



**BARD COLLEGE INSTITUTE FOR WRITING & THINKING**

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## **INTRODUCTION TO BARD COLLEGE INSTITUTE FOR WRITING AND THINKING PRACTICES**

Provided below are some: (I) Introductory Remarks; a (II) General Overview of the Practices; and (III) The Workshop.

### **Introductory Remarks:**

The workshop outlined below is grounded in practices we at the Bard Institute call “Writing to Learn” and “Writing to Read” practices, consisting primarily of informal, exploratory, in-class writing. This informal writing differs from a traditional writing assignment as its purpose is not to produce a finished product, but to encourage creative thinking and personal textual connection. The aim of these practices is to foster close reading, and encourage students to articulate their thoughts free of the paralysis that can ensue when students are pressured to find the “right answer.”

Common Core literacy standards in History and Social Studies (grades 5-12) emphasize a student’s ability to site to specific textual evidence, determine central ideas, analyze textual structure and evaluate conflicting points of view, all of which skills are premised on the student’s comfortability with the written word itself. The “Writing to Learn” and “Writing to Read” practices engaged in here address these literacy objectives by directly engaging the student’s personal interest in the text itself, thereby facilitating an enduring engagement with words and concepts that otherwise feel foreign and elusive. Though these practices can be adopted to a variety of subjects and texts, it was our goal in these workshops to help make these foundational Federalist documents and ideas as real to our students as they were to our founders in 1789.

In these exercises, as in all those we do at the Bard Institute for Writing and Thinking, it important that the teacher position herself not as a judge and arbiter, but as a participant and facilitator, engaging in the informal writing practices alongside their students. This non-hierarchical participation and positioning helps promote an atmosphere of collaboration in the classroom, so key to promoting the sense that writing and reading can be fun and creative. Time allowed for writing to read can vary depending on the class and the lessons to be covered.

## **General Overview of the Writing and Learn and Writing to Read Practices:**

**Exploratory writing generally:** Function and Purpose.

**“First thoughts”:** In the workshop for teachers, we began asking, “Who we are as teachers?” In a class for students you might begin by asking students who they are as students, and what are their “first thoughts” about courts, judges, etc.

It is best to hear all the “first thoughts” writing, either in the whole group or in small groups, at the beginning of a unit of study, or in connection with a first reading of a text. Students learn from each other’s responses, but what they write is also informative for teachers.

**Focused Free writing:** Not as open-ended as “First thoughts.” This writing moves into the subject more directly. For example, invite students to write in response to a question raised by one of the workshop texts, for instance: “How is this case is about justice?”

Beginning the workshop with writing in response to a general question broadly related to the subject of the workshop allows every voice to be heard, engages student interest in the subject, and offers information about student interest, limitations, and questions. Focused free writing can importantly help to ease students into the work by creating a spirit of collaboration and community, helping them recognize both that their voice is important, and that it is just one in a chorus of the ideas of their peers. Where the teacher participates in these writing exercises, s/he does so in this spirit of collaboration, providing not the “corrective” example, but a reflection as spontaneous and personal as those of her students. Witnessing the teacher’s genuine engagement can help the students move beyond the inevitable self-consciousness that arises whenever writing and reading out loud is involved.

Writing our way into a text, writing down our thoughts as we read, and marking what jumped out of a text are habits of reading we encourage students to develop.

The following are examples of some “writing to read” practices engaged in at the Bard Institute for Writing and Thinking generally, and specifically utilized in in these workshops.

### **“Text Rendering” and “Text Explosion”:**

Students begin by reading a portion of a text first to themselves. This portion can be assigned for homework, or done silently in class. Ask students to underline any phrase that they do not understand, or that grabs their interest. Then in class, the class will collectively read the document out loud. Once the textual portion has been read collectively and the sound of the document is “in the room”, as it were, the teacher will read that portion out loud again. Explain to the students before-hand that as you read, students will call out the phrases or words they noticed when the teacher reaches them. Once this second reading has concluded, give students a few minutes to write down further thoughts or questions, as well as any further thoughts they have about how their words say something about the issue raised by the text selected. These further thoughts may be shared collectively.

There are more playful ways of engaging in “text rendering” or “text explosion”, all of which serve to create a more personal connection with the text. One of our favorite exercises is to have students “free associate” to the word or phrase that they have underlined. When the teacher reads the text out loud a second time, the student repeats the line they have underlined when the teacher reads that part, then the teacher stops reading as the student reads out loud their “free association”. When the student is finished, the teacher picks up reading from the text again, going around the room and responding to each student in turn.

Another playful exercise, one utilized in this Workshop, is for the student to read their selected portion of the text out loud in a particular “manner” (skeptically, emphatically, dramatically, etc.)

### **“Dialectical Notebook”:**

Here we ask students to put three vertical columns on a piece of paper, asking them to respond to a particular passage in a text that you have chosen: In column #1 they write: What they understood; What they did not understand; What they would like to hear more about. The piece of paper is then passed to a partner, who responds, in column # 2, to what the first person has said. Once they have responded, the paper is passed back to the original student, who remarks in column # 3 on what their partner has written.

This is a tool to help students foster an independent relationship to a difficult text. By forcing students to write down their response to a particular passage as they encounter it, they are required to articulate and identify what they understand, or don’t. Since they know ahead of time that this response will be passed to a partner, they recognize that they must write in a way that someone else will understand. This exercise is helpful in fostering clear thinking and writing. And it helps students engage closely with texts that are difficult and intimidating.

### **“Believing and Doubting”:**

This is a great exercise for expanding a student’s perspective. Briefly, the student is asked to respond first to a portion in a text as if they “believe” it, and then as if they don’t “believe” (i.e. “doubt”) it. The key is to take both sides of the argument seriously, so that the student is forced to see a different point of view. While we emphasize that the “doubt” must be seriously undertaken, this does not mean that it can’t also be playful and fun.

### **“Process Writing”:**

At the end of a workshop of class, we often ask students to “process” what they learned, or what they now think. This act of reflection can be an important cognitive tool, helping students to reflect on what they have learned, thus enriching understanding and fostering comprehension at a deep level.

**“Odd Angled” texts:** Here’s another approach, not covered in our workshop: You might open by having the students respond to the well-known tale, Dr. Zeuss’s *The Zax*. This short, whimsical story raises questions of how to resolve conflict, and of the need of

an “outsider’s voice” to resolve arguments. It may thus re-introduce the question “what is justice?” as well as the role of judges and courts in a manner that is more engaging and indirect than the text the teacher ultimately wants to address.