What is it? Rather than writing for a grade, “writing to learn” is focused on fostering critical thinking, organizing data, and developing the learner’s perspective. Writing allows the learner to shape meaning and understanding and encourages internal processing. “When students write, they are obliged to organize concepts, place them in their own language, and connect them with their own analogies and metaphors” (wcw.wisc.edu, 2013). “Writing to learn” isn’t just demonstration of thought, it is a tool to foster learning.

How is it done? Two approaches to "writing to learn" exist in the literature. One approach is informal or "low stakes" writing, where students provide short writing assignments that are informal in nature, allowing discovery. Typically, these assignments are either not graded at all or are graded with very few points or "weight." These writing assignments facilitate thinking time, which we often do not allow during class.

However, a different approach to "writing to learn" also exists, which is more formal and is often called "high stakes" writing. In this approach, students develop lengthy written assignments through a series of drafts and revisions. The use of peer evaluation, as well as instructor evaluation, is common here. The writing becomes a guide to what is learned, as well as how well it is learned. In this approach, formative evaluation is emphasized. While the stakes may be high, the bulk of feedback (perhaps all feedback) is provided during development, rather than waiting until the assignment is completed. Summative evaluation is held until the final product is submitted. This approach develops substantive learning about the course content, as well as strengthening the student’s skills in writing well at a formal level.

How can I avoid poor writing samples? Be clear in what you expect. Use a detailed rubric. Ask students to help you develop that rubric. Provide examples of good writing. Require peer review during development. Provide commentary as needed in the development stages. Send students in need to WATR.

Do I need to correct their use of grammar and punctuation? Again, two approaches to the concept exist. With informal writing, assignments are not graded or evaluated on the basis of writing mechanics. That is why "low stakes" is often used as the label for this approach.

With the more formal approach, students can be expected to utilize appropriate language and style. Make students responsible for polishing their own drafts, however. Use peer review for comments. General comments about grammar and punctuation can be made, but the student learns more by revising than he/she will by receiving numerous proofreading notations. In fact, research clearly shows that students will not use proofreading notations.
unless they are forced to do so. When forced to do so, the research suggests the students learn more about writing if they are directed to find the solution, rather than being given the solution. In other words, do not edit the student’s work.

**What is a “good” writing to learn assignment?** It should tie to specific “pedagogical” goals (look at your learner outcomes). Writing should also be discipline specific, using appropriate terms and methods. Discuss the audience and purpose of the writing assignment with your students.

**What are the expectations for the writing emphasis general education requirements?** See the UUCC Web page and click on "General Education."

**What kind of writing assignments can I use?** See below. Also visit [http://wac.colostate.edu/intro/pop5.cfm](http://wac.colostate.edu/intro/pop5.cfm)

**Idea 1: Think-Pair-Share** *(low stakes assignment)*  
Lyman (1981)  
Ask an open-end question. Allow students 1 minute to think about the answer.  
Ask the students to pair up and discuss their answers in a collaborative dyad.  
After several minutes, ask the students to write their collaborative answer.  
Then, either ask the dyads to share their answers with the whole class, or collect the written answers for your review later. Check comprehension, rather than writing style.

**Idea 2: Structured Problem Solving** *(low stakes assignment)*  
*(Johnson, et al., 1991; Millis & Cottell, 1998; Slavin, 1995)*  
A short lecture may be needed before the activity.  
Student groups (about 4 per group) are given a problem to solve within a specified time limit.  
The groups are told they must work on the problem together, until all are satisfied and they agree upon the answer. The answer must be written.  
After the time limit is over, the instructor calls on each group to present the solution. Or, students might be asked to explain their answer to another group.  
Collect the written answers and review for comprehension and how the group solved the problem (method).

**Idea 3: Five-Minute Essay** *(low stakes assignment)*  
*(Angelo & Cross, 1993; Young, 1997)*  
Students are asked to write during the last five minutes of class to answer the following questions:  
*What did you learn in class today?*  
*What questions or concerns do you have?*  
If time allows, students assemble into groups of four to share their responses and select the best one or two questions to submit to the entire class. Or, the instructor can simply collect these “essays” and review content for the next class session. This assignment can also be used as part of a journal (collect journals periodically).
Idea 4: **Microthemes** (low or high stakes assignment)
(Bean, Drenk, & Lee, 1982)
Four microthemes, each is a different kind of writing assignment.

- **Summary writing**: Summarize a reading assignment by focusing on main and secondary points.
- **Thesis-supported writing**: Student receives a state of two opposing viewpoints. The student is asked to take one view or the other and to provide supporting evidence for that perspective.
- **Data-provided**: Students are given a series of statements or data and are asked to draw a conclusion.
- **Quandary-posing**: A conceptual question is asked and students compose a written response.

Idea 5: **Journal** (low or high stakes writing)
(O'Connell & Dyment, 2006; Karp-Boss, Weller, & Boss, 2007)
"Reflective" or "learning" journals have been used for decades in education. This technique is used across disciplines. It should be more dynamic than simply taking notes. It should ask the students to share their perspectives, as well as put what they are learning into their own words. Journals aren't just a summary of what was learned, but an exploration of content and how it effects the individual student, how it transforms the knowledge or skill of that student, and how it reflects on professional practice.

**Journals might contain the following:**
- Summaries of reading assignments (in the student's own words).
- Summaries of key points in a lecture (in their own words).
- Definitions of key terms, phrases, acronyms (in their own words).
- Key points raised during a discussion.
- Their own discussion questions about material presented in reading assignments or lecture.
- Their responses to questions posed about the reading assignments.
- Objective information (describe it); reflective (student reaction to it); interpretive (student explains what was observed); decision-making (what could be done differently in a similar situation)

**Journals can be graded on these elements:**
- Clearly written (not grammar and punctuation, as much as conveying meaning).
- Thoughtful and creative.
- Refers directly to the lesson or points raised in the material covered.
- Reflects what student found interesting, exciting, or important.
- Reflects what the student has discovered or will discover with more investigation.

**Journal prompts can be used, too!**
Summarize the information in your own words. Then answer, “So what?” Define, classify, compare/contrast, cause, effect, evaluate, or propose. Students might also answer, “Now what?” Write a conclusion.
A reflective journal can also contain sketches, photographs, tables, figures, and samples that supplement their perspective and summarize the material. If the student remembers information better in a visual manner, these add-ons to the journal may help that student learn more effectively.

_Idea 6: Research Article_ (high stakes assignment)
Students conduct original research and write a report on it. Begin with a problem statement (and hypotheses, if appropriate). Develop the introduction. Develop the literature review. Develop the methods section. Report the results. Analyze and provide a conclusion. Pull the parts together into a cohesive article. Each part of the assignment is distinct, completed in phases, revisions and peer review occur along the way at appropriate intervals, and the writing is highly formal. Providing a clear rubric is essential to this assignment. For information on assessment, see Pyrczak’s _Evaluating Research in Scholarly Journals._

Old saying: “You don’t know what you know until you’ve written it down.”

New saying: “You don’t know what you don’t know until you’ve reflected on what you know and found the gaps in your knowledge. Now you have direction for what to learn next!”

Another old saying: "Writing makes thinking visible"

Resources:
Journal writing (for instructors): [www.audiencedialogue.net/journal.html](http://www.audiencedialogue.net/journal.html)
Journal writing (for students): [www.michener.ca/pdf/WritingReflectiveJournals_000.doc](http://www.michener.ca/pdf/WritingReflectiveJournals_000.doc)
Writing assignments & a rubric: [www.duq.edu/Documents/cte/writing-to-learn.pdf](http://www.duq.edu/Documents/cte/writing-to-learn.pdf)
Writing Across the Curriculum: [http://www.wright.edu/academics/wac/facguide.htm](http://www.wright.edu/academics/wac/facguide.htm)
You Tube: Writing to Learn at [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pr-buiFYLtU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pr-buiFYLtU) “Designing Engaging Writing Assignments-Writing to Learn” videos by AuburnWrites
Parameters for writing assignments and more at: [http://academic.udayton.edu/crc/faculty/DesigningEffectiveAssignments.htm](http://academic.udayton.edu/crc/faculty/DesigningEffectiveAssignments.htm)
Summary about writing to learn in an easy-to-read format: [http://writing.byu.edu/writing-to-learn/](http://writing.byu.edu/writing-to-learn/)
List of references and writing assignments across curriculum at:
http://serc.carleton.edu/sp/library/writing_assignments/index.html

Resources for Teachers at WAC Clearinghouse: http://wac.colostate.edu/intro/po2n.cfm

*Writing to Learn* paperback by William Zinsser

"Writing to Learn: From Paragraph to Essay" by Lou and Marilynn Spaventa

Writing to Learn & more: http://www.wcer.wisc.edu/archive/Cl1/CL/doingcl/writing.htm