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Using Writing to Enhance Learning in Religious Education: Practical Ideas for Classroom Use¹

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Writing is essential to the kingdom of God. Adam and Eve kept a book of remembrance and taught their children to read and write (see Moses 6:5–6). Prophets and others called of God recorded the prophecies and histories of their peoples. The Nephites wrote to persuade their children and brethren to believe in Christ (2 Nephi 25:23). They kept the commandment “that all men . . . shall write the words which [the Lord spoke] unto them” (2 Nephi 29:11). Peter, Paul, and John wrote epistles expounding doctrine and strengthening the Saints. Joseph Smith wrote his prayers, recorded his visions, and sent letters of comfort to the Saints. The Lord esteems the writings of His servants so highly that He has declared He will judge the whole world from their books (see 3 Nephi 27:25–26).

But all the books have not been written. As students and teachers of the gospel, we have our own opportunity to write the words that God speaks to us. This invitation is extended to all the Saints, not just the prophets. Paul taught, “He that prophesieth speaketh unto men to edification, and exhortation and comfort” (1 Corinthians 14:3). As a church, we seek to edify others through our sacrament talks, via the lessons we teach, and in our missionary efforts. The process of thinking and writing enhances the service we offer. When we help our students learn how to ponder the gospel of Jesus Christ through classroom and personal writings, we teach students to act upon an important principle of edification. When we encourage students to communicate

their faith through writing as well as through speaking, we provide an important opportunity for the Spirit to witness the truth.

As religious educators, we have a unique responsibility to help our students explore the gospel through their writing and thus improve their ability to communicate its truths with others. The act of writing encourages thinking and pondering, which enhances communication skills. Writing, as a learning vehicle, enables students to probe more deeply the wonders of God's word. Through writing, students can clarify their thoughts and feelings and enhance their learning.

Religious educators have enough to teach without supplementing their curriculum with writing classes. That is why I have been careful to suggest activities that have an immediate classroom application. This article offers helpful tools to encourage student writing. It presents a variety of teaching ideas that will help students use writing to enhance their experience in religious education. The suggestions include various types of writing activities for different experience levels and explanations of how students benefit from each activity. My objective is to provide a list of "idea starters" that can be modified according to teachers' individual gifts as instructors and the needs of the different classes they teach. Certain ideas may complement your style of teaching; others may work for one class and not another; and some may simply be too much for you and your class. I encourage you to experiment with the activities so you can discover what works best for you.

1. Ideas for Basic Writing

The activities for basic writing are simple and direct. Their purpose is to help students interact with course material through writing. They encourage students to think openly and directly about the scriptures while providing the teacher with continuous feedback concerning student progress and the effectiveness of the course. I have suggested an experience level that is best suited for each activity. However, you may find that with modification, the activities can be used at all levels.

Activities for Basic Writing

Level	Activity	Description	Advantages
Seminary	Response Journal	Write a personal response to scripture reading or class discussion in a daily scripture journal.	Journals stimulate personal interaction with scriptures and gospel topics.
Seminary	Passage Summary	Identify the main points of a scripture passage and write a brief summary.	Summaries provide instructors with feedback on student understanding. They help students clarify main ideas.

Seminary	Headline	Write a newspaper-style headline that summarizes the information in the passage.	Headlines require students to be concise and specific in their written summaries.
Seminary	Simple Explanations	Write a note to a child explaining a scripture or concept.	Simple explanations teach students the importance of simplicity in scripture understanding.
Institute	Idea Map	Draw a graphic representation that illustrates the idea organization in the passage.	Idea maps develop students' awareness of structure as an aid in pondering scripture messages.
Institute	Answer a Question	Respond in two sentences to a question about a passage.	Written answers give instructors opportunities to evaluate student understanding.
Institute	Brainstorm	Write about the possible applications of a scripture in various settings in today's world.	Brainstorming contemporary applications emphasizes the relevance of principles taught in the scriptures.
Institute	Key Word Identification and Definition	Describe in several sentences the impact of one or two words in a scripture passage.	Students focus their scripture study by concentrating on meanings of the words.
Institute	Personal Opinion	Formulate a one-paragraph personal response to an issue based on readings and study.	Personal response essays encourage students to expand their thinking about certain scriptures.
All	Rush Write	Write quickly for two minutes, recording first impressions about a passage or concept.	Rush writes prompt students to capture their initial response to ideas and scriptures.
All	Rush Write	Write nonstop for ten minutes, expressing in broad terms what was understood from reading or class discussion.	Free writes teach students to comprehend and analyze what they are reading and learning.

2. Ideas for Analysis Writing

Students should be invited and encouraged to use writing to specifically examine their own thoughts and insights. Analytical writing requires students to develop confidence in their skill as thinkers and writers in religion. These activities require in-class time for writing. Teachers should understand that the quiet time during which students are writing can be just as productive as the time during which the teacher is talking. Students benefit from feedback regarding their writing. By providing such help, teachers encourage students' understanding of how writing promotes clear thinking.

Activities for Analysis Writing

Level	Activity	Description	Advantages
Seminary	Definitions	Write a dictionary-type definition of a word from the scriptures.	Defining words increases students' understanding of scripture by focusing their attention on specific word meanings.
Seminary	Different Perspectives	Write about a doctrine from an assigned perspective (i.e., a soldier, minister, person in the street, etc.).	Considering various perspectives encourages students to expand their thinking.
Seminary	Problem/Solution	Suggest in writing a solution to a contemporary problem using a scripture passage.	Problem-solution analysis demonstrates how the scriptures have application to the students' personal lives and to their understanding of world affairs.
Seminary	Scripture Annotation	Make notes in the margin next to a scripture passage.	Scripture annotation provides students with practice in focusing their reading.
Institute	Scripture Relationships	Compare in one paragraph two or more scriptures to show how they communicate the same idea differently.	Comparisons encourage students to use their own scripture study and analysis skills to understand important scripture themes.
Institute	Doctrinal Analysis	Write a letter to a newspaper editor about the implications of a scripture passage.	Doctrinal analysis invites students to articulate their own scriptural insights.
Institute	Scripture Context	Explain in several sentences how the context of a scripture passage affects the meaning.	Studying context helps students analyze scripture meaning within the immediate circumstances surrounding the passage.

3. Ideas for Application Writing

Application writing provides students with an opportunity to write using forms common in the Church. These are similar to analysis papers except they require the student to be aware of a particular type of writing. Instructors can help students by providing models as part of the activity. One benefit of this activity is that it helps students learn how the structure of writing interacts with the content.

Activities for Application Writing

Level	Activity	Description	Advantages
Seminary	Bible Dictionary	Write a new entry for the Bible Dictionary.	Writing dictionary entries encourages students to be thorough in their scripture study and precise in their explanations.
Seminary	Letter to a Friend	In a letter, explain a gospel concept to a nonmember friend.	Letters promote students' awareness of their nonmember peers and helps them think of ways to address such peers in religious contexts.

Seminary	Sacrament Meeting Talk	Write a draft appropriate for a sacrament meeting talk.	Talks provide practice in writing with a specific purpose and audience in mind.
Institute	Lesson Plan	Outline a lesson plan for a Church class based on a scripture block.	Outlining lesson plans improves lesson-preparation skills among students who will teach in the Church all their lives.
Institute	Encyclopedia Entry	Write a twenty-five-word entry regarding a specific topic.	Encyclopedia-entry writing helps students to choose their words carefully and sparingly.
Institute	Ward Newsletter	Write a scripture-related article for a ward publication.	Writing articles develops skills in teaching basic concepts to a Church audience through writing.

4. Ideas for Creative Writing

Creative-writing assignments are usually a welcome option for students. They provide an opportunity to explore their creative talents in relation to the scriptures. Often, these activities result in some of the most innovative insights, giving students and teachers a chance to take pleasure in the aesthetic side of religious writing. Note that the ideas below are suitable for all experience levels.

Activities for Creative Writing

Levels	Activity	Description	Advantages
All	Personal Narrative	Write about a personal experience in which the scriptures have a direct application.	Personal narratives impact the student and instructor more personally than an analysis paper.
All	Parable	Write a modern parable that illustrates a specific doctrinal concept or scripture teaching.	Writing a parable gives students the opportunity to study and model one of the Savior's teaching methods.
All	Poems	Write a poem that expounds upon a particular scripture or doctrine.	Poetry provides a unique opportunity to ponder the scriptures and feel the Spirit.
All	Dialogue	Write an imaginary dialogue that explores a doctrinal concept.	Writing a dialogue teaches students to articulate gospel concepts from different perspectives.
All	Advertisement	Write an advertisement related to a scripture idea or event.	Writing an ad requires that students exercise visual and verbal creativity to teach a gospel truth.
All	Adapt a Song	Write new words for a song to reflect the ideas in a scripture.	Song writing encourages students to express scriptural insights in a memorable way through music.

5. Ideas for Research Writing

Research writing provides an opportunity for an in-depth examination of scriptural ideas. It promotes the exploration of new thoughts through reading and pondering information from a variety of sources. Students can use research activities as a way to complement course material and take responsibility for self-directed learning. Although a formal research paper is usually not required in seminary or institute, informal research writing can enhance learning and add to class discussion. Although research activities are suggested only for the institute level, in certain circumstances, they could be adapted for seminary purposes.

Activities for Research Writing

Level	Activity	Description	Advantages
Institute	Background Research	Prepare a summary of background information related to a passage.	Background research helps students consider the relevance of context to specific passages.
Institute	Examining Different Commentaries	Write a brief comparison of the different interpretations of a specific passage.	Examining different commentaries increases students' awareness of various perspectives of a scripture passage.
Institute	Biography	Research the life of a Church leader or a scripture character and write a short biography.	Writing biographies encourages students to recognize the human efforts that the Church is built upon.
Institute	Alternative Translations	Describe how alternative translations to the King James Version of the Bible contribute to scripture understanding.	Examining alternative translations expands students' understanding of the Bible.

Final Thoughts

Before trying any of the suggested ideas, you should determine how you want to use writing to enhance learning. You will need to consider purposefully your students and your teaching objectives. Once you have determined the role of writing in your class, carefully introduce the writing activities. Help students understand that writing magnifies learning and that it is an important part of your class. The expectations of the assignments must be clear to the students. When they see a definite starting point for the activity and a defined product expectation, they will be more likely to overcome the natural resistance that all writers face. Remember that for most students, writing in a religious education setting may seem unusual at first. Reassure them by

explaining the importance of writing in the learning process. It will be helpful if you begin with small, easy writing activities to build student confidence and to demonstrate how writing will be used to facilitate classroom discussion.

Once your students start writing, remember that for writing to be meaningful, it should be read by someone. Students will write with greater interest if they know that their teacher or others will be reading what they have written. You will find that most students enjoy sharing and discussing what they have written, providing classroom discussion with more personal and specific insights. Using student writing as part of a class discussion also promotes spontaneity and variety.

As with all new things, both you and your students will experience a learning curve when you use writing activities. Your success in implementing writing will depend upon your interest and your determination to establish a new expectation in your class. You may find that in using writing as a way to enhance learning, you will have found another way to write the law upon the hearts of your students (see Hebrews 8:10). That is, after all, our prime objective as religious educators. **RE**

Note

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