What kinds of writing work effectively in large classes?

The short answer is that the kind of writing that works effectively in large classes is the kind of writing that works well in any class: writing that

- is integrated well with the course design,
- is sensitive to students' understanding of what is valuable, and
- matches the resources students and instructors have available to devote to the task.

In a large class with high student-teacher ratios that last factor, resources, will tend to mean that the amount of writing that can be responded to and graded will be correspondingly small. See The Mathematics of Response. In such contexts, we would suggest short writing assignments and varied uses of informal writing to learn and writing to share (in-class quickwrites with subsequent discussion or pair-share formats, microthemes, short papers for instructor response, etc.). Many times short informal writing does not require instructors' written comments or grades; instead, the writing can be integrated into, or equivalent to, class discussion.

Mathematics of Response

Mathematics of response provides data on the actual time it takes to respond to student writing--and how a consideration of this should influence decisions about how to incorporate writing into the classroom.

Response to student writing is a time-intensive activity. Consider the following scenarios.

Scenario 1: 8-10 page papers x 45 minutes for a careful reading and detailed written response.

Number of Students	Hours of Response Time	Number of Weeks
30 students	22.5 hours of response time	(FT=0.56 weeks; 1/4FT=2.25 weeks)*
60 students	45 hours of response time	(FT=1.12 weeks; 1/4FT=4.5 weeks)
90 students	67.5 hours of response time	(FT=1.68 weeks; 1/4FT=6.75 weeks)
120 students	90 hours of response time	(FT=2.25 weeks; 1/4FT=9 weeks)

Scenario 2: 1-page papers x 4 minutes for a very quick read and simple evaluation (e.g., check plus, check, check minus).

Number of Students	Hours of Response Time	Number of Weeks
30 students	2 hours of response time	(FT=0.05 weeks; 1/4FT=0.2 weeks)*
60 students	4 hours of response time	(FT=0.1 weeks; 1/4FT=0.4 weeks)
90 students	6 hours of response time	(FT=0.15 weeks; 1/4FT=0.6 weeks)
120 students	8 hours of response time	(FT=0.2 weeks; 1/4FT=0.8 weeks)

How you relate trade-offs among length of paper, number of students, and type of response is an important factor in determining the success of writing assignments. Giving assignments that take

more time than you have will usually lead either to less-than-ideal response or to overwork. One key for making these decisions is to align your goals, the tasks, and the responses.

* The number of hours in each scenario is also represented in terms of the number of weeks of response for a 40-hour full-time (FT) appointment and a 10-hour, 25% appointment.