DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 282 232 CS 210 526

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TITLE Guidelines for Using Journals in School Settings. Approved by the NCTE Commission on Composition.
INSTITUTION National Council of Teachers of English, Urbana, Ill.
PUB DATE Jun 87
NOTE 3p.; A SLATE (Support for the Learning and Teaching of English) Starter Sheet.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Controversial Issues (Course Content); Elementary Secondary Education; Guidelines; Higher Education; Instructional Improvement; *Privacy; Student Participation; *Teaching Methods; Theory Practice Relationship; *Writing Exercises; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS *Student Journals

ABSTRACT

Intended to help teachers avoid the problems of privacy posed by asking students to keep journals or personal notebooks, this starter sheet outlines some of the assumptions behind journal assignments and suggests guidelines for assigning journals. The first section presents a list of assumptions about the connections between thought and language that represent strong pedagogical reasons for asking students to keep journals. The second section discusses how writing in journals helps students interact with and respond to the material being learned and lists a variety of specific, practical reasons for assigning journals. The third section presents the following guidelines for assigning journals: (1) explain that journals are not diaries but are concerned with the content of the course; (2) ask students to buy loose-leaf notebooks and to hand in only those pages that pertain directly to the class; (3) suggest that students divide their journals into several sections, one for each course; (4) ask students to write short journal entries in class; (5) do something active and deliberate with what students have written; (6) award points for student journals, but do not grade them; (7) respond only to those journal entries that pertain specifically to the class; and (8) at the end of the term, ask students to organize their entries and to review what they have written. (JD)

SLATE Support for the Learning and Teaching of English

GUIDELINES FOR USING JOURNALS IN SCHOOL SETTINGS

Approved by the NCTE Commission on Composition, November 28, 1986

In recent years teachers in elementary and secondary schools, as well as in college, have been asking students to keep personal notebooks, most commonly called journals but also known as logs, daybooks, thinkbooks, and even diaries. These informal notebooks serve a range of educational purposes, from practice in self-expression to figuring out problems in science classes. Some teachers encourage students to write about whatever they want, while other teachers carefully specify topics. In most cases, students are encouraged to express honestly their personal opinions, take some risks with their thoughts, and write in their own natural voices.

Because journals provide students considerable freedom to express their thoughts and feelings, students often write about private and intimate subjects—subjects that more properly belong in personal diaries than school journals. The problem for teachers is how to encourage students to write personally and frankly about ideas and issues they care about without at the same time invading their private lives.

This document will outline some of the assumptions behind journal assignments and suggest guidelines to help teachers avoid the problems of privacy which journals occasionally present.

Assumptions about Language and Learning

Students are asked to keep journals for strong pedagogical reasons, based generally on the following assumptions about the connections between thought and language:

1. When people *articulate connections* between new information and what they already know, they learn and understand that new information better (Bruner 1966).
2. When people *think and figure things out*, they do so in symbol systems commonly called languages, which are most often verbal but also may be mathematical, musical, visual, and so on (Vygotsky 1962).
3. When people learn, they use all of the language modes—reading, writing, speaking, and listening; each mode helps people learn in a unique way (Emig 1977).
4. When people *write* about new information and ideas—in addition to reading, talking, and listening—they learn and understand them better (Britton et al. 1975).
5. When people *care* about what they write and see connections to their own lives, they both learn and write better (Moffett 1968).

Writing to Learn in Journals

Teachers assign journals—and logs and thinkbooks and daybooks—for a variety of specific and practical reasons, including the following: (1) to help students find personal connections to the class material they are studying; (2) to provide a place for students to think about, learn, and understand course material; (3) to collect observations, responses, and data; and (4) to allow students to practice their writing before handing it in to be graded.

Teachers in all subject areas, from history and literature to psychology and biology, have found that students who write about course readings, lectures, discussions, and research materials better understand what they know, what they don't know, and what they want to know—and how all this relates to them. In elementary classes, as well as in high school and college, when students study science, math, and reading, they log what they are learning about science, math, and reading in their journals. Teachers commonly ask students to read aloud voluntarily from their journals to help start class discussions or to clarify for each other points of confusion or differing interpretations. In short,

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CS210526

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journals are active, methodical records of student thought and opinion during a given term, and are meant to help students prepare for class discussions, study for examinations, understand reading assignments, and write critical papers.

In addition, English and language arts teachers commonly assign journals to help students learn to write formal assignments. In these classes, student writers keep journals for many of the same reasons as professional writers: to find and explore topics; to clarify, modify, and extend those topics; to try out different writing styles; to sharpen their powers of observation; to attain fluency; and in general to become more aware of themselves as writers.

In most instances, teachers consider journals to be the students' territory, a place where students can experiment and try out ideas without being corrected or criticized for doing so. Consequently, while most teachers periodically collect and read journals, they neither correct them for spelling nor grade them for ideas. Instead, they respond personally and positively to selected entries, usually in soft erasable pencil. Sometimes teachers simply respond positively to selected entries; other times they ask questions or make suggestions in response to student questions. In many cases the journals provide an opportunity for non-threatening dialogue between teacher and student. In short, journals are useful tools for both students and teachers.

The following section presents some guidelines for assigning journals which teachers have found helpful in the past.

Guidelines for Assigning Journals

1. Explain that journals are neither diaries nor class notebooks, but borrow features from each: like diaries, journals are written in the first person about issues the writer cares about; like class notebooks, journals are concerned with the content of a particular course.
2. Ask students to buy loose-leaf notebooks. They can then hand in to you only those pages which pertain directly to your class, keeping their more intimate entries private.
3. Suggest that students divide their journals into several sections—one for your course, one for another course, another for private entries. When you collect the journals, you need only collect that part which pertains to your own course.
4. Ask students to do short journal entries in class. Write along with the students, and share your writing with them. Since you don't grade journals, the fact that you also write gives the assignment more value.
5. Every time you ask students to write in class, do something active and deliberate with what they have written. For example, have volunteers read whole entries aloud, have everyone read one sentence to the whole class, have neighbors share one passage with each other, etc. (In each case, students who don't like what they have written should have the right to pass.) Sharing the writing in this manner gives credibility to a non-graded assignment.
6. Count, but do not grade, student journals. While it's important not to qualitatively evaluate specific journal entries (for here students must be allowed to take risks), good journals should count in some quantitative way: a certain number of points, a plus added to a grade, or an in-class resource for taking tests.
7. Do not write back to every entry; it will burn you out. Instead, skim journals and write responses to entries that especially concern you.
8. At the end of the term ask students to put in (a) page numbers, (b) a title for each entry, (c) a table of contents, and (d) an evaluative conclusion. This synthesizing activity requires journal writers to treat their documents seriously and to review what they have written over a whole term of study.

Of all writing assignments, journals may be the most idiosyncratic and variable. Consequently, good reasons exist to ignore any of the above suggestions, depending on teacher purpose, subject area, grade level, or classroom context. However, these suggestions will help many teachers use journals more positively and efficiently in most school settings.

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Note: This document was drafted by Toby Fulwiler, University of Vermont, with considerable help from the members of the NCTE Commission on Composition, including Glenda Bissex, Lynn Galbraith, Ron Goba, Audrey Roth, Charles Schuster, Marilyn Sternglass, and Tilly Warnock.