

***Grab-and-Go Writing Activity:  
Throwing Snowballs: A Free-Writing and Sharing Exercise***

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**Timeframe:** 20 minutes (can be shorter or longer based on the size of the class and available class time)

**Materials needed (including preparation):**

- Three or four questions related to class topic and/or assigned reading. Examples drawn from my courses include the following questions.
  - Should the US government formally apologize for the illegal “repatriation” of Mexican Americans during the Great Depression? Why or why not? (*lower-division history course*)
  - In your view, who is the most complex character from *So Far From God*, and why? (*upper-division literature course*)
  - What element of public speaking do you hope to improve in your next speech assignment? (*lower-division public speaking course*)
  - If the author of *Culture of Empire* were here with us in class today, what is one question you would like to ask him, and why? (*graduate-level seminar*)
- One sheet of paper per student, supplied either by the instructor or removed from students’ notebooks, as well as a pen
- *Optional:* Prepared PowerPoint slide with questions animated to unfold one-by-one

**Objectives:** After the activity, students will be able to

- compose brief, pointed responses that deepen their knowledge and comprehension of the topic and/or reading assignment.
- compare and contrast their own responses to those of classmates.
- clarify and better articulate their thoughts in response to the instructor’s questions/prompts in subsequent work with the material.

**Introduction:** [1 minute]

“We are going to do a snowball activity, which will help you reflect on some important questions for our topic today. As you know, to write is to think. I am going to ask you four questions about the reading we did (or issue we’re discussing) for today, and we’re going to free-write for several minutes as a way to collect our thoughts and get deeper into our topic. There are no right or wrong responses. The goal is to write. Even if you’re unsure of how to respond, that’s okay—just write about *why* you are unsure.”

## **Procedures: [15-18 minutes]**

### **Step 1: Free-Writing [3 minutes]**

- Ask students to take out a sheet of paper and divide it into four rectangles, either using a pen or just folding it in half both ways. They should number each box one through four.
- Instruct them not to write their names anywhere on the page.
- Pose your first question and give them about three minutes to write a response in one of the squares. Remind students to write as neatly as possible and to use box number one.

### **Step 2: Sharing the Snowballs [5 minutes]**

- Ask students to make “snowballs” by crumpling up their papers when they are done writing. (Be prepared for surprised looks and assure them that it is okay to crumple!)
- Ask students to toss their snowballs across the room on the count of three.
- Make sure that everyone catches a new snowball. (Occasionally, they will roll under chairs or get into the corners of the room.)
- Tell everyone to unfold the snowballs and, going around the room, ask them to take turns reading aloud the written responses in front of them. Encourage them to listen for common themes or interesting responses.
- As students read responses, take your own notes on the responses so that you can gain a sense of students’ engagement with the topic. Your notes will provide a springboard to guide discussion later.

### **Step 3: Repeating the Activity [5-8 minutes]**

- Repeat steps one and two as outlined above.
- Repeat as many times as allowed by your class size and/or remaining time.

## **Closure/Evaluation: [2-3 minutes]**

Close the activity by asking students to comment on the responses they just heard. Can they identify any common themes or unique replies? If time allows, students could take another couple of minutes to free-write about new insights gleaned from the exercise. You can use one of the responses or themes that emerged from the exercise to segue into the next class segment or topic.

## **Activity Analysis:**

The snowball activity is one of my go-to activities for a low-stakes writing exercise to use in class. The snowball is versatile because it is easy to implement, requires minimal preparation, draws all students into writing and discussion, and can be used in virtually any discipline/topic. The activity can be integrated into any segment of a class session: as a kick-off, during the

middle of class to revive a flagging discussion, or at the end as a means of clarifying “take away” points from class. Students like it because they are able to share their point-of-view without having to develop their ideas, which may not be fully formed; likewise, they enjoy hearing from everyone else in the class. In addition, the energy and enthusiasm in the room picks up when students throw the snowballs across the room.

The only weakness of this activity has to do with time: Students may take longer than expected to respond to particular questions, or the reading aloud of answers may take more time when students are engaged and inspired to begin discussing what they heard. On a similar note, a larger class size (more than 25 students) might mean that there is not time to hear all responses to a question; you might have to alternate which students read aloud after each question. You may only get through two or three of the four questions you have prepared. However, if you have class time to fill, then these weaknesses become strengths.

[Attached is a sample PowerPoint slide with snowball questions from a literature course.]

# Snowball Activity



1. The story from House on Mango Street that stands out most to me is \_\_\_\_\_ because . . .
2. Aside from Esperanza, the character that intrigues me the most is \_\_\_\_\_ because . . .
3. An issue that this book has made me think differently about is \_\_\_\_\_ because . . .
4. If Cisneros were here, a question I would ask her about this book is \_\_\_\_\_ because . . .