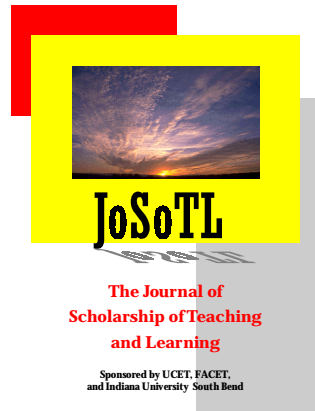


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Three-Part Journaling in Introductory Writing and Literature Classes: More Work with More Rewards

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Abstract

All teachers are challenged to reinforce and connecting the learning that takes place in various “spaces” of a student’s life: home-school, internal-external, and written-oral contexts. In the following article, I suggest a three-part journal assignment I have developed to capture and integrate these various moments of edification, using Pre-Class, In-Class, and Post-Class entries. I pay particular attention to audience, to issues of “private” and “public” writing. Recounting the scholarship on journal-writing, I then examine the work and responses of students in different kinds of classes (writing and literature) and different kinds of institutions (private and state) to suggest the versatility of this assignment.

Introduction

A problem all teachers face when assigning reading material--whether stories, essays, or textbook chapters--is having a motivational tool to keep students reading on schedule and with comprehension. Daily quizzes may serve such a purpose but they are poor substitutes for notes which students can claim and use afterwards. Yet insisting on note-taking is hard to enforce, even hard to teach. I would like to explain the three-part journals I have used in various introductory English classes to stimulate both comprehension and motivation to read. Though I have used these journals only in literature and writing courses, I would suggest that they could be applied to any kind of curriculum, humanities or science, which involves reading and is attempting--thanks to writing across the curriculum objectives--to integrate writing more thoroughly into the class.¹ Journal writing is not new and I will begin by contextualizing my assignment in the larger social and theoretical arena before explaining its pedagogical and practical values and complexities.

Journals have long been integral to western society's discursive activities, from the spiritual memoirs of Puritans and travelogues of eighteenth-century Europeans, to the famous diaries of Samuel Pepys and Anne Frank. To journal is to record one's inner ideas and transformation of those ideas as one interacts with the outer world, a record that is for both oneself and potentially for posterity. In fact, a debate central to today's scholars as they consider the value of journals is whether journals are written simply for oneself, as audience, as ends to themselves or whether there isn't always a sense of, or hope for, an outer audience which prompts revisions of journals into "more important" works. In other words, are journals private diaries or autobiographies-in-progress? Depending on how we as teachers view journals, we will use them differently in the classroom. Essays from the exhaustive *The Journal Book* edited by Toby Fulwiler (1987) reflect this typical dichotomy of views held by teachers of writing: Christopher C. Burnham, following on the heels of Ira Progoff and others, describes his Personal Development Journal centered on the students' self-analysis of their past, present, and future life experiences (150ff), while Geoffrey Summerfield in examining journals of famous writers like Wordsworth suggests that writing is always a social act and that these writers were "acutely aware of the fact of audience" (33) and thus so should our students. Similarly, Peter Elbow and Jennifer Clarke "celebrate *ignoring* your audience" in journal writing as a way of deflecting writer's block (19), while Jana Staton describes "dialogue journals" to make a concerted effort to create an audience (the teacher) for, in this case, elementary-age writers (49ff). Ann E. Berthoff's "dialectical notebooks" might be considered dialoguing with oneself using two sides of notebook pages, one side for a

¹ *The Journal Book*, edited by Toby Fulwiler, to which I will be referring later, prints NCTE Commission on Composition guidelines to journals (1996), stating: "teachers in all subject areas, from history and literature to psychology and biology, have found that when students write about course readings, lectures, discussions, and research materials they understand better what they know, don't know, want to know--and how it all relates to them" (6) and includes nine articles in a section on "Journals and the Quantitative Disciplines."

student's initial thoughts, the other side for adding reflections on these comments as he/she continues to ruminate and interact with others (12ff).

Cynthia Gannett, in *Gender and the Journal* (1992), exposes the various other dichotomies associated with journal-writing, from "academic/nonacademic, literacy/literature, public/private, intellectual/personal, and...male/female" which cause tensions and "continue to render the journal a problematic panacea" (34). Given this, she argues, the journal must stop being seen either as a benign prewriting heuristic or a simple personal memoir, and be recognized as the powerful shaper of language and culture which it is.

Aware, then, of the powerful tensions residing in journals, I come to a description of my own. Like Gannett, I resist seeing journals either as psychological freewriting or as only a step toward the more important critical paper. Like Burnham, Elbow, and Clarke, I believe that journals should become a space where students can share and develop their own thoughts on a text without fear of an overbearing audience; however, like Summerfield and Staton, I believe that writing in a vacuum is impossible and that creating the idea of social context from the start is vital. In a way, my three-part assignment allows for both private ("diaries") and public writing ("autobiographies") to occur because different parts allow for different concepts of "audience" and "purpose." Let me explain.

In these journals, students must write a Pre-Class entry to help them put their own unique ideas down on paper; an In-Class entry to ensure that they are following and capturing the essence of class discussion; and a Post-Class entry to ask them to assimilate class opinions with their own. One initial purpose is simply to get students to write on a daily basis in an uninhibited, exploratory way; "a tool to help me stay in my 'writing mood'" as one student perceptively notes.² I grade only on content, not writing, so students can see the value in their individual ideas even if the expression of these ideas is often "non-conventional." I ask somewhat directed questions but find that some of the better students will usually use these as a spring-board only to larger, essay-type responses.

In the Appendix, you will see the questions that I typically ask. The Pre-Class entry begins by asking for a few biographical questions to ensure that students do not jump into the work without knowing something about its author. I ask students to then choose favorite quotes and give initial impressions to invite interaction directly with the text, its language, and its content. I begin the process of making initial judgments by asking what they liked and didn't like. The last part of the Pre-class journals asks them to jot down material that is just "confusing" to them at the moment. This solicitation for questions and interest-points leads directly to class discussion where I often open by

² All comments are taken from anonymous student evaluations during or after a class while I was teaching in an adjunct capacity at DePauw University, Greencastle, Indiana (1997-8) and Purdue University, W. Lafayette, Indiana (1998-9). Journal entries are used with the students' permission.

asking them to share the questions they wrote down: hence, the move from private speculation to public sharing of ideas. I have seen a dramatic difference in the quality of discussion, particularly in my first-year composition courses, since using this assignment because students are not only “forced” to read the assigned articles in a course that does not use exams, but they now have notes from which to speak the minute they enter class: “they definitely help prepare me for class. I plan on doing a journal for every class possible this semester” writes a composition student.

The In-Class entry, then, becomes a transcription of that hopefully elevated level of class discussion. Its inclusion in the journal assignment was actually suggested by students who, on student evaluation forms, asked to get journal credit for taking notes in class. But I insist that notes not only be taken on information put up on the board and my verbal explanations, but also note-taking on other students’ comments and discussion points. This is an aspect of the journal that is harder to obtain, though, often attesting to weaker note-taking skills of many first-year students. But by commenting directly in the journals as to where notes get oblique and sketchy during the day’s discussion, I am able to begin this learning process for them. By weaving these into the journal entry, I encourage students to record the challenges to their initial impressions that come from peers and the instructor. Similarly, as students share their impressions in class, these private ideas become available and even more vulnerable to a public audience.

The Post-Class entry is often the most time-consuming and thus the most resented aspect of the journal assignment...but also the most pedagogically essential. This is, after all, the place where the student assimilates his/her initial impressions with the material gained in class, whether that be corrections to his/her misperceptions or just a larger awareness of the multiple interpretations of a text to complicate students’ typical “there’s only one way to interpret this text” attitude. Like Pat Belanoff, I fight the concept that so many students bring to class that “‘somewhere out there’ is a ‘right’ response to every piece of literature and that their task as students is to discover what that ‘right’ response is” (*The Journal Book* 100); like me, she has come to “place journals at the heart of my literature classes. Journals belong to students; in them, they can record *their* thoughts about literature...[and] learn to sharpen their own natural way of responding to a text” (102-3). My pre-writing section allows for these personal responses; however, I also agree with Burnham who uses journals to move students from dualism (“I’m right; they’re wrong”) to a multiplicity mindframe (“others may see and read things differently and that is all right”). The ability to entertain multiple readings while still being able to justify one’s own is a complex task all teachers attempt to achieve; the Post-Class entry begins this process by providing a space for a validation of both a student’s opinions and the many ideas that are generated in class. As one student recognized, journals “[capture] my first thoughts and my thoughts after class with so many ideas presented in class. They are helpful in working on understanding the story.” Thus, without journals ever being “invaded” by peers in the class, they are influenced by that “audience” as students begin the process of exposing

private thoughts to the public world and then allowing that interaction to reshape or only solidify their private views.

A writing student's journal entry on a chapter from Jonathon Kozol's *Savage Inequalities* shows this move from personal to public awareness, through both her reading experience and her interaction with the class:

For today's class, we read two articles (long articles, at that). The first article, Savage Inequalities, by Jonathan Kozol was about public schools and its issues...I realize how lucky I am to have went to a decent high school. I learned a lot of statistics in this article about the education factor in St. Louis...one in four kids will go to college from their high school. In my graduating class of 84, 73 kids went onto college. I also thought it was interesting when they were talking about Morris H.S. in New York City that about the chalkboards...teacher are afraid to let students write on them for fear they may cut themselves. I can't even imagine a school being that poverty stricken. In class, I hope we can discuss the issues of these poverty stricken schools and if anyone in class has ever seen one?

This student's engagement with the text and its "stories" is authentic and impassioned. Although there are writing mistakes, I do not comment on them; instead I responded with "wow" when she uses statistics to show the poverty of East St. Louis schools--for indeed, this is an impressive application of "dry facts" to a personal understanding of the world around her. And her solicitation for more people's high-school experiences was realized the next day in an animated class discussion which she carefully recorded. Her journal shows the privatizing of ideas yet also the anticipation of audience, even that she will be audience to others' private experiences. Her Post-class entry shows her assimilation of these In-class notes:

I thought class today was interesting. I learned a lot about personal experiences with schools and what the class thinks of their schools. Good viewpoints and opinions on life were spoken today. I though[t] what Tom had to say about 'doing your best with what is given to you' was great. Many people want more than what they can have, but sometimes you just have to deal with what you have.

At first frustrated that her attitude was a reflecting a middle-class "excuse" not to engage in social changes in inner-city schools, I then began to realize that in fact she was extrapolating that one sentence ('doing your best with what is given to you') to comment on her own life experience. Public commentary becomes personal commentary, and the public classroom audience has reverted back to a personal one again.

I end the journal entry by asking students to apply their new-found ideas by making connections with previous works, suggesting topics for papers, etc. Without diminishing the value of immediate textual reflections, this assignment can also be seen in the

context of the rest of the class, as freewriting for papers, for example. Indeed, one reason I ask students to record favorite quotes and statistical facts is so they can use these journals again as sources for their papers. And obviously in those classes with exams, in particular introductory literature courses, these journals are an invaluable study guide; as one student writes, "The journals are an excellent way to review the works studied and better prepare oneself for the test."

Thus, the initial value of these journals is to give students daily writing opportunities to free up the writing act, to behave as a record of transmitted ideas and facts throughout the course, and to generate better in-class discussion by enforcing daily reading of the assignments. I should note, however, that I normally do not collect these on a daily basis so that students with a busy day can occasionally fall behind on the assignment and not be penalized. But frequent skipping makes it nearly impossible to catch up. I collect the journals three times a semester and grade the students on completeness of entries and on the insightful content within each entry. I try to read every word and comment here and there to assure students that I am reading and taking their comments seriously. These are not as conversational as the responses described by Jana Staton; nevertheless, I assure students that I am "listening" even if I am not always "responding" in a dialogic fashion (I am using Staton's terms, p. 47 in *The Journal Book*). As one student wrote, "the comments...let you know that the instructor is reading them and they aren't just wasted time and paper." As "listening audience" who reacts to intriguing ideas without penalizing mechanical errors, I hope to encourage and not stifle the writing act for students. If true misconception of material is occurring, though, I can intervene without the kind of grade-penalty that occurs with exams, pointing out individual misunderstandings in their journals and discussing larger class miscomprehensions in class. So, when an entire poetry class had misunderstood Robert Browning's "My Last Duchess," I caught it right away and was able to work through their confusion in class.

Another advantage concerns the shy student, the person for whom bridging the private and public arena is intensely difficult. For this person, the Post-Class entry enables them to reflect on "Where you stand on any of the debates or interpretations that came up in class" and in detailing their responses, they become dialoguers within the class debate and I become the sole, and hopefully less daunting, audience. In fact, I have recently begun giving extra credit toward the participation grade for each entry completed above and beyond the required number due. One student last semester, a very smart but incredibly shy girl intimidated by the aggressive males in the class, made use of this option by turning in "extra credit" entries--and incredibly thoughtful entries at that--thus raising a raw participation grade of D to a B. One student wrote that "I love the journals because I think it gives us time to express our feelings even if we don't feel like sharing in class." Likewise, a literature student wrote that "I like journals...because although I may not say a lot in class, my ideas are still explained"--i.e., there is an audience to hear one's ideas, thus validating these ideas. Many of the students who enjoy journals are in fact female; Cinthia Gannett, in *Gender and the Journal*, argues

that because journals have tended to be marginalized in academic discourse, and journals/diaries have traditionally been the domain of women, we are marginalizing women in the process. The means of reversing this trend is to privilege journals and the reflections of our sometimes more silent female students.

But I need to admit that many students may not like this assignment at first because it IS a lot of work, as I point out in my paper's title. Journals have tended to have a bad name among students ever since they were integrated into academic curricula. As Gannett writes, "for many students, keeping a journal can be a miserable experience. Some students are bewildered by the assignment; others are downright bored" (20). Student comments from my mid-semester evaluations always make this painfully clear to me: comments range from "busy work" to a "nagging task." Interestingly, though, students often complain and unintentionally point to the worth of the assignment in the same breath: "Journals suck. But they make you do the reading and think which is their purpose." Or, "I don't think they help. [But] The [teacher's] comments help clear up anything that I don't understand." Often the student's area of expertise determines the resistance or pleasure they show with journals; though not true in every instance, humanities majors tend to enjoy the assignment while engineering students tend to resist it. I discovered this when carrying the assignment from one institution to another. In a first-year writing course at DePauw University, Greencastle, Indiana, in 1998, where I held a visiting professorship and where most students were pre-humanities, many students responded positively. Of the fourteen students, half had some "pain but..." comments while the other half thoroughly enjoyed the journals: "The journals have provided me with an excellent opportunity to reflect on the material. I like to use them as a way to express my feelings on certain subjects." Or "The journals are great for brainstorming, free thoughts, responses, and ideas. I think we benefit from these a great deal more than just writing another paper." Or "They are very helpful in really remembering and learning the material! They give me a chance to vent my feelings if I don't want to or don't have the opportunity to do [so] in class." In contrast, in the same type of first-year composition class at Purdue University the next semester where I had many pre-engineering and other applied science majors, the assignment engendered many "hostile" and vague complaints, such as those quoted earlier. And this was despite the fact that I had limited the number of entries from ten now to five for each journal for Purdue students. This last point may also suggest, though, that daily repetition can in fact help students become more comfortable with the assignment faster.

Literature students tend to be more of a mixed bag, some loving journals, others "loathing" them. Like writing classes, however, their mid-semester comments usually show both a resentment for the journals and a recognition of their academic worth: "Personally, I do not prefer journals. I would rather take my own notes...[but] I think the class notes section of the journal helps me to take better notes...[and] the instructor comments are very helpful." Or, "I [am] not too crazy about writing journals (and I'm behind in writing them right now), but I think that they do end up being beneficial to

remembering my impressions of the work;" or finally, "I think they are a pain while I am doing them but when I go to write a paper or study for a test they are definitely [sic] helpful." A tally of this introductory fiction class at DePauw University, Spring 1998, showed that seven of the twenty-four students did express vehement opposition. Five had some version of the "pain but gain" comment, while the rest--twelve of the twenty-four--commented only on how helpful the journals were.

Nevertheless discouraged that not all twenty-four of my students absolutely loved this assignment, I decided to do a test with them. Realizing that students will be most enamored only with assignments that have immediate positive results, I decided to see how they felt about the journals immediately after their final exam. Results might have been skewed by the fact that mid-semester evaluations were anonymous while I offered a couple extra-credit points toward their exam grade if they answered my question and thus they had to include names on these second responses. My question was, "Tell me what has been most helpful about writing journals this semester. Have they helped in studying for the midterm and final? Have they helped you to record your ideas as you read? Have they helped you to "speak" about the texts even if you don't speak in class? How has the pre-, in-, and post-class structure helped?" I begged the question a bit, and a few chose not to take the extra credit by not responding which probably meant that they just could not see any good coming from the journals. This notwithstanding, I was pleasantly surprised that now twenty-one out of the twenty-six students--over 80%--all had very positive things to say about the journals...and they did not appear to be vague, fabricated reasons to appease me. Fourteen of the students commented on the very practical use of the journals for studying purposes: "By reviewing the class notes after each class, I do not feel that I have to cram for exams." Or, "Although the journals were a lot of work they helped me remember and understand the work very clearly weeks after [I] read so that when test time came I was ready with extremely good notes."

Students differed, though, in which part of the journal they liked and which could be omitted: some felt that the post-class entry basically repeated the in-class notes (suggesting to me that they weren't assimilating the material well) but others did see that the "post-class function was very helpful in sorting through class debates." Others resented having to do an in-class section when they took their own notes while others found the in-class notes "the most helpful" in studying for exams. A few at midterm time had said that they had had trouble finding original things to say for the pre-class entry but by the final exam students appeared to improve at this task because they only praised the pre-class entry now: "The thing that I liked about the journals the most was the pre-journals. They helped me organize my thoughts before class--something I may not have done."

Indeed, I was surprised that, given that students had just finished an exam, many students (12) still saw the value of these journals for less pragmatic reasons--such as preparing for class discussion. Some saw the journals as an alternative means of

discussing--“If I don’t always share my feelings in class, I have done it in my journals”-- while others even recognized their value to better discussions: “They have helped me to record my ideas as I read. Slowly, but surely, I think I am speaking more in class” in part due to journals. Various others spoke of the journals helping them to better understand what they were reading: “Instead of reading the stories and putting it back, I am forced to work and analyze what I read,” or, “Through my understanding I have developed more confidence in my ability to analyze literature.” One student spoke of the journals’ cumulative value: “They also made me realize some parallels between several stories.” An international student admitted that “For me, it is hard to understand the stories by reading just once. As I write my favorite quote, or other things I usually begin to understand more than before.”

Did students arrive at this understanding because I began to elaborate more consistently in class after their mid-semester comments about the academic value of journals, or only after the class was finally over were students able to look back objectively and see the value of writing to their understanding of the class? I like to think the latter. I am tempted to say that even if students never quite “get it,” I will continue to use journals because I appreciate the improvement in students’ discussion skills, verbal skills, and understanding of the texts we study. A sample journal entry from an introductory fiction student exemplifies the potential of these journals. Initially writing very sketchy commentary about what he was reading, by the end, he was writing entries on Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* sometimes as long as nine pages, engaging with the characters on an incredibly rich and personal level:

...I like the fact that Sue comes into the picture. In a way I have developed an attraction to Sue. I like how she is somewhat rebellious and very energetic. For someone like Jude who is reserved, his opposite is the perfect sole mate for him. I also like Jude because he reminds me of me. I think that we have a lot of similarities. We are both reserved at times and we are focused on what we want. We both have the potential to become very successful as long as we work at it. The difference between us is that I know that girls will distract me from other tasks, like school, and I will not let myself get attached to them. Anyhow, I like the way these two are developing...

As I told him in the margin of his notebook, “This is so neat! I can think of no better compliment to a book than to be able to relate to the protagonist so well. (I can relate to Jude’s educational goals myself).” The student was using the journal’s space for a very interesting personal-academic play; in some respects, his personal account shed light on the character of Jude, helping him to understand the book better for future academic work. On an even more powerful level, his exploration of Jude was helping him to understand himself. Because I was witness to this revelation, I could act as supportive audience but also share some of the private thoughts I have had, too. We teach literature because we believe that it has relevancy to our personal lives but sometimes it takes a forum such as a journal to put such powerful recognition into words.

Thus, these three-part journals are able to bridge the various dichotomous tensions often associated with journal-writing: “academic” and “personal,” “immediate” and “cumulative” and “public” and “private.” In part, this is due precisely to the multiple parts where the Pre-Class entry can act as the completely private, immediate, and personal space (as the above literature student’s entry attests) while the In-Class entry embraces the academic and public spheres. The Post-class then asks students to assimilate the personal views with public re-visions, and immediate thoughts with cumulative learning. All types of journaling are valued because all have their space.

So, ultimately, though I know that students will always comment on the “amount of work,” I will know the multiple-values of these journals: that they record the growth of writers and thinkers, and reveal that knowledge never stems from one source, but is the accumulation of the students’ own vital thoughts and their interaction with the outer world of peers and instructors/readers. And for these reasons alone, if journals are more work for me, too, I gladly accept that burden.

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APPENDIX:
**Sample Journal Assignment for an Introductory Literature Class
with Variations for Writing Classes**

English 158 (Intro. to Fiction)
DePauw U.--Spring 1998
Dr. Alisa Clapp-Itnyre
JOURNAL ASSIGNMENT

Overview: Journals in this class are a way for you to record those ideas you have after reading a work of literature and after participating in a class discussion about it. These ideas are precious, not just for the sake of future papers and exams, but because they are YOUR ideas after encountering a “great” work of literature. The following entry-description, then, is not meant to be busy-work in the least but a way of getting you to THINK about what you are reading. They are also intended to have practical value in giving you a good set of notes for getting paper topics and for studying for exams. If you are having trouble with them (doing too much, getting “bored”), come see me because you are not using them correctly. Note that I will also use them in various ways during class discussion; for that reason you’ll want to keep up with them.

Grades: In order to see what kind of work you are doing--and to catch any major confusion going on in the class--I will collect and read these three times this semester (see syllabus). They will be graded based on thoroughness and thoughtfulness, not necessarily length: a “+” for exception work (not necessarily longer, but full of thought; an “A”); a “check-plus” for good work (=A-/B+); a “check” for adequate work (=B-); and a “-” for inadequate work (=C). The only way you can fail the assignment, then, is to not turn it in.

Form: Because these are meant to be YOUR journal, you can write them in whatever shape you want: hand-written in a journal-book, typed & printed up on your computer, etc. One possibility might be to write them on loose-leaf paper that can be added to your 3-ring class binder with the stories themselves; then, just turn in the appropriate entries, stapled, when due. Note: Because I read each journal carefully, I can’t always guarantee that I’ll get these journals back to you right away so find a way to only turn in what you need without handing me your entire notebook.

Format For EVERY story or article read, you should have a 1-2 page entry that includes the following. Novels should either include one entry/ day OR a longer, single entry. PLEASE label your responses (A #1, etc.) so I can follow more easily.

A. Pre-Class: After you have read the story but before class, record the following in 1/2 page, numbered, in this order, please:

1. 1-2 important biographical facts about the author
2. 1-2 favorite quotes and why, those that seem ironic, interesting, or could be used in a paper (cite a page #)
3. Your initial impressions of the story: its theme, what worked, what didn’t, etc.
4. One question or issue you hope gets answered or discussed in class.

B. In-Class: During class, take good notes (these can be in place of or in addition to your own set of notes), in any order:

1. Any notes that go on the board, along with my oral comments explaining them.
2. Any facts or terms that are important
3. The essence of any debates or disagreements that go on
4. The various interpretations of a work, of a scene, character, etc., that come up.

C. Post-Class: After class, in 1/2 page, think about and write the following:

1. The response to your pre-writing questions and thoughts
2. Where you stand on any of the debates or interpretations that came up in class
3. Any applications of your new-found ideas: seeing trends with previous works; getting ideas for paper topics, etc.

Variation of Parts A-C for writing-class journals based on composition-textbook chapters, Purdue University, Fall 1999:

Format --For your first journal, based on chapters in Jean Wyrick's *Steps to Writing Well*:

(Do one per class day; due with your 1st paper)

A. Pre-Class: After you have read the chapter but before class, record the following in 1/2 page, numbered, in this order, please:

1. Which of the ideas about writing you currently use when writing a paper, or have at least heard of (distinguish between these, though)
2. Which of Wyrick's ideas were new to you? Which will you try and which won't you? Why not?
3. One question or issue you hope gets answered or discussed in class (that you'll ask if it doesn't come up!)

B. In-Class: During class, take good notes (these can be in place of or in addition to your own set of notes), in any order:

1. Any notes that go on the board, along with my oral comments explaining them.
2. Any facts or terms that are important
3. The essence of any student comments or class discussions that go on

C. Post-Class: After class, in 1/2 page, think about and write the following:

1. The response to your pre-writing questions and thoughts
2. Where you stand on any of the discussions or concepts that came up in class
3. Applications of your new-found ideas: which you'll try on the current paper you're working on and how you'll apply. (example: a particular lead-in idea you hadn't thought of before that you'll try on this paper) -->
Give a brief example