

# The Writerly Framework: An Observation Protocol

<b>Creating Spaces</b> for students to think, generate, make connections		
<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Exemplary Moments</i>	<i>Opportunities</i>
1. Planting seeds of suggestion 2. Cultivating co-creation 3. Taking risks 4. Pausing for reflection 5. Shifting agency 6. Challenging the readerly		
<b>Engaging in Dialogue</b> where students interact and engage with the content and each other		
<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Exemplary Moments</i>	<i>Opportunities</i>
1. Generating questions 2. Co-constructing knowledge 3. Fostering interaction 4. Delving into the content 5. Prompting feedback 6. Challenging the readerly		
<b>Making Meaning</b> where students don't "record" the content but rather create new understandings of it		
<i>Dimension</i>	<i>Exemplary Moments</i>	<i>Opportunities</i>
1. Enhancing retention 2. Generating understanding 3. Fostering integration 4. Distributing practice 5. Solving problems 6. Challenging the readerly		

## 1. Creating Spaces

This category captures the essence of the writerly, which is the instigation of openness. The idea here is that students need the space to think, to generate, to build, to make connections, to develop or further their understandings. One of the most obvious ways to “achieve” the writerly, whether in a text or in teaching, is suggestiveness. This suggestiveness is not about ambiguity, however. A fit analogy here might be to consider the difference between telling and showing. If you “tell” someone something, it is finished and thinking stops. However, if you “show” someone something (in images or words), thinking opens up and new discoveries are made. This process is made possible any time there is an intentional effort to be suggestive rather than declarative.

There are, of course, risks involved any time a teacher surrenders agency to students. However, there are also risks in not surrendering such agency. Risk taking is essential to making a shift to the writerly, which is by definition an adventure with uncertain outcomes. It won’t always work (just as traditional lecturing doesn’t always work), and it might not ever work for all students, but little good comes from taking the easy road.

For Barthes, one of the primary functions of the writerly is that the reader should become more like the writer, and when we apply this to teaching and learning, the student should become more like the teacher. The concepts of active learning and constructive alignment both claim that good “teaching” is more about what the student does than what the teacher does, and this is also the case with writerly teaching.

### 1.1 Planting Seeds of suggestion

Is the content delivered in a manner that is suggestive and prompts the reader into deeper engagement? Or is it more declarative, endeavoring to be comprehensive or complete?

### 1.2 Cultivating Co-Creation

Does the teacher make the classroom a place of creative collaboration and integration, or do they enter the room with all of the answers for the purpose of transferring them to the students?

### 1.3 Taking Risks

Does the course (or individual lesson) take risks and encourage students to take risks?

### 1.4 Pausing for Reflection

Does the course purposefully give space for the writerly to occur by including pauses and moments of silence where thinking and discovery can occur?

### 1.5 Shifting Agency to Students

In what way does the course give students agency in the teaching and learning process?

## 1.6 Challenging the Readerly

One of the best and easiest ways to strive for writerliness in our teaching is to recognize and root out the readerliness in our teaching, which is where the teacher's role is to provide the answers and possess full authority and where the student's role is to receive it all uncritically, exactly as it was encoded.

In the creating spaces dimension, does the course challenge the readerly by finding places where these spaces are not being created and recognizing how they might, then, be created? And is it possible and desirable that these criteria might suggest opportunities for other criteria?

## 2. Engaging in Dialogue

Interaction is at the heart of writerliness. Indeed, the way that Barthes (1974) describes the writerly is in many ways analogous to what people in the online learning world call learner-content interaction (Moore, 1989). The Writerly Framework has also been heavily influenced by the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, both his work on "Epic and Novel" texts (1981), which is somewhat similar to Barthes scheme of readerly and writerly texts, and his work on dialogism (1981), which has also informed a considerable line of educational research, led by such figures as Rupert Wegerif, Olga Dysthe, and many others.

Whenever students engage with the content of their curriculum, it is never a one-way thing. Learning is not an act of recording, it is an act of interpretation, an act of re-writing (Gray, 2024), which implies that learning is an act of interacting with the source material and making it something new. Indeed, interaction is not about two different things meeting; it is about two different things influencing each other; it is about both sides changing. Both sides have to move toward each other into something that is shared. Learning is, therefore, more than a dialogue or conversation. It is a creative, productive, generative act that involves a bidirectionality of meaning (Doukopoulos, 2024) between instructors, students, and content.

It is also important to point out that conversations can only happen if each statement serves as a prompt for a response. Therefore, the act of teaching should be, essentially, a process of prompting, and this might most easily be achieved through a strategic use of questions, as well as, occasionally, intentionally provocative statements that lead to students' responses or questions. It also requires giving students space to generate and reflect upon such questions and responses.

### 2.1 Generating Questions

Does the educational experience prompt, implicitly or explicitly, the generation of questions? Does the delivery of content entail the asking of questions (and not simply answering implied questions)? Does the delivery of content, in whatever form, elicit questions from the students, not just questions for the instructor but also for the content itself?

### 2.2 Co-Constructing Knowledge and Meaning

Does the instructional experience lead to an interactive co-construction of new meaning and new knowledge in the students, where the co-construction can occur between the student and the instructor, the students themselves, or the student and the content?

### 2.3 Fostering Interaction

Does the educational experience lead to a meaningful experience of interaction, particularly between the student and the content, so that both the student and content are changed?

### 2.4 Delving into the Content

Does the instructional strategy strive for more than merely covering content? That is, does it lead them to delve deeply into that content for a richer and more meaningful learning experience?

### 2.5 Prompting Feedback

Does the instructional experience provide mechanisms for students to receive feedback on their efforts to create new meanings and understandings? And are these situated to serve as constructive failures, so that students learn from their mistakes?

### 2.6 Challenging the Readerly

Readerly teaching is perhaps best characterized as straightforward, declarative information delivery, very much akin to Paulo Freire's banking approach (1968) to education. It is essentially a just-the-facts approach, and it dominates most disciplines in higher education. It also has its place and is necessary in almost all courses. But only as a part of those courses. We recognize that knowing facts is a major part of being educated, but at the same time, facts are essentially meaningless until they are taken into consideration, and once they are taken into that consideration and given context and meaning, they essentially cease to be facts. In Barthes's terms, this refers to what has already been written and cannot be rewritten. Learning, and meaning making, only really start to happen when rewriting happens, and that is something that can't be achieved by rote memorization.

How can students take the "stuff they just need to know" and situate it into their understanding in more engaging, motivating, and authentic ways? How can they be prompted to enter into a dialogue with the content to achieve better understanding, deeper learning?

## 3. Making Meaning

The concept of the writerly, while resisting the notion of an ultimate or final meaning, is about the process of the reader/student creating meaning/learning that is generated by the course content. Again, this is not simply a matter of students "recording" the material, however; it is about generating new meanings and understandings. Such meanings and understandings are very individualized and personal. There is, actually, no other way for them to be.

If we were to take all of the leading experts on a particular concept or phenomenon, and even though they could come together and craft an "official" explanation of that concept or phenomenon, if they were each to write their own explanation, they would all be slightly different, in

form and content, because each of them would have a different understanding of it. This is, of course, a function of representation and production, but it is also a function of each person's own experience, priorities, and method of sense making, which is related to how their knowledge structures are, well, structured.

One of the main functions of higher education, whether we want to admit it or not, is to create colleagues. We seek to find the best and brightest of our students and turn them into ourselves, or at least into our co-workers and replacements. Yet, we also tend to think of our students as knowledge consumers and ourselves as knowledge producers. Perhaps a new way of thinking about it is to conceptualize students as consumers of information but producers of meaning. Just as a factory needs raw materials to make a product, students need content to make meaning, or knowledge. The difference here is that factories are designed to make that conversion, to generate that production, whereas our classrooms, whether on campus or online, are typically designed to just give the students the raw materials with the implied expectation that they are supposed to be raw.

### 3.1 Enhancing Retention and Transfer

Are there moments where students are prompted in some ways to process or understand the material in larger or different contexts that reach beyond the abstract confines of the chapter or classroom?

### 3.2 Generating understanding

Does the student's encounter with the content lead to the creation of new meanings and understandings, for the student, but also, perhaps, for other students, the instructor(s), and even the content itself?

### 3.3 Fostering Integration

Does the presentation of material or the prompting from assignments lead students to make connections between different parts of the course or program curriculum?

### 3.4 Distributing Practice

Does the course offer multiple opportunities for students to use or practice with course material, particularly in ways generate new ideas and meanings and not simply repeat correct answers?

### 3.5 Solving Problems

Does the course provide opportunities for creative problem solving where students are forced to apply what they have learned in novel, relevant, and authentic contexts?

### 3.6 Challenging the Readerly

Is teaching about telling or asking? Are students in your classroom active participants in the course's production of meaning, or are they, as Barthes would put it, "plunged into a kind of idleness" where they can only choose whether or not to buy what you are selling? One of the biggest issues around attempts to implement active learning and student-centered classrooms is a lack of appropriate

intentionality, where the purpose of the activity is lead to something creative and new, rather than to arrive at some fixed point.

Are the intended learning processes and outcomes of the course passive, all about reception? Or are they generative, about producing new meanings and understandings?