Materials and aids:
12. Assignments for lesson:
13. Follow-up assignments:
14. Content outline:

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Lesson Plan Worksheet

Lesson topic:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Question** | **Things to think about** | **Planning Notes** |
| **WHAT** | Developing Lesson Goals:   * What should the students learn? * What should they know or be able to know at the end of class? * How would you want students to answer the question: “What was the one thing you got out of this discussion?” |  |
| **WHY** | Reflecting on the Lesson Goals:   * In what way do goals fit into the course as a whole? * Why should students care/be interested/be motivated? |  |
| **HOW** | Procedures:   * How would you accomplish these goals? * What questions will you ask? When? * What activities will you use? |  |

**Learning Taxonomies and Foundations of Undergraduate Education:**

Seven Core Principles of Undergraduate Student Learning (1987, Chickering, Gamson):

Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education

I. Summary of Principles:

***1. Good Practice Encourages Student-Faculty Contact***

Frequent student-faculty contact in and out of classes is the most important factor in student motivation and involvement. Faculty concern helps students get through rough times and keep on working. Knowing a few faculty members well enhances students' intellectual commitment and encourages them to think about their own values and future plans.

***2. Good Practice Encourages Cooperation among Students***

Learning is enhanced when it is more like a team effort than a solo race. Good learning, like good work, is collaborative and social, not competitive and isolated. Working with others often increases involvement in learning. Sharing one's own ideas and responding to others' reactions improves thinking and deepens understanding.

***3. Good Practice Encourages Active Learning***

Learning is not a spectator sport. Students do not learn much just sitting in classes listening to teachers, memorizing pre-packaged assignments, and spitting out answers. They must talk about what they are learning, write about it, relate it to past experiences, and apply it to their daily lives. They must make what they learn part of themselves.

***4. Good Practice Gives Prompt Feedback***

Knowing what you know and don't know focuses learning. Students need appropriate feedback on performance to benefit from courses. In getting started, students need help in assessing existing knowledge and competence.

In classes, students need frequent opportunities to perform and receive suggestions for improvement. At various points during college, and at the end, students need chances to reflect on what they have learned, what they still need to know, and how to assess themselves.

***5. Good Practice Emphasizes Time on Task***

Time plus energy equals learning. There is no substitute for time on task. Learning to use one's time well is critical for students and professionals alike. Students need help in learning effective time management. Allocating realistic amounts of time means effective learning for students and effective teaching for faculty. How an institution defines time expectations for students, faculty, administrators, and other professional staff can establish the basis for high performance for all.

***6. Good Practice Communicates High Expectations***

Expect more and you will get it. High Expectations are important for everyone - for the poorly prepared, for those unwilling to exert themselves, and for the bright and well motivated. Expecting students to perform well becomes a self- fulfilling prophecy when teachers and institutions hold high expectations of themselves and make extra efforts.

***7. Good Practice Respects Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning***

There are many roads to learning. People bring different talents and styles of learning to college. Brilliant students in the seminar room may be all thumbs in the lab or art studio. Students rich in hands-on experience may not do so well with theory. Students need the opportunity to show their talents and learn in ways that work for them. Then they can be pushed to learning in new ways that do not come so easily.

Student Approaches to Learning   
(text and charts taken from <http://education.jhu.edu/research/newhorizons/future/creating_the_future/crfut_entwistle.cfm>):

"Learning and Studying: Contrasts and Influences"

by Noel Entwistle, Ph.D.

The full essay is available at the link above as well as in the Appendix of this document.

What we learn depends on how we learn, and why we have to learn it. Recent research on the ways in which students in higher education tackle their day-to-day academic work has drawn attention to the need to think of learning as the outcome of a whole range of interacting factors. Of course, how well we learn depends on our intelligence-or rather the level of our various intelligences in relation to the task we have to do. It has been clear for many years that achievement in formal educational contexts also depends on effort, and on the general level of student motivation. But increasingly, research on student learning has been describing additional influences on academic learning. These influences depend, in part, on the individual characteristics of learners, and on their past experiences in education. They also depend on current experience within the courses they are taking-the quality of the teaching, and above all on the nature of the assessment procedures. We now have a set of related concepts which allow us to understand why some students do well, while others do badly.

All these first three conceptions imply that information is presented to the learner whose job it is, when required, to reproduce that information in the same form as it was originally learned. This is not unreasonable when facts are being learned, but that is only one type of learning. Often we have to understand something for ourselves and that depends on a transformation of the knowledge presented, an ability to relate it to what is already known and to make personal sense of it. The more sophisticated conceptions stress the extent to which the learner has to be active in making sense of the material and, in the process, may change as a person."

**Different Conceptions of Learning**

(Adapted from Saljo, 1979, and Beaty, Dall'Alba & Marton, 1990)

A. Increasing one's knowledge

B. Memorizing and reproducing -- *Reproducing*

C. Utilizing facts and procedures

D. Developing an initial understanding -- *Transforming*

E. Transforming one's understanding

F. Changing as a person

From interviews with students who had been asked to read an academic article and to be "ready to answer questions on it afterwards", they distinguished between *deep* and *surface* "approaches to learning" which depended on the students' intention when tackling the task. Some students intended simply to spot facts likely to form questions, and then to memorize them; in other words they focused on the surface level of the text. Other students intended to understand what the author was saying, and so focused more deeply on the underlying meaning, and sought to integrate the components. The characteristics of these contrasting approaches are summarized below.

**Defining features of approaches to learning**

*Deep Approaches*

Intention to understand material for oneself  
Interacting vigorously and critically on content  
Relating ideas to previous knowledge/experience  
Using organizing principles to integrate ideas  
Relating evidence to conclusions  
Examining the logic of the argument

*Surface Approach*

Intention simply to reproduce parts of the content  
Accepting ideas and information passively  
Concentrating only on assessment requirements  
Not reflecting on purpose or strategies in learning  
Memorizing facts and procedures routinely  
Failing to recognize guiding principles or patterns

For a full summary of the history of the above research and implications for student learning, please read the .PDF "Paper 2: Student approaches to learning." (University of Oxford: <http://www.learning.ox.ac.uk/media/global/wwwadminoxacuk/localsites/oxfordlearninginstitute/documents/supportresources/lecturersteachingstaff/resources/resources/Student_Approaches_to_Learning.pdf>).

What's the difference between a deep approach, a surface approach, and an achieving approach to learning? Why is it useful to know about students' approaches to learning?

<http://www.iml.uts.edu.au/learn-teach/approaches.html>

(Adapted from Marton et al., 1984, and Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983)

**Bloom's Revised Taxonomy**

This new taxonomy reflects a more active form of thinking and is perhaps more accurate:

Remembering: Recall previous learned information.

Examples: Recite a policy. Quote prices from memory to a customer. Knows the safety rules.

Key Words: defines, describes, identifies, knows, labels, lists, matches, names, outlines, recalls, recognizes, reproduces, selects, states.

Understanding: Comprehending the meaning, translation, interpolation, and interpretation of instructions and problems. State a problem in one's own words.

Examples: Rewrites the principles of test writing. Explain in one's own words the steps for performing a complex task. Translates an equation into a computer spreadsheet.

Key Words: comprehends, converts, defends, distinguishes, estimates, explains, extends, generalizes, gives an example, infers, interprets, paraphrases, predicts, rewrites, summarizes, translates.

Applying: Use a concept in a new situation or unprompted use of an abstraction. Applies what was learned in the classroom into novel situations in the work place.

Examples: Use a manual to calculate an employee's vacation time. Apply laws of statistics to evaluate the reliability of a written test.

Key Words: applies, changes, computes, constructs, demonstrates, discovers, manipulates, modifies, operates, predicts, prepares, produces, relates, shows, solves, uses.

Analyzing: Separates material or concepts into component parts so that its organizational structure may be understood. Distinguishes between facts and inferences.

Examples: Troubleshoot a piece of equipment by using logical deduction. Recognize logical fallacies in reasoning. Gathers information from a department and selects the required tasks for training.

Key Words: analyzes, breaks down, compares, contrasts, diagrams, deconstructs, differentiates, discriminates, distinguishes, identifies, illustrates, infers, outlines, relates, selects, separates.

Evaluating: Make judgments about the value of ideas or materials.

Examples: Select the most effective solution. Hire the most qualified candidate. Explain and justify a new budget.

Key Words: appraises, compares, concludes, contrasts, criticizes, critiques, defends, describes, discriminates, evaluates, explains, interprets, justifies, relates, summarizes, supports.

Creating: Builds a structure or pattern from diverse elements. Put parts together to form a whole, with emphasis on creating a new meaning or structure.

Examples: Write a company operations or process manual. Design a machine to perform a specific task. Integrates training from several sources to solve a problem. Revises and process to improve the outcome.

Key Words: categorizes, combines, compiles, composes, creates, devises, designs, explains, generates, modifies, organizes, plans, rearranges, reconstructs, relates, reorganizes, revises, rewrites, summarizes, tells, writes.

For further reading and a structured breakdown of instructional strategies using Bloom's Revised Taxonomy, visit: <http://www.nwlink.com/~donclark/hrd/strategy.html>

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## Creating the Learning Environment

The Natural Critical Learning Environment (adapted from What the Best College Teachers Do, Bain, K. 2004 and from the work of Charlie Cannon, Professor of Industrial Design at the Rhode Island School of Design, founder, Innovation By Design):

How do the best teachers create a natural critical learning environment in which they embed the skills and information they wish to teach in questions and tasks students will find fascinating -- authentic tasks that will arouse curiosity and create a safe environment in which students can try, fail, receive feedback, and try again?

Think of something you want your students to do intellectually. How will you create a safe yet challenging environment in which they can practice the discipline and receive feedback that is formative, not summative?

*The Natural Critical Learning Environment:*

1. Begins with an intriguing question

2. Places that question in a larger context

3. Engages students to argue for an answer

4. Helps students answer the question

5. Leaves students with more questions

*The Invitation:*

1. It is important to me -- personally

2. It is important to our field

3. We're going to do it together

4. Here is how you are going to contribute

5. Here is what you are going to get out of it

*The Trigger:*

1. It is outside of the immediate classroom context

2. Relates an essential question to the wider world

3. Students work in small groups to solve it

4. They share their findings with the entire class

*The Coda:*

1. Builds on what the students have already done (credit)

2. Gives their work a new audience (prestige)

3. Useful for the student's resume (experience)

4. What it does for you (research/scholarship)

**Design a project that is**

intrinsically motivating for students and embeds learning in an authentic and interesting project...

involves goal-based learning: the learners goal serves to direct the project...

involves learning-by-doing and learning-by-failing: provides opportunities for students to try, fail, and receive feedback in advance of, and separate from, a grade...

helps students to learn specific reasoning skills...

tells you and your students if they have learned to reason in the discipline.

**Ten Commandments of Good Instruction by Ron Miller M.D.**

1. Goal: Have a goal for your lecture. Decide what needs clarification, development and emphasis. State the purpose of your lecture.

2. Simplify: Keep it simple stupid. Research has shown better student retention when topics are covered, re-emphasized and simplified - therefore, simplify complex material.

3. Speak: Speak in conversational tones and maintain eye contact

4. Pause: Change pace every ten minutes. Research has shown better student retention when the lecturer breaks the lecture into segments.

5. Encourage: Encourage participation. Allow time for students to answer and think about the material presented.

6. Listen: Listen to your student’s answers and respond to them.

7. Entertain: Entertain by provoking thought, showing a sense of humor, and displaying enthusiasm

8. Create: Create an inner tension, a sense of anticipation or curiosity

9. Show: Show your interest in the subject and the students. Show you are interested in what they learn.

10. Summarize: Try to end with an intellectual bang. Leave enough time to over the major points. Leave enough time for questions.

**Fifteen Suggestions for Student Writing - Motivation and Revision**

1. Profess a problem-driven model of the writing process. Instead of asking students to choose "topics" and narrow them, encourage students to pose questions or problems and explore them. Show how inquiry and writing are related.

2. Give problem-focused writing assignments. Students are most apt to revise when their essays must be responses to genuine problems. See Chapter Six (Engaging Ideas, Bean, 2011) for advice on creating writing assignments that guide students toward a problem-thesis structure.

3. Create active learning tasks that help students become posers and explorers of questions. Students need to be seized by questions to appreciate how the urge to write grows out of the writers desire to say something new about a question or problem. Through classroom activities that let students explore their own responses to questions, students rehearse the thinking strategies that underlie revision. Chapters Eight through Thirteen focus on strategies for active learning (Engaging Ideas, Bean, 2011).

4. Incorporate low-stakes exploratory writing into your course. Chapter Seven (Engaging Ideas, Bean, 2011), suggests numerous ways to incorporate exploratory writing into a course. Exploratory writing gives students the space, incentive, and tools for more elaborated and complex thinking.

5. Build talk time and writing center conferences into the writing process. Student writers need to talk about their ideas with others by conversing with classmates, friends, or writing center consultants/tutors. Writers need to bounce ideas off interested listeners, to test arguments, to see how audiences react, and to get feedback on drafts. In this regard, consider having students talk through their ideas in small groups before they write their first drafts.

6. Intervene in the writing process by having students submit something to you. Take advantage of the summarizable nature of thesis-based writing, by having students submit to you their problem proposals, thesis statements, nutshelling statements, or self-written abstracts. Use these brief pieces of writing to identify persons who need extra help.

7. Build process requirements into the assignment, including the due dates for drafts. If students are going to stay up all night before a paper is due, make that an all-night session for a mandatory rough draft rather than for a finished product.

8. Develop strategies for peer review of drafts, either in class or out of class. After students have completed a rough draft, well in advance of the final due date, have students exchange drafts and serve as "readers" for each other. See Chapter Fifteen for advice on conducting peer reviews (Engaging Ideas, Bean, 2011).

9. Hold writing conferences, especially for students who are having difficulty with the assignment. Traditionally, teachers in American universities spend more time writing comments on finished products than on holding conferences earlier in the writing process. As a general rule, time spent "correcting" finished products is not as valuable as time spent in conference with students in the rough draft stages.

10. Require students to submit all drafts, notes, and doodles along with final copies. Have students staple their final copies on top of draft material arranged chronologically like geological strata. Not only will you have evidence of your students' writing process, but you will also set up a powerful defense against plagiarism.

11. Allow rewrites, or make revision-oriented comments on typed next-to-final drafts. Many students are motivated toward revision by the hope of an improved grade. If students have an opportunity to revise an essay after you have made your comments, you will strike a major blow for writing as a process. See Chapters Five, Fifteen, and Sixteen for advice on writing marginal and end comments that encourage revision rather than cosmetic editing (Engaging Idea, Bean, 2011).

12. Bring in examples of your own work in progress so that students can see how you go through the writing process yourself. Students like to know that their teachers also struggle with writing. The more you can show students your own difficulties as a writer, the more you can improve their own self-images.

13. Give advice on the mechanics of revising. If students compose entirely online, explain the advantages of revising on a double-spaced hard copy rather than the screen. This strategy leaves plenty of room on the page for crossing out and revising while making it easier to look back at earlier pages for inserting large-scale mapping statements, signposts, and other structural cues.

14. Don't over-emphasize essay exams. Symbolically, essay exams convey the message that writing is a transcription of already clear ideas rather than a means of discovering and making meaning. They suggest that revision is not important and that good writers produce acceptable finished copy in one draft. Although essay exams obviously have an important place in liberal education, they should not substitute for writing that goes through multiple drafts. See Chapter Twelve for further discussion of essay exams (Engaging Ideas, Bean, 2011).

15. Hold to high standards for finished products. Teachers are so used to seeing early drafts as final copy that they often forget how good a globally revised essay can be when teachers demand excellence. Students do not see much point in revision if they can earn A's or B's for their quickly edited drafts.

For more suggestions, active learning and writing exercises and the foundational background of the above list of teaching practice for student writing, see Engaging Ideas: the professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom, by John C. Bean, 2011, Joessy-Bass.

Another excellent resource for guiding student writing practice across disciplines comes from Montclair State faculty member Leslie Rapperlie. Her book, titled *Writing and Experiential Education: practical activities and lesson plans to enrich learning* (Woodnbarnes, 2011), contains a rich array of writing and active learning exercises applicable to nearly every course. A copy is available in the Research Academy and will be available in digital form once published.

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