

What is a Value Writing Intervention?

Value writing interventions are short, structured writing assignments that prompt students to reflect on how what they are learning in a specific class connects to their lives, goals, or interests. Typically, students are asked to explain how a course concept, skill, or topic could be useful in their current or future lives or careers.

Why do a Value Writing Intervention?

Students are more motivated when they see why what they are learning matters. Identifying **purpose and relevance** in academic material leads to greater interest, engagement, academic performance, and retention. When students reflect on their purpose for learning, they can better recognize the value of their coursework, increasing their likelihood of persisting. These effects are often strongest for students who begin a course with less confidence or lower prior achievement, though all students benefit from finding meaning in what they learn.

When to do a Value Writing Intervention?

Value writing interventions can be implemented at multiple points in a course. They can also be particularly effective in introductory, core, or required courses where students might initially struggle to see relevance, or in courses known for high attrition or low engagement.

Learning Mindsets and Mindset GPS

Students' beliefs about themselves as learners and their learning environment.

Growth Mindset

The belief that abilities can be developed through effort, the use of effective strategies, and help from others when needed.

Purpose and Relevance

The belief that one's schoolwork is valuable because it is connected to a larger purpose and/or relevant to one's life.

Sense of Belonging

The belief that one is academically and socially connected, supported, and respected.

Quick Overview



Minimum Prep Time

15 minutes

For light customization of existing template



Minimum Class Time

0-10 minutes

Can be done outside of class or as a quick in-class activity



Frequency

Routine

Can be done multiple times, recommend at least 2-3 times



Timing

Flexible

Recommend early in the term, mid-term, and end-of-term

Learning Mindsets Supported



*This resource predominantly supports **Purpose & Relevance***

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[More Resources](#)



How to do a Value Writing Intervention

Step 1: Set the stage. Begin by explaining why relevance matters for learning and motivation. A short framing statement helps students see the purpose: “When we pause to think about how what we’re learning connects to our goals or interests, we remember it better and stay more motivated.” You can also model examples of how the topic students are learning about has been meaningful or useful in your work or personal life, as well as examples of how it’s impacted the work and lives of former students. Another way to set the stage is to share how you struggled to learn material when you didn’t see its relevance, which motivates you to design activities like this to help students make sense of why the material matters.

Step 2: Provide a simple, open-ended prompt to guide their reflection. Prompts can include:

- “How could what we’re learning be useful to you now or in the future?”
- “Why might this topic or skill matter for your goals, values, or interests?”
- “In what ways could this knowledge help you, someone you know, or your community?”

Encourage students to write honestly. Also, encourage students to make personal, specific, and content-related connections. See model on last page.

Step 3: Keep it short and low-stakes. The writing can be brief (one to two paragraphs or about five to ten minutes of writing). It can be completed online, on paper, or as a discussion post. Grade for completion, not for writing quality or accuracy. The goal is reflection, not evaluation.

Step 4: Respond and reinforce. Acknowledge students’ effort to make personal, specific, content-related connections. You might offer short feedback such as, “I liked how you offered specific examples on how you could link [insert specific concept] from class in multiple ways to your future career,” or share a few anonymous examples in class. You can also use student examples to start a discussion about how the course material connects to real life.

Step 5: Repeat. The benefits of value writing interventions grow when students have multiple opportunities to practice connecting learning to their lives (e.g., early in a course to spark curiosity and interest, before major assignments or exams to reinforce the meaning behind effort, and at the end of the semester to reinforce reflection and transfer of learning).

Resources for Further Reading

Hulleman, C. S., Godes, O., Hendricks, B., & Harackiewicz, J. M. (2010). Enhancing interest and performance with a utility-value intervention. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 102(4), 880–895. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0019506>

Hulleman, C. S., & Harackiewicz, J. M. (2021). The utility-value intervention. In G. M. Walton, & A. J. Crum (Eds.), *Handbook of Wise Interventions: How Social Psychology Can Help People Change* (pp. 100–125). Guilford Press.

Hulleman, C.S., Totonchi, D.A., Barron, K.E., Sutter, C.C., & Hulleman, T., Tibbetts, Y., & Thoman, D. (2025). From student to system change: The evolution of the utility-value intervention. In A. Elliot (Ed.), *Advances in Motivational Science* (Vol. 12, pp. 165-227). Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.adms.2025.02.002>

How to know it's working

You can tell if a value intervention is working by looking for signs that students are making more personal, specific connections between course content and their lives, and by observing improved motivation or performance. Simple indicators can include more detailed relevance language in student writing or in day-to-day class discussions, higher engagement (attendance, assignment completion, persistence), and positive student feedback about the activity itself. You can also administer short surveys to assess changes in students' attitudes. Administer the first survey early in the term before the first reflection and a second survey near the end of the semester. For example, questions could include:

- *I think what I'm learning in this class is useful to know.* [Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree]
- *I think what I'm learning in this class is personally relevant to me.*
- *I think what I'm learning in this class is interesting.*
- *I see how what I'm learning about in this class can be applied to my life.*

How to adapt

By stakeholder: While value writing interventions were initially developed to help instructors support students to see purpose in specific course content, value writing interventions can be adapted to support campus professionals who work with students outside the classroom (e.g., academic advisors, success coaches, First-Year Experience programs, orientation staff, residence life teams, and career services) as they help students see purpose in attending college and in choosing a major or career direction.

By type of class: For large classes or online classes, use digital forms or learning management systems (Canvas, Blackboard, etc.) to make it easier to collect and review responses.

By timing and dosage: More than one iteration of the prompt tends to help. Repeated opportunities across the semester are better than a single one. Consider assigning two or three reflections at key points in the term (e.g., early on to establish relevance, mid-semester to re-engage motivation, and near the end to consolidate learning).

By type of prompt: In addition to asking students to write short personal reflections about how what they are learning could be useful in their lives, goals, or future work, you can ask students to write a letter to someone else (parent, friend, younger student) about how the material might be helpful for that person.

By making it a formal, graded part of course: When the writing intervention is built into the course credit (rather than optional), engagement tends to increase. In addition to being a stand-alone writing assignment, variations can include adding a question to prompt value writing in existing assignments.

By including training on how to make effective connections: Provide examples of how other students have found value and guidance on how to think about making connections, especially when students might struggle to see relevance. Research suggests value writing interventions are most effective when connections are personal, specific, and related to content.

What to avoid

Avoid telling students how a course concept can connect to their lives without also giving them a chance to reflect on how it is personally relevant or meaningful to them. Purpose and relevance interventions are more powerful when students identify value for themselves.

Name:

Writing Activity

Part A

Pick one of the topics or concepts you have learned about in this class and briefly describe it below.

Part B

Apply the topics/concepts to your own life or the life of someone you know. How might the information be useful to you, or a friend/relative, in daily life or the future? Write one or two paragraphs below. Write openly and honestly. Can you make your connections personal and specific to the content that you wrote about in Part A?