



Low-Stakes Writing Helps Students Improve Writing & Thinking

What is “Low-stakes Writing”?

“Informal writing that helps students reflect on what they are learning from discussions, readings, lectures, and their own thinking.”

Why Would I Want to Use Low-Stakes Writing for my Students?

The #1 Benefit? You do NOT need to grade them!!!

Other benefits of low-stakes writing:

- Improves retention of course concepts; as students work to make concepts clear and accessible to others, they often come to understand those concepts better themselves
- Encourages student involvement in course ideas and in class
- Helps students keep up with readings and put content in their own words
- Helps instructors verify whether students understand the material
- Prepares students for high-stakes assignments
- May connect course concepts with students’ experiences
- Does not require you to collect the writing or to evaluate it

Assessing low-stakes writing if you want students to receive points and/or feedback:

If you choose to offer points and/or feedback, decrease the amount of time you spend. Consider using one of the following strategies:

- Collect the low-stakes writing activity to take attendance
- Collect the low-stakes writing activity & use a small participation mark for its completion
- Collect the low-stakes writing activity & use a simple rubric & just put a checkmark on the paper:

Low Stakes Writing Rubric	
“Grade”	Explanation
✓ +	Good insights Compelling argument Well-developed Well-integrated with lectures and readings
✓	Adequate
✓ -	Insufficient response Incorrect Under-developed Incomplete

Low-stakes writing activities:

There are many low-stakes writing activities!! You can Google the internet to find lists and lists of them! I have included a few options below. However, before implementing any of them, consider your students and your course teaching objectives. Just because a writing assignment idea looks like a fun or worthwhile activity does not mean that it will help you reach your teaching goals.

Low Stakes Writing Prompts	
To Re-awaken Student Interest in the Lecture [can be offered in the middle of a lecture]	
	Applying ideas to personal circumstance or known situations. Sometimes you can clarify ideas best when you can frame them in ways that are meaningful to you. Use a concept from your reading assignment (or from today's lecture) and apply it to a situation in your own life or to a current event with which you are familiar. Applying it to something you know may help you understand it better.
	Explain how the lecture today is relevant for your critical thinking about the topic for your main paper.
To Ponder, Clarify, and Apply the Reading for the Day	
	Explain how one of your favorite scriptures is related to what we talked about in class (or the reading for today).
	Explain how the reading for today is relevant to the lecture from last class.
	Summarize the reading for today in a thoughtful single sentence.
To Encourage Progress Towards the Major Paper	
Brainstorm	Free-write. Write on your topic for the main paper for 3-4 minutes non-stop. If you get stuck and do not know what to say next, write "I'm stuck and don't know what to say next..." or try asking yourself "what else?" until another idea comes to you. Do not concern yourself with spelling, grammar, or punctuation. Generate as much as you can about the topic. Read what you have written to see if you have discovered anything about your subject or found a line of thinking you would like to pursue. Repeat this exercise several times.
	Clustering/Webbing. Place a word that represents the main idea of your upcoming paper in the middle of a blank paper. As fast as you can, jot down anywhere on the page as many words as you can think of associated with your center word. Do not discount any word or phrase that comes to you; just enter it on the page. Review the page and connect relevant ideas.
Research Question	Defining terms. Define the key terms or concepts in your major paper using your own words. Why will these be important for your reader to know?
	Broaden the vision. Write 10 research questions that are relevant for your topic.
Thesis	Viewpoints. Look at the topic for your paper from different points of view: 1) describe it, 2) compare it to something else you know, 3) analyze it (meaning break it into parts), 4) apply it to a situation you are familiar with, 5) argue for it, and 6) argue against it.

	Rewrite the thesis using answers to each of these questions. Who? What? Where? When? How? Why?
	Subordinate ideas. Choose one part of the thesis, and brainstorm (freewrite) for 3-4 minutes. Then write about the relationship of these ideas to your main claim.
Introduction	What? So What? Now what? Ponder your draft and ask and respond to “So what?” of the ideas expressed so far. Finally, write as you ask yourself, “Now what?”
Arguments	Problem/Solution. Create 2 columns: 1) List all the issues that contribute to the problem you are researching for the main paper; 2) List as many potential solutions as possible.
	Shifting viewpoints. Write for the next 3-5 minutes taking a stand in opposition to the main claim of your paper. Use evidence, if possible.
	Create a concept map. Place the main claim of your paper in the middle of the paper. Create 3 circles reaching out of the middle circle & label them with the 3 main ideas from your main claim. Now add as many circles beyond the 3 idea circles as you can think of.
Conclusion	Freewrite your conclusion. Keep writing non-stop for 3-4 minutes. Stop. Read your ideas. Choose the best idea and write for 3 more minutes. Stop. Repeat.
	Draw a picture. Sketch the problem and your solution in a visual format.

References

Adapted from: “Low Stakes Writing Assignments” -- *Promoting and Assessing Critical Thinking*. Centre for Teaching Excellence, University of Waterloo.

Adapted from: In-Class Writing Exercises (<https://writingcenter.unc.edu/faculty-resources/tips-on-teaching-writing/in-class-writing-exercises/>) (The Writing Center at North Carolina Chapel Hill)

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