

Ideas for Low-Stakes Writing

One reason faculty give for not assigning writing is that it takes so much time to respond to students' papers. But, does all student writing need to be graded? It's helpful to differentiate between high and low-stakes writing assignments. According to the description given by the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Waterloo,

High-Stakes writing:

- "involves formal, structured writing where a formal grade is assigned
- 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" (CTE Teaching Tipsⁱ)

Low-Stakes writing:

- "involve[s] informal writing and grading...
- 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" (CTE Teaching Tipsⁱⁱ)

Low-stakes writing gives students the chance to think through themes of the course, often with the help of their peers. These assignments give students the chance to, as Peter Elbow puts it, "organize concepts" of the course and "place them in their own language, and connect them with their own analogies and metaphors."ⁱⁱⁱ These writing activities also give faculty the chance, in a quick glimpse, to check for understanding without the need to grade the work.

Many of these writing activities can be posted to **myCI**. That way, you have them all in one place and can easily review them.

Some commonly used low-stakes assignments include:

- **Journal Entries**
- **In-class Free Writes**
- **Personal Responses**
- **Real-World Application**
- **Reading Responses**—in addition to open-ended responses, you may want to use direct questions, such as:
 - What is the thesis?
 - How is A similar to / different from B?
 - How does A relate to B?
 - What alternatives could the writer have considered?
 - What were the four main arguments for / against the proposed policy?^{iv}
- **Ticket Out**—where a student must submit a question or comment based on the day's lesson before leaving the classroom^v
- **Believing and Doubting Game**—this is an idea from Peter Elbow^{vi}
 - students first describe everything in the reading they can believe in, saving any negative comments for later
 - then students share their doubts, questions, challenges unsubstantiated claims
 - optional: take a position on the reading, idea, concept

Some ideas that may be new (and require more explanation) include:

- **One-sentence summaries**—At the end of class, identify a particular concept discussed in class and have students summarize it in one sentence. Alternatively, do not give them a particular concept; simply ask them to summarize 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).

- **Headlines**—After discussing a concept or event, have students write newspaper-style headlines summarizing it. This activity may be particularly appropriate in a discussion on research, controversial issues, or historical developments.
- **Directed Paraphrasing**—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.).
- **Poems**—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.
- **Memory Matrix**—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		

- **Definitions**—students develop a definition for a course-related word (dictionary format) or must write a precise paragraph or a set of paragraphs on a particular course related concept (encyclopaedia entry).^{vii}
- **Write What You Know**—as you introduce a new concept, ask students to write what they already know about it.
- **Translation**—in this activity students take on a difficult paragraph of a reading and paraphrase it in their own language.
- **Interpret a Table**—present students with a (or series of) complex table or graph, ask students to make sense of it (them) on their own before discussing it with the class^{viii}.
- **Thesis-Support**—students generate a thesis on a topic under discussion and provide evidence to support it.

Some low-stakes writing activities that may need a little more time, perhaps to be done outside of class:

- **QQTP:**
 - a question prompted by the reading
 - a quotation from the reading that you found compelling, controversial, puzzling, or otherwise remarkable
 - a brief idea or set of ideas you can use as talking points in class discussion from a colleague at College of St. Scholastica, Duluth, MN (Patricia Hagen?)^{ix}
- **Double-entry Responses**
 - Left Column
 - copy a passage
 - summarize
 - cite an idea or claim that excites, provokes, puzzles
 - Right Column
 - your response
 - questions
 - analysis
 - rebuttal
 - explanation / clarification
 - imitation . . .

- **Adopt a Persona**—look at an issue, question, policy, choice, or behavior from a specified perspective that is significantly different from the students' perspective.
e.g.: respond to a specific judgment made in an auditor's report from the perspective of the client^x
- **Letter Writing**—the students write a one or two-page letter describing course concepts. Be specific about to whom the letter should be addressed to.
eg: 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). This variation would have students look at the subject as a whole, rather than summarize course concepts.^{xi}

Upon completing many of these assignments, students can be encouraged to share them with a classmate and look for common themes or questions that could be shared with the larger group.

Ideas for responding to Low-stakes assignments:

It's a good idea to find ways to assess these writing tasks that differs from the ways you evaluate students' formal writing. Not all writing needs to receive points or credit, the important thing is that students receive enough feedback so as to feel their work is recognized.

- **Check, Check Plus, Check Minus or a Simple Point Scale**—These marks allow students to receive feedback on their work without you needing to comment on each submission
- **Oral Feedback**—After review students' writing you might want to give one or two comments to the class as a whole to clarify where students may be off (or on) track.
- **Peer Feedback**—Sometimes peers are best equipped to respond to one another. A good reminder from the Writing Center at Texas A & M is that the feedback students give one another needs to be:
 - specific and detailed
 - honest
 - tactful
 - informed by faculty expectations for the activity^{xii}
- **Participation Credit**—Some faculty opt not to collect all low-stakes writing assignments, but instead evaluate student engagement with the activity and their peers.

Works Cited

- Burke, Richard. "Working Up Something to Say: Sequencing Low-Stakes Writing Assignments to Produce a High-Stakes Project." Feb. 2011. Web. 20 Jan. 2013.
www.sc.edu/fye/events/presentation/annual/.../CT-64.pptx
- Centre for Teaching Excellence. "Teaching Tips." *University of Waterloo*. n.d. Web. 10 Jan. 2013.
http://cte.uwaterloo.ca/teaching_resources/tips/low_stakes_writing_assignments.html
- Elbow, Peter. "Embracing Contraries in the Teaching Process." *College English*. 45.5 (1983): 327-339. Print.
- . "High stakes and low-stakes in assigning and responding to writing." *Writing to Learn: Strategies for Assigning and Responding to Writing across the Discipline*. 69 (Spring 1997): 5-13. Print.
- Smith, Ray. "Sequenced Microthemes: A Great Deal of Thinking for Your Students, and Relatively Little Grading for You." *Teaching Resources Center Newsletter*. 5.3 (Summer/Fall 1994). 26 Aug. 2006. Web. 20 Jan. 2013. <http://www.iub.edu/~cwp/assgn/microseq.shtml>
- University Writing Center. "Low Stakes Assignments." Texas A & M University. 2011 Web. 10 Jan 2013.
<http://writingcenter.tamu.edu/for-faculty/teaching-writing/assignments/low-stakes-assignments/>

Works Consulted/For Further Reading

- Anson, Chris, ed. *The WAC Casebook: Scenes for Faculty Reflection and Program Development*. Oxford UP, 2002.
- Bean, John. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. 2nd Ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2011.
- Bean, John, Dean Drenk, and F. D. Lee. "Microtheme Strategies for Developing Cognitive Skills" in *New Directions for Teaching and Learning in All Disciplines* 12. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1982.
- Fulwiler, Toby and Art Young, eds. *Language Connections: Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum*. Urbana, IL: NCTE, 1982. 192 pp.
- WAC Clearinghouse. <http://wac.colostate.edu/>

compiled by Kathleen Klompier via the CSU Channel Islands ISLAS grant, Jan 2013

ⁱ Centre for Teaching Excellence. University of Waterloo.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.

ⁱⁱⁱ Elbow. "High Stakes and Low-Stakes in Assigning and Responding to Writing."

^{iv} Burke. "Working Up Something to Say: Sequencing Low-Stakes Writing Assignments to Produce a High-Stakes Project."

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Elbow. "Embracing Contraries in the Teaching Process."

^{vii} This idea and the previous ones in this section all come from the University of Waterloo's Centre for Teaching Excellence.

^{viii} This idea and the previous one come from Smith.

^{ix} Burke attributed this idea to a colleague at College of St. Scholastica, Duluth, MN (Patricia Hagen?)

^x Burke.

^{xi} Centre for Teaching Excellence, University of Waterloo.

^{xii} University Writing Center, Texas A & M.