

## Less Writing, More Thinking Assignments

*Microthemes* are short (often one page) essays. They are designed according to a principle that a small amount of writing is preceded by a great deal of thinking. Space constraints necessitate focused assignments that get students to delve into a single concept or issue. The brevity forces students to work out their thinking without developing support for it, which they might do in a subsequent assignment. Not all microthemes need be graded; some instructors, considering them practice for longer papers, simply record that they have been completed. Rather than writing comments on individual microthemes, the instructor can provide feedback to students by presenting several of the best (and worst) microthemes that exhibit representative writing or thinking problems.

The Summary-Writing Microtheme: Writing a good one or two hundred-word summary of an article is a cognitively difficult task. The writer must first determine the structure of the original article by locating the transitions and other cues that signal hierarchical relationships among specific details and various levels of abstraction. Then, the writer must condense the whole, retaining main and subordinate ideas while eliminating supporting details. Such a task builds students' reading comprehension skills and also gives students practice in writing concise, flexible prose.

The Thesis-Support Microtheme: Many student writers have difficulty discovering issues within a topic or formulating thesis statements that take focused positions on issues. Thesis-support microthemes provide students with an issue (i.e. The price-earnings ratio of a stock (does/does not) reflect the rate or return that an investor will achieve.). Students must choose one alternative for each issue and write a microtheme that defends the position.

The Data-Provided Microtheme: The task of the data-provided microtheme is the obverse of the thesis-support microtheme. Here, students are provided with data and asked to discover a thesis or a general statement that gives meaning to the data. Students must arrange the data in a logical order (in more complex assignments, students select only the significant data and omit irrelevant data), connect the parts with appropriate transitions, and write statements showing the meaning that they have induced.

The Quandary-Posing Microtheme: There is some evidence that the process of transforming vaguely formed private thoughts into public words enhances comprehension. One does not really understand a concept until one can articulate it clearly to someone else. These microtheme assignments ask students to solve puzzles and to teach their solutions in writing to an imagined audience.

Adapted from "MICROTHEME STRATEGIES FOR DEVELOPING COGNITIVE SKILLS" by John Bean, Dean Drenk, & F. D. Lee. September 21, 1988.