

Using Personal Writing To Extend Literary Envisionments

Teachers have developed many ways to have students use writing to record initial responses to texts. The bookmark prompts Ms. Rief has students refer to as they work in their writer's notebooks is one effective strategy. You may wish to experiment with additional strategies in your classroom.

The Reading Response

Less directed than the bookmark prompts, the reading response is flexible enough to be used at any grade level once students are able to draft a series of sentences with moderate fluency. Calling on the brain's generative powers of association, the directions ask students to start writing and keep writing for a period of 10 to 15 minutes about the reading they have just completed. (The time can be adjusted to suit student age and ability levels, but should be long enough so students move past their first thinking to fresh ideas.) Students are encouraged to keep their writing focused on the text and their responses to it. Often, they begin with a summary of the reading, but typically move beyond that within a few sentences. They may find themselves exploring connections between the reading and other things they have read or real-life experiences. They may pose questions and then attempt a response. They may complain about things they didn't like or didn't understand.

The Dialogue Journal

This response mode asks students to focus on passages that they have selected. Folding a paper in half lengthwise, they label the left column "The text says..." and the right column "I say..." In the left column they write their chosen passages (with page numbers) and in the right column they respond in whatever way they like. You may ask them to choose a certain number of passages for response, or simply ask them to spend a specified amount of time on the project. It is helpful to teach students to use ellipses to truncate lengthy passages. An alternative strategy is to have one student choose the passages, and later trade papers with another who completes the "I say..." column.

The Process Log

This activity helps students become aware of how they read and the strategies they use as they process text. It is most effective when used with a short text, perhaps one that offers interpretive complexities. Students are asked to read the text, marking it in whatever way seems useful to them. They then write a brief statement completing the prompt, "This is about..." They then read the text a second time, marking as before. They reread their earlier statement, and either revise it or accept it by writing, "ok." They then take a few moments to write a process log of their reading in which they identify what they understood after their first reading, what questions they had, and what, if anything stood out. They write a similar comment about their experience with the text during a second reading. They then write a brief paragraph about how they understood what they did. Sharing these in class provides a springboard for a rich discussion of interpretive strategies and how they help readers with the comprehension of difficult texts.

For a detailed description of these strategies, see Kathleen Dudden Andrasick's *Opening Texts: Using Writing To Teach Literature*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1990. ISBN 0-435-08522-0.