

Low-Stakes Writing Assignments

Writing is a common tool used in the classroom. Many forms of writing exercises are used by instructors to gauge student learning and to give students the opportunity to engage in enhanced learning activities. As a learning tool, writing can help students achieve the following goals:

- *Critical thinking*: Writing converts students from passive to active learners, encouraging them to take concepts learned in class and confront problems, gather and analyze data, prepare hypotheses, and formulate arguments.
- *Independent learning*: Rather than having instructors tell them information, students become responsible for their own research, reflection, and learning.
- *Exploration*: Students are encouraged to explore how they think and feel about different concepts and issues.
- *Explanation*: Students take concepts and try to make them clear and accessible to others, in the process coming to understand the concepts better themselves.
- *Focused thoughts*: Students need to clarify what they are going to write before they put their thoughts and opinions down on paper in a concise way.
- *Personalised ideas*: Students take abstract concepts and rewrite them in their own words in a way that makes sense to them.
- *Retention of concepts*: When asked to write about concepts discussed in class or described in course readings, students retain the concepts better.

High-Stakes vs. Low-Stakes Writing

Instructors could use a wide variety of writing exercises to accomplish the goals listed above. One helpful way to categorize writing assignments is to divide them into two simple categories: high-stakes and low-stakes. *High-stakes writing* involves formal, structured writing where a formal grade is assigned. This grade is usually worth a large portion of a student's overall mark. High-stakes writing encourages students to explore ideas outside of the course and to learn outside of class, helps teachers to see if students can integrate course material with other sources, and improves students' formal writing skills. However, high-stakes writing can create stress for students who are concerned over how much it counts towards their final grade, as well as for professors and teaching assistants who have to grade the assignments. In addition, high-stakes writing assignments are often unfeasible for larger classes because of the amount of marking.

Low-stakes writing, on the other hand, are writing assignments or activities that involve informal writing and grading. Low-stakes writing encourages student involvement in course ideas, helps students keep up with readings and put content in their own words, helps instructors to see whether or not students are understanding course material, and prepares students for high-stakes assignments. Low-stakes writing also creates less stress

for students and teachers, because it usually counts for a small portion (if any) of the total grade and tends to be quicker to mark than essays, lab reports, and writing portfolios. Despite the workload that high-stakes writing assignments give to students and instructors, they are common in the university classroom. Low-stakes writing, however, can be as effective in helping students to learn. Listed below are a number of low-stakes writing activities that may be useful in different classroom settings. Before you try any of these ideas, 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. For tips on how to respond to high- and low-stakes writing effectively and efficiently, see the TRACE Tips sheet titled "[Responding to Writing Assignments: Managing the Paper Load.](#)"

Abstract writing

Purpose: To focus thoughts and summarise ideas; to reinforce course readings; to develop critical thinking skills

Procedure: Remove any identifying marks from a paper (e.g., title, author's name, abstract, journal reference, reference list) and have students read the paper and write an abstract.

Example: Read the following journal article and write an abstract for it, summarising the main points of the author(s) in your own words. Remember to identify the main thesis, the data collecting procedure, the findings, and the conclusions in your abstract.

One-sentence summaries

Purpose: To reinforce class concepts; to gauge students' comprehension of the lecture; to involve students in summarising material; to highlight defining features of a concept.

Procedure: At the end of class, identify a particular concept discussed in class and have students summarise it in one sentence. Alternatively, do not give them a particular concept; simply ask them to summarise the lecture in one sentence, picking the most salient points. One guideline you can offer is that a one-sentence summary should answer the 5 W's (who, what, when, where, why).

Example: Write a one-sentence summary (using the 5 W's) about Fink's Model of Active Learning, which we discussed in class today.

Headlines

Purpose: To retain and explain concepts; to summarise key concepts

Procedure: After discussing a concept or event, have students write newspaper-style headlines summarising it. This activity may be particularly appropriate in a discussion on research, controversial issues, or historical developments.

Example: Write a headline that summarises our class on high-stakes versus low-stakes writing.

Directed Paraphrasing

Purpose: To personalise ideas; to explain concepts; to develop critical thinking

Procedure: Students are asked to write about a particular concept taught in class in their own words. A variation of this would be to have students paraphrase as if they were explaining concepts to a particular audience (e.g., an industry leader; an elected government official, etc.).

Example: In your own words, write what the difference is between high-stakes and low-stakes writing as if you were explaining it to a first-year undergraduate student.

Definitions

Purpose: To explore ideas; to personalise ideas; to focus thoughts

Procedure: Students must develop a definition for a course-related word (dictionary format) or must write a comprehensive but precise paragraph or a set of paragraphs on a particular course-related concept (encyclopaedia entry).

Example: Write an encyclopaedic entry for “low-stakes writing assignments,” complete with a definition, a description of different types of low-stakes writing assignments, and an explanation of how these assignments can be effectively utilized in a classroom setting.

Application Cards

Purpose: To develop critical thinking; to explain and apply concepts; to retain concepts

Procedure: Distribute 3x5 cards to your students. Have them write a real-world application for a theory, principle or procedure they have learned about in class on the card and either submit them to you or share them with one another. The small card is optional – using lined paper is fine too – but the card indicates to the students that they should be concise.

Example: A colleague in your field is interested in learning more about using writing as an effective learning tool. Explain to this colleague how to run a writing exercise that you plan to use in your classroom.

Editorials

Purpose: To explore opinions and personalize ideas; to explain concepts; to focus thoughts and summarise ideas; to engage in critical thinking

Procedure: Have students select a particular course topic, identify major issues, take a position, and write an editorial for the local newspaper defending their position.

Example: Support or refute the following claim: “Writing exercises have a place in every university classroom.” Write in a journalistic style.

Online Discussion Groups

Purpose: To personalise ideas; to focus thoughts; to explore ideas

Procedure: Divide the class into small groups of 4-6 students. Set up an online discussion board and have each group discuss course issues online. Each group then selects a member to summarize its discussion. The summaries are posted to the main class list, where you and the entire class can read them. You will want to monitor the group discussion, especially toward the beginning of term. See TRACE Tips sheet entitled [“Online Discussions: Tips for Instructors.”](#)

Example: On the course discussion board, discuss with your group experiences you have had with high- and low-stakes writing assignments, and together identify the pros and cons about each. Have one member of your group post the pros and cons to the course e-mail list.

Letter Writing

Purpose: To retain concepts; to explain concepts; to personalise ideas

Procedure: Have the students write a one- or two-page letter describing course concepts. Be specific about to whom the letter should be addressed to.

Example: Have students write a letter to a friend who has been sick the past week and explain what the friend has missed. A variation of this would be to write a letter to a confused friend who wants to switch his or her major (English). Have students explain why (or why not) their friend should switch his or her major to their major (Science). This variation would have students look at the subject as a whole, rather than summarise course concepts.

Personal Response Exercise

Purpose: To retain concepts; to personalise ideas; to explore concepts

Procedure: Students write about concepts taught in class through sharing personal opinions/ experiences that relate in some way to those concepts.

Example: Write about the most memorable writing assignment you’ve ever had to complete as a writer.

Journals

Purpose: To personalise ideas; to retain of concepts; to explore concepts

Procedure: Students write in a journal on a regular basis about particular concepts learned in class. The writing can be open-ended (write about a certain aspect of a course for a certain length of time) or guided (students respond to content-specific questions developed by you).

Example: Identify and discuss your ideas on three significant concepts that stood out for you in this week's readings.

Poems

Purpose: To encourage creativity; to personalise ideas

Procedure: Have students create a poem that expresses their feelings about a particular topic. This exercise can be a great way to lighten the mood. Be sure to allow time for students to share their poems with one another.

Example: Write a poem describing your views on writing. This can be in any poetic format that you wish.

Memory Matrix

Purpose: To retain concepts; to personalise ideas; to explain concepts.

Procedure: Students complete a two-dimensional diagram for which the instructor has provided labels. Having information laid out visually can help students to prepare for a test or see how different concepts fit together.

Example: Based on the readings for today, fill in the following matrix:

	High stakes writing	Low stakes writing
Description		
Examples		

References

For more writing exercise ideas, consult:

- Angelo, T. A. and P. K. Cross (1993). *Classroom Assessment Techniques* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.
- Bean, J. C. (1996). *Engaging Ideas*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.
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- Sorcinelli, M. D. and P. Elbow, Eds. (1997). *Writing to Learn: Strategies for Assigning and Responding to Writing Across the Disciplines*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.