Teacher to Teacher

Write! Write! Write!

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"If you wish to become a writer, write!" These words are as true today as they were when the Greek philosopher Epictetus said them nearly 2000 years ago. In ABLE classes, students write paragraphs, essays and other formal pieces.

Yet informal writing is just as important as formal writing. Indeed, if you keep track of your own writing over the next day or two, you'll probably discover that most of your writing is informal. Surely we want students to become comfortable with informal writing. In addition to its pervasiveness in the lives of literate people, informal writing is a very powerful tool for learning (National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2000). Making informal notes allows learners to keep track of what they have learned and to "freeze" their thinking for later reflection or for sharing with others in discussion.

A final reason to promote informal writing in your ABLE classroom is that students may harbor negative attitudes about writing and themselves as writers. These feelings cannot be overcome if students' only writing experiences are formal (and involve concerns about grammar, usage, spelling, etc.), as these situations tend to be stressful. Plenty of informal writing, on the other hand, can help students learn to believe in themselves as writers and to see the valuable role that writing can play in their learning and in their lives.

Informal writing differs from formal writing in terms of purpose, audience, and what constitutes "acceptable" form. Consider the differences between writing a grocery list and writing a research paper, for example (Rasinski, Padak, & Fawcett, in press):

	Purpose	Audience	"Acceptable" Form
Grocery list	To remember what to purchase	Self	Any— no sentences; it's OK to misspell broccoli
Research paper	To synthesize new knowledge	Instructor, other students	Eventually, formal perfection

This is a rather simplistic example (sometimes rough writing is a precursor to formal writing), but as skilled adult writers, we use why we are writing (purpose) and for whom we are writing (audience) to make decisions about the amount of effort to put into the written piece and about what level of perfection is acceptable.

Understanding this framework can help students write effectively. You may find it useful to use the three descriptions that follow to help students make good choices about the level of formality to strive for in their writing:

- For your eyes only–no one else will see this, so use whatever form works for you. Examples: lists, notes to yourself
- "Sloppy copy"–someone else may see this, but they won't care about form. The writing just needs to be readable. Examples: journal entries, rough drafts, some email messages
- Good copy–this will be displayed/ read by others, so you want to polish the writing as much as possible. Examples: final drafts, letters, some email messages

You can probably find lots of times within instruction to encourage informal writing. Simply saying "Jot some ideas down about…" or "get your thoughts down" may suffice. The Eureka! resource database describes several teaching strategies that are based on informal writing activity (http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/strategies.html) Some particularly useful ones, which can be used in groups, with partners, or individually, are listed below.

Informal Writing to Prepare for Discussion/ Respond to Reading

These activities center on note-taking and are therefore useful for responding to any kind of reading and preparing for discussion.

Ohio Literacy Resource Center
Enhancing Adult Literacy

Affinity Diagrams
http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/affinity_diagram.pdf

Agree? Disagree? Why?
http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/agree_disagree_why.pdf

Brainstorming
http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/brainstorming.pdf

Discussion webs
http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/discussion_webs.pdf

Journals
http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/types_of_journals.pdf

K-W-L
http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/k_w_l.pdf

Literature Circles
http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/lit_circles.pdf

New-Knew-Q
http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/new_knew_q.pdf

Save the Last Word for Me
http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/adapt_save_last_word.pdf

Think-Pair-Share
http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/think_pair_share.pdf

(Write and Share)2
http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/write_share2.pdf

Informal Writing Using Graphic Organizers

Graphic organizers help students classify information, see similarities and differences, or understand the relationship between and among ideas.

Herringbone
http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/herringbone.pdf

Matrices or Charts
http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/matrices_charts.pdf

Opinion-Proof
http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/opinion_proof.pdf

Problem and Solution Text Frames
http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/prob_solution.pdf

Semantic Mapping
http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/semantic_mapping.pdf

Series-of-Events Text Frame
http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/series_of_events.pdf

Venn Diagrams
http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/venn_diagrams.pdf

What is a Timeline?
http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka/strategies/WhatisaTimeline.pdf

References

National Assessment of Educational Progress. (2000). Available online at http://nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard/reading/.

Rasinski, T., Padak, N., & Fawcett, G. (In press). Effective reading strategies (4th ed.). New York: Pearson.
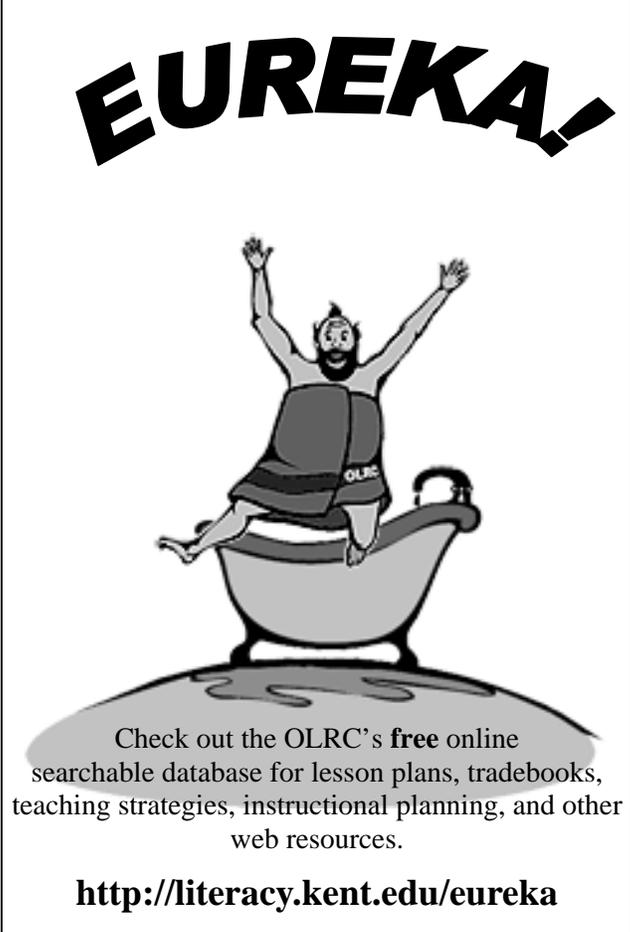
EUREKA!

Check out the OLRC's **free** online searchable database for lesson plans, tradebooks, teaching strategies, instructional planning, and other web resources.

http://literacy.kent.edu/eureka