

Tips and Approaches for Using the Writing Questions (NSSE and FSSE) for General Education Assessment

Schools need economical and reliable ways to assess and improve general education learning. We discovered one method when we added 27 questions about writing to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Results indicate that gains in general education learning are associated with three “best practices” for writing assignments:

Assign meaning-constructing writing tasks

Engage students in interactive writing processes

Explain expectations clearly

By analyzing students’ responses institutions can create targeted initiatives for improving faculty’s use of writing, thereby increasing students’ general education learning. Here’s what you can do:

- 1) Participate in the NSSE CSWC—or use the NSSE writing questions at no cost in your own local assessment. Details at <http://comppile.org/wpa+nsse>.
- 2) Participate in FSSE and use the writing questions—or use the FSSE writing questions in your own local assessment.
- 3) Ask these questions of NSSE and FSSE writing scales and individual writing questions:
 - Are we doing as well as we want on the writing scales for first-year students? For seniors?
 - Compare with peer groups (if participated in NSSE CSWC consortium)
 - Compare with our aspirations
 - Are there notable discrepancies between parallel NSSE and FSSE scales? (if used both sets of writing questions)
- 4) Look separately at results from the gains question about writing.
- 5) If you want to do better:
 - Ask these questions
 - Are there certain departments we should target?
 - Are there certain groups of students we should target?
 - Devise appropriate faculty and curricular development strategies
 - Draw from your institutional experience
 - Consult the literature on teaching
 - Consult the NSSE+WPA website: <http://comppile.org/wpa+nsse>
- 6) Conduct research by combining writing results with school records such as student grades.

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The Scales We Examined

NSSE Best Practices for Using Writing to Learn

Encourage Interactive Writing Activities	<i>For how many writing assignments have you:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Brainstormed to develop your ideas before you started drafting your assignment• Talked with your instructor to develop your ideas before you started drafting your assignment• Talked with a classmate, friend, or family member to develop your ideas before you started drafting your assignment• Received feedback from your instructor about a draft before turning in your final assignment• Received feedback from a classmate, friend, or family member about a draft before turning in your final assignment• Visited a campus-based writing or tutoring center to get help with your writing assignment before turning it
Assign Meaning- Constructing Writing Tasks	<i>In how many of your writing assignments did you:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Summarize something you read, such as articles, books, or online publications• Analyze or evaluate something you read, researched, or observed• Describe your methods or findings related to data you collected in lab or field work, a survey project, etc.• Argue a position using evidence and reasoning• Write in the style and format of a specific field (engineering, history, psychology, etc.)• Explain in writing the meaning of numerical or statistical data• Include drawings, tables, photos, screen shots, or other visual content into your written assignment• Create the project with multimedia (web page, poster, slide presentation such as PowerPoint, etc.)
Explain Writing Expectations Clearly	<i>In how many of your writing assignments has your instructor:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provided clear instructions describing what he or she wanted you TO DO• Explained in advance what he or she wanted you TO LEARN• Explained in advance the criteria he or she would use to grade your assignment

FSSE Best Practices for Using Writing to Learn

- Same three scales use the same items as above. Tenses were changed where needed and items reflected the position of the faculty member as the person giving the assignment.
- Each faculty member was asked to indicate, for a self-selected course, how many writing assignments they did or asked students to do what was indicated in the items. The response scale was the same as the student items.

Deep Learning Scales and Items

Higher-Order Learning Activities	<p><i>During the current school year, how much has your coursework emphasized the following mental activities?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• ANALYZING the basic elements of an idea, experience, or theory, such as examining a particular case or situation in depth and considering its components• SYNTHESIZING and organizing ideas, information, or experiences into new, more complex interpretations and relationships• MAKING JUDGMENTS about the value of information, arguments, or methods, such as examining how others gathered and interpreted data and assessing the soundness of their conclusions• APPLYING theories or concepts to practical problems or in new situations
Integrative Learning Activities	<p><i>In your experience at your institution during the current school year, about how often have you done each of the following?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Worked on a paper or project that required integrating ideas or information from various sources• Included diverse perspectives (different races, religions, genders, political beliefs, etc.) in class discussions or writing assignments• Put together ideas or concepts from different courses when completing assignments or during class discussions• Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with faculty members outside of class• Discussed ideas from your readings or classes with others outside of class (students, family members, co-workers, etc.)
Reflective Learning Activities	<p><i>During the current school year, about how often have you done each of the following?</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Examined the strengths and weaknesses of your own views on a topic or issue• Tried to better understand someone else's views by imagining how an issue looks from his or her perspective• Learned something that changed the way you understand an issue or concept
Deep Learning Overall	<p><i>Sum of all twelve items in the three scales above.</i></p> <hr/>

Self-Reported Gains Scales and Items

Practical Competence	<i>To what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Acquiring job or work-related knowledge and skills• Working effectively with others• Using computing and information technology• Analyzing quantitative problems• Solving complex real-world problems
Personal and Social Development	<i>To what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Developing a personal code of values and ethics• Understanding yourself• Understanding people of other racial and ethnic backgrounds• Voting in local, state (provincial), or national (federal) elections• Learning effectively on your own• Contributing to the welfare of your community• Developing a deepened sense of spirituality
General Education	<i>To what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills, and personal development in the following areas?</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Writing clearly and effectively• Speaking clearly and effectively• Acquiring a broad general education• Thinking critically and analytically

Presentation (PowerPoint) will be available for download at:
nsse.iub.edu/html/research.htm