

**Low Stakes Weekly Student Journal Returns Priceless Communication:
 Minimal Demands Enhance Student-Instructor Exchange of Ideas**

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College graduates are expected to be able to clearly express themselves in writing. To develop this competency, regular writing assignments are essential for post-secondary students who may be better at texting emojis than composing paragraphs using complete English sentences at high school graduation. Unfortunately, I am not an English composition professor; I am trained in the field of psychology, and psychologists are rarely lauded for their lofty English prose. Thus, I resorted to short (100 word) weekly journal entries as regular writing assignments in my Introductory Psychology classes. Before the pandemic I graded these journals based on how well students understood and applied class material to some aspect of their lives; however, relaxing those demands during the pandemic resulted in unexpectedly personal and highly valuable communication with my students that I would have otherwise thwarted by having students focus on facts learned in class rather than experiences that are affecting their studies.

Prepandemic Journal Demands

The weekly journal assignment for my Introductory Psychology students began as a way of incorporating a vaguely specified university-wide “writing component” into the class. Each week, students reflected on the class material that had been presented in the textbook or lecture and applied that material to their own personal life. These entries served as a knowledge check for each unit, so I graded these journal entries based on evidence that the student understood and correctly applied class material using the following rubric:

Journal Entry Rubric				
Criteria	Ratings			Points
Knowledge – Student accurately names and describes concept presented in class this week	1 pt – Excellent Concept from class correctly named and described	.5 pt – Adequate Concept from class named but description vague or unclear	0 pt – Inadequate No concept from class named or described well enough to identify it	1 point max
Application – Student provides a real-life example of the psychological concept and accurately applies their knowledge from class	1 pt – Excellent Real-life example described clearly, and concept applied accurately	.5 pt – Adequate Real-life example given and concept applied but information vague or partially inaccurate	0 pts – Inadequate No real-life example given, or application is wholly inaccurate	1 point max
Total Points ____ / 2				

Students generally did well on these journal entries, but the entries often resembled a grocery list of the topics we had covered, and the examples students gave were often the same or very similar to examples from the textbook or the lecture. Thus, these responses demonstrated that students were clearly worried about providing “wrong” answers and less likely to risk discussing something that might be tangential to class.

Changes for Online Learning

When we had to abruptly switch to online learning in March of 2019, I initially adjusted the journal assignment because I felt it was unfair to ask students to apply the material without having the classroom experience where example applications are provided by me and their classmates. However, I wanted to keep grading for the semester essentially the same as that described in the syllabus from the beginning of the term in January 2019. So, I changed the assignment just slightly by asking students to just write 100 words reflecting what they think about the material being covered in class; these thoughts could include application of the concepts, questions about the concepts, procedural problems switching to on-line learning, or any other class related issue the student wanted to bring to my attention. The revised rubric for the journal entries became the following:

Online Learning Journal Entry Rubric				
Criteria	Ratings			Points
Writing Style – Student wrote at least 100 words long and writing is clear enough to understand	1 pt – Excellent Entry is at least 100 words long and is easily understood	.5 pt – Adequate Entry is less than 100 words long or not easy to understand	0 pt – Inadequate Entry is less than 100 words long and not intelligible	1 point max
Application – Topic discussed applies to psychology class	1 pt – Excellent Clear relationship between entry and class	.5 pt – Adequate Some relationship between entry and school, but not to psychology	0 pts – Inadequate Journal entry does not relate to school, psychology, or class	1 point max
Total Points ____ / 2				

The change in the content and personal information provided by students in the journal entries was immediate. When students no longer had to worry about getting the answer “wrong” and just had to say something – anything -- somewhat related to the class, I began hearing about personal struggles (including instances where I could refer students to the UCBA counseling center), unusual tangentially related interests (including psychopathology for Cersei Lannister and other Game of Thrones characters), musings about implications of the class topics to personal goals (including career, education, and Dungeon & Dragon campaigns), and the basic and anxiety questions that students had been afraid to ask (like “Do I really need to read the textbook?”).

Suddenly, I was getting insight into the motivations and fears of even the most introverted students who avoid raising their hand or attending office hours – all because I gave them a forum to communicate with me where they were rewarded just for talking to me about any topic even remotely related to class. As a result, I developed stronger personal connections with even the very quiet, sit in the back of the room, never raise their hand or come to office hours students. Therefore, I could better address the needs of each of my students, not just those who routinely feel comfortable approaching their instructors and expressing their thoughts.

Innovations to Keep

Because of the clear increase in student confidence when the weekly journal assignment was less content-focused, I do intend to keep the more open, less constrained format for the journal even as we return to in-person learning. Every class has quiet students who avoid attention, and this assignment opens my ear as the instructor to even these shy students. It also allows for me to address students at whatever level they need help: whether they struggle just comprehending basic facts or if they are considering the ethical implications of current political debates related to psychology. Thus, the low-demand journal allows me to hear and instruct students in a personalized manner regardless of the student's level of understanding or introversion.