

Quick Write Journaling

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I have taught ESL097 English as a Second Language II in the Quick Start program several times. Quick Start offers an opportunity for incoming first time students to take and pass basic skills and/or English as a Second Language courses before starting their first semester at LaGuardia. I like teaching these students because they are motivated and they work very hard to move on to the next level in a sequence or totally out of remediation or ESL as quickly as possible. Students enrolled in Quick Start understand that they will be saving time and money over time.

ESL097 emphasizes reading and writing, therefore its main goal is to prepare students to write cogent, well organized descriptive or argumentative short essays that would earn them placement in either ESL098 or ESL099. In fourteen days, students write six essays in addition to the placement and final essays. Hence, it is imperative to select materials that provide a wide range of vocabulary, verb tenses, sentence models, and paragraph structures. Moreover, since class sessions are scheduled from 9:00 am to 2:00 pm with a 30 to 45-minute recess for lunch, diverse class activities are paramount to maintaining students interested in the materials and focusing on writing tasks.

I start each day with a quick write journal activity which affords an uninterrupted 8 to 10-minute timed writing opportunity without regard to accuracy which is then followed with a short discussion about the topic. My goal is to have students write without lifting

their pen or pencil from the paper. The topic list revolves around college life and includes summaries, analyses, comparisons, descriptions, and recommendations*. For instance, a topic that tends to generate a great deal of writing and discussion is the question: What would you recommend to someone who has been invited to take the placement exams before registration at LaGuardia? By this time, many students have realized that taking placement exams seriously is in the individual's best interest, because the results determine which courses they are eligible to take in the first semester and the placement results are irreversible unless they perform very well on leveling exams the first day of class. Often better than half of the students reveal in their quick writes that they were tired or hungry, did not feel well, or did not give their full attention to placement exams. One student wrote, "I took algebra and trigonometry [for] 2 years in my country but I thought the test w[ould] no[t] count." The quick write assignments surface very real issues which students did not understand or were unfamiliar with before and become subjects of class discussions. Students are eager to share their knowledge with prospective students and they feel empowered to convey their experiences to friends and acquaintances before it is too late.

Another topic that usually generates a great deal of writing is the question: How would you improve the admission process at LaGuardia? Invariably, students offer useful insights drawn from their experiences facing CUNY and/or LaGuardia's bureaucracy on various levels. They often express a desire to know before they register what kind of credit they will receive for college courses taken in their home countries like the student quoted above. They also express certain level of anxiety, because they feel Testing Office staff "speak very fast" during testing sessions and students miss part of

the information during this all important face to face encounter. Often, they add they were rushed and didn't have time to read instructions carefully and as a consequence may have not performed as well as they could.

The quick write journal promotes also personal connections with services to students at LaGuardia and general rules and regulations. Students feel uncomfortable and vulnerable during their first encounter with an American collegiate experience. Therefore, the writing topics also serve to spark intra group communication particularly in a small setting helping participants to get to know classmates across ethnic, linguistic and/or national boundaries. The small groups work best when I am able to mix a strong writer, someone with effective oral communication skills, and one that is weak in one or both skills, since characteristics of a good writer and of an effective oral communicator will be highlighted in the second part of the course which serves to strengthen confidence or acts to alert those who need to brush up on their skills.

The quick write journal is not a panacea, yet second language students who are provided with a sustained writing experience tend to become better writers as they find their own voice to express ideas. By the end of the 14-day session and as a result of focused and sustained quick write journaling, my students have a broader set of information on how to be successful in college. They are armed with questions they could ask, offices to which they could direct their concerns, or individuals from whom they can seek information or assistance.

*Sample Quick Write Journal Topics

1. What are you passionate about? Why?
2. What do you hope to accomplish in life by going to college?
3. What is your career goal? Why does it appeal to you?
4. Do you feel comfortable in college? Why? If not, what will be helpful to you?
5. What would you recommend to someone who has been invited to take the placement exams before registration at LaGuardia?
6. Students face many challenges while attending college. List some of the challenges you are facing now. Are you aware of any services offered at LaGuardia that can help you?
7. Select one challenge from your list and explain how you plan to overcome that challenge. Who could help you at LaGuardia?
8. Today most college students work while attending classes. What are some of your reasons for working?
9. One of the skills you have to develop at LaGuardia is the ability to communicate ideas clearly and effectively. What does communicate clearly and effectively mean to you? Who do you think is an effective communicator?
10. Thinking of the person you identified as an example of an effective communicator, make a list of what makes him/her an effective communicator. Be specific.
11. Family and friends are usually supportive of your decision to attend college, but at times they can put pressure on you. How would you handle such situations when they arrive?
12. Identify challenges you face while trying to understand a reading assignment. What is most difficult for you? Be specific. Who might be able to help you with a reading assignment at LaGuardia?
13. How would you improve the admission and testing process at LaGuardia?