



Short Essays Written in Class

Ten minutes, three prompts, no grade. The exercise that reaches the students a plenary never will. College and high school.

The cheapest exercise here and the one with the best return per minute. Ten minutes of silent writing, three prompts, no grade. It reaches every student, including the ones who will never speak in a plenary, and it gives you something to read that tells you what the room actually understood.

Charles Petranek, drawing on twenty-five years of running simulations, argues that students learn more when written debriefing follows oral debriefing, and that writing is the only way to assess individual learning, because oral debriefing implicitly assumes that everyone learns the same things at the same time in the same way.

When to use it

- **Always, if you can.** It is also the opening move of the full-period debrief: write first, then small groups, then the plenary.
- **When the room is uneven.** Three or four confident students will otherwise set the account of what happened, and the rest of the class will adopt it.
- **When you have ten minutes and nothing else.** It is the only exercise here that fits in the tail of a period and still produces evidence.

Running order

0–2	Put three prompts on the board. Say it is not graded, that they keep it, and that they will use it in a few minutes. Both of those are true and both change how they write.
2–12	Silence. Do not circulate and do not read over shoulders. Write your own answers if you want the room to stay quiet.
12–15	Collect, or do not. If you collect, say in advance whether you will.

The three prompts

One. What happened, in your own account, not the official one.

Two. Why it happened, and I want a reason that is not about somebody's personality.

Three. What surprised you.

Prompt two does the work. Left open, students explain outcomes by character: she was stubborn, he would not listen. Ruling that out forces them toward rules, incentives, information and timing, which is the move the whole debrief is trying to produce.

Variations worth knowing

- **The counterfactual prompt.** Name one decision that, reversed, changes the outcome. Not a wish, a decision, made by somebody in this room.
- **The other side, sixty seconds.** Give the strongest version of the position you spent the day opposing. If a student cannot do it, they did not understand what they were arguing against.
- **The memo in role,** written after de-roling: a cable home, a memo to the client, a note to the file. Students enjoy writing it, and the register switch is itself a check on whether they understood the institution.
- **For AP classes,** write to an actual released free-response prompt. Students write about something they just lived through, the task is the real task, and you are grading writing you were going to assign anyway.

What to watch for

Ask students to name what they did, not to rate how much they improved. Self-rated skill gains are the weakest finding in this literature. Clark and Scherpereel found no significant change in self-rated public speaking, leadership or negotiation, and Kartal found that students systematically revise their opinion of their former selves downward, which inflates apparent gains. A student who can describe a thing they actually did has given you evidence. A student who reports feeling more confident has given you a feeling.