

Integrating Low-Stakes Writing Into Large Classes

Overview

The benefits of assigning low-stakes writing have been well established—students learn more when they are required to articulate their knowledge in writing. Low-stakes writing can also help students keep up with reading, better understand course concepts, or take a more active role in the course. But many instructors of large college classes are hesitant to assign writing because they believe it will be too time consuming, or because they feel that in order to assign writing they must also dedicate significant class time to teaching writing skills. This resource addresses such concerns and provides guidelines and methods for incorporating low-stakes writing into your class without being overwhelmed with work.

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General Considerations

As you consider integrating low-stakes writing, it's important to distinguish more generally between low-stakes and high-stakes tasks. High-stakes tasks typically make up a larger percentage of the overall course grade and are evaluated for a variety of issues that may be outlined in a rubric, while low-stakes tasks account for less of the overall grade and are evaluated based on the level of engagement, if at all. Often writing assignments are thought to be all high-stakes tasks that need to be graded critically for content and/or prose quality. But this doesn't have to be the case.

Including writing in all college courses allows students to practice their writing skills throughout their college career, not just in designated "writing requirement" classes. Low-stakes writing assignments offer students the opportunity to think critically about course material, grapple with disciplinary concepts and terms, and practice problem solving without the pressure of evaluation. Low-stakes writing also offers unique learning benefits because it honors students' developing knowledge and lets them articulate their ideas before perfecting their language or sentences. Research shows that it's important for students to use their own personal language when they are assimilating new knowledge, and low-stakes writing is the perfect format for students to explore course material in their own words.

Low-stakes writing also offers faculty benefits because it provides scaffolding for high-stakes assignments, which makes it easier for students to succeed. For more ideas on how to use low-stakes writing to scaffold major assignments, see ["Effective Assignment Sequencing for Scaffolding Learning."](#) Low-stakes writing also promotes more active learning by asking students to explore course concepts in writing and offering opportunities for students to share their writing in class.

Assigning Low-Stakes Writing

The following are some important features of successful low-stakes writing assignments to keep in mind as you consider how to use them in class:

- **Low stakes writing shouldn't focus on the quality of the writing.** Low-stakes writing assignments should be exploratory and directed toward helping students gain a greater understanding of course content without focusing on stylistic concerns. In fact, when students worry about writing skills issues, such as grammar or structure, the clarity of their thinking can be hindered. However, low-stakes writing can prepare students for high-stakes writing tasks—see the section below on Writing in Preparation for suggestions.
- **Low-stakes writing should be assigned through the term.** Assigning low-stakes writing throughout the term encourages students to see that writing is an essential element of their learning. Because low-stakes writing has been proven to be beneficial, there is no need to feel guilty about assigning a lot of low-stakes writing, even if you offer only minimal (or no) response. The purpose of low-stakes writing is to invite students to generate greater insights through the act of writing, so it can be responded to minimally, with encouragement alone, by peers, or not at all.
- **Low-stakes writing should require critical thinking.** If low-stakes writing doesn't require students to synthesize information, they may perceive it as busy work. When students describe concepts in their own terms or make connections between texts or to their own lives, low-stakes writing deepens students' learning experience. When coming up with assignment prompts, ask students to do more than just summarize.
- **Low-stakes writing should focus on motivating students and fostering conversation and community.** Because low-stakes writing isn't being assessed for quality, instructors can use it as a chance to offer encouraging words or foster conversation with the student. It can also help an instructor gauge how well students comprehend course material and illuminate which concepts need more attention. By including opportunities for students to share their low-stakes writing in class, you can also foster community in the classroom.
- **Low-stakes writing needs to be well integrated into the class.** Low-stakes writing will be most successful if students understand the purpose it serves, how it will be graded, and what kind of response they can expect. Be sure to explicitly discuss with students how low-stakes writing tasks will improve their learning and let them know how they will be assessed.

Responding (or Not) to Low-Stakes Writing

For large classes, the difficulty many instructors face is how to account for the writing that students are doing. There are various levels of response that you can choose from based on time constraints and the goals you have for each assignment. It's important to remember that low-stakes writing has powerful learning benefits even if the writing is not assessed, but that doesn't mean that low-stakes writing shouldn't be accounted for in some way. Here are some important considerations to keep in mind when responding to low-stakes writing:

- Though you may not collect all the low-stakes writing students do throughout the term, it's important to collect it at first so that students can see that you're engaged with the writing they are doing, but will not critique it in a high-stakes manner.
- Because low-stakes writing should allow students to write without worrying about critique, the method of response should be less focused on criticism and more focused on positive encouragement or asking questions to further students' thoughts.
- It's important to be upfront with students about how you will respond to the low-stakes work they do and how their writing will be assessed. You might even create a key to that will cut down on your response time (e.g. an underline indicates good critical thinking while a wavy line indicates a lack of critical depth).
- If you plan to collect low-stakes writing, the syllabus should clearly state how it will be accounted for and whether or not it will count toward participation points or will be assigned a certain percentage in the overall grading breakdown (e.g., Writing Exercises – 10%)

The following are some methods for response that you might consider:

- Ask that students share ideas arrived at through low-stakes writing with the rest of the class, but do not collect or grade the writing itself.
- Collect and skim over students' writing, but rather than responding to everyone, select key questions or themes to address with the full class.
- Collect and skim over students' writing and select a few quotes or questions from student writing to share during class discussion. Be sure to give credit to the students in class when you use their quotes—this will signal to the class that you are reading their writing even if you aren't responding to each student individually.
- Allow students to respond to each other in small groups first. You may create specific questions for them to discuss in their groups to help structure their discussion. Then collect the writing and give students credit, but offer no response.
- Collect and read over student writing and offer only words of encouragement or brief questions.
- Collect and read over student writing and respond only with minimal marks that you define in a response key (underlines, checkmarks, wavy lines, asterisks, etc).
- Give students incentives for doing low-stakes writing tasks rather than collecting or grading it, such as letting them use their low-stakes writing as open notes on a test or letting them know the low-stakes task will be revised as part of a high-stakes one.

In Practice

The following strategies offer ways that low-stakes writing could be integrated into large classes to help improve student learning. The strategies are divided into two categories: “Writing to Learn,” which includes assignments that foster a deeper understanding of course content; and “Writing in Preparation,” which includes assignments that prepare students for high-stakes writing tasks by focusing on key moments of process.

To help you take advantage of the potential learning benefits of each aspect of the task, each strategy is divided into three stages: assigning, sharing, and responding.

Of course, this is only a small sample of the low-stakes writing assignments you might consider. See the Resources at the end of this document for a list of texts that offer more examples. You might also consider developing your own low-stakes writing assignments based on your pedagogical goals for the class. Keep in mind when developing low-stakes writing assignments that the length might vary, but they should be easy to write and easy to read.

A Note on Variations and Digital Options

Variations on each strategy are also provided to offer you additional ways to adapt each assignment to your course. These variations also include methods for assigning low-stakes writing in digital platforms, such as forum posts, blogs, and on Twitter. Because such digital platforms offer the benefit of social interaction, they provide an excellent format for low-stakes writing. The resource [“Using Blogs in the Classroom”](#) also provides more information about integrating a blog into your course.

Writing to Learn Strategies

Strategy 1: Study Questions

Study questions help students keep up with reading while allowing them to frame their reading experience and make connections to other texts or concepts discussed in the course. Though study questions may require students to do some summary, study question prompts should invite students to synthesize their understanding of course material with their personal experience or opinions, or make connections that go beyond the reading.

Assigning: Give students a prompt to respond to by the next class that will require them to think critically about the assigned text and make connections with other texts, course concepts, or their own lives (around 500 words). Let them know that their response need not be in a polished form; it should simply focus on deeply engaging with the question at hand and refer back to the reading as needed to justify or clarify their answer.

The following are some examples of study questions that engage students in critical thinking:

- How do the roles women were expected to play in the Han dynasty compare to the expectations placed on women in China today? What advice would you give a woman living in that time?
- Consider Jones’s sermon in the light of Winthrop’s “Model of Christian Charity.” In what ways does Jones seem to be influenced by the Puritan thinking of Winthrop?
- Which of Hudson’s four models of democracy strikes you as the most desirable model for a democratic government? Does this desirable model also offer the best description of how American democracy works today?

Sharing: On the day the reading is due, ask students to get into small groups or pairs and discuss their responses to the question before the class discussion or lecture. Ask students to share what came up in their small groups or pairs as an entry into full-class discussion.

Responding: Ask students to hand in their responses. Respond to the first one or two sets minimally, underlining or checking parts of the response that show deep thinking (letting students know what an underline or check mark indicates). Share a few of these passages with the full class to model the kinds of critical engagement you expect. After the first two, simply collect the responses and give students points for participation.

Possible Variations:

- Study questions can be posted on a class blog or on the CTools Forum page. Students could be asked to respond before class and could be required to comment on at least one post by another student. For more information about integrating a blog into your class see the resource [“Using Blogs in the Classroom.”](#) For student guidelines for using CTools Forums, see Supplement 1: [“CTools Forum Post Guidelines.”](#)
- Students can be asked to revise one or more of their responses to study questions into their longer high-stakes writing assignment(s) or exam essay(s). The revised response could require a thesis, a more cohesive structure, and polished prose. If students are aware that their responses could become rough drafts for polished essays, they might put more effort into each response.
- Study questions can be assigned as freewrites at the beginning of class or as a way to deepen discussion in the middle of the class. Students could be asked to share their responses as part of discussion. Freewrites can be collected and skimmed.

Strategy 2: Concept Papers

Concept papers deepen students’ understanding of key concepts covered in a course by offering students an opportunity to explain concepts in their own words and identify questions they might have. Concept papers can also provide instructors insight into how well students are absorbing the material covered in class.

Assigning: Leave some time at the end of class (ten minutes or so) for students to freewrite about the concepts that were just covered. Ask students to explain the concept in their own words as if they were explaining it to a friend. Near the end of the freewriting period, ask them to write down what remaining questions they have about the concept.

The following are examples of concept paper prompts:

- Explain the logic behind Einstein’s theory of Special Relativity in your own words.
- Describe the multiple model approach to anthropology in your own words.
- Summarize Thoreau’s main claim in your own words.

Sharing: Start the next class by calling on students to share their explanations and questions with the full class.

Responding: Spend some time responding to the questions that students share from their freewrites before beginning the next lecture. Collect the freewrites at the end of class and read over them to get a clearer picture of how students are absorbing course material. Choose a few of the most frequently asked questions to cover in a future class.

Possible Variations:

- Offer students an incentive by allowing them to use their freewrites as notes during a test.
- Ask students to share their freewrites with each other in small groups and see if they can answer each other's questions first. Each small group could then share whatever questions remain with the full class. This method is similar to Eric Mazur's Peer Instruction model, which is used in math and sciences classes. Peer Instruction invites students to teach each other about concepts through conversation, though it could be done using freewrites as well. Peer Instruction begins with an instructor giving the class a quiz on a certain problem or concept. Students then discuss their answers with each other and attempt to persuade each other of their answers if they believe they got it right. Then the instructor gives the quiz again to see how many more students answer correctly. For more information on this method, see the book *Peer Instruction: A User's Manual* by Eric Mazur.
- Ask that students summarize a concept or ask a key question from class in a Twitter post. The limited character length will challenge students to condense their comments to what is most essential. Ask that students reply to these posts in re-tweets. For a handout of Twitter activities, see [Supplement 2: "Twitter Assignments."](#)

Strategy 3: Round Robin

This strategy involves collaborative writing or students writing in response to each other. By asking students to write down their ideas rather than just discussing them, they can take the time they need to better articulate their position, and participation will not be limited only to those who are comfortable speaking in large classes. This activity can be used to deepen student understanding about course material or brainstorm ideas for their essays. If you choose to ask students to generate questions for the activity, it will also challenge them to engage with course material from a position of inquiry.

Assigning: Come up with a series of three to four questions about the reading material assigned for class or about concepts that have been discussed in class. The questions should be written at the top of a piece of paper with plenty of blank space where students can write their answers. In class, ask that students divide into groups of three or four depending on the number of questions you have brought in. Give one question sheet to each student. Give each student 5-10 minutes to write an answer to the question, then ask that they pass the sheet to another student. The next student should read the question provided as well as the previous students' answers, then formulate their own response. This process should continue on until each student has had a chance to read all responses and answer all of the questions in the group. If you have time, you can ask them to respond a second time to each question.

Sharing: Once this activity is completed, give students time to discuss what came up for them during the process in their groups. Then ask each group to share an important discovery they made together with the full class. You might consider leading a discussion on each of the three to four points and ask students to share the ideas that came up in their groups during the activity before directly addressing the material.

Responding: This strategy requires no response, though you may collect the sheets and read over them to see how well students comprehend course material. You may also give students credit for participation.

Variations:

- Instead of asking students to respond to questions, you may ask them to bring in ideas for paper topics and turn this into a collaborative brainstorming session. See the section on Writing in Preparation below for more strategies to help students develop paper topics.
- Rather than developing the questions yourself, you could ask that each student bring in a single question.
- These could be done on CTools Forums, with students posting questions in a conversation group. Students could be required to respond to their group members a certain number of times to further their conversation through writing. Before class, you might consider skimming the posts and selecting examples from the exchanges to foster discussion in class, as well as to let students know that you are reading them.

Strategy 4: Class Notes

This strategy will allow students to share the responsibility of taking notes in class. It can foster more active engagement in class discussion when students know that one student in each class will be taking careful notes. The class notes can then be shared at the start of each class as a recap of the last class.

Assigning: Assign one or two students to take notes each day of class. Let students know that their notes will be considered the main notes from lecture that day to encourage them to take organized notes. You might consider going over good note-taking habits in class or presenting students with a sample of class notes before they begin this assignment.

Sharing: Ask student to post their notes in a folder in CTools Resources. Read over the notes together in class, clarifying any issues and addressing any questions that come up.

Responding: There is no need to respond to this assignment, though you should give students credit for their work.

Possible Variations:

- These letters could be posted as pages on a course website, and students could be encouraged to turn them into a multimodal experience, including images and links that complement the class notes.
- If there are two or more note takers per day, students could be asked to collaborate and create one set of notes.

Writing in Preparation Strategies

Low-stakes writing can purposefully delay the process toward the final product of a high-stakes writing task (such as an argumentative essay, a research paper, or an exam) to emphasize important critical thinking stages on the way. Because students can often be more articulate when they are writing in low-stakes situations, writing done in preparation can help students avoid the confusion they run into when they articulate ideas for the first time in a high-stakes situation. By reading over their low-stakes work ahead of time, you may also gain greater insights into confusing moments in their high-stakes assignments. The following are some strategies you might consider when assigning low-stakes activities that serve as preparation for a high-stakes task.

More strategies for Writing in Preparation can also be found in the resources [“Metacognition – Cultivating Reflection”](#) and [“Effective Assignment Sequencing for Scaffolding Learning.”](#)

Strategy 1: Writing about Paper Topics

Students can write about their paper topics as a low-stakes way to prepare for an upcoming essay. By working through their topics ahead of time, students can try out ideas or discard topics that don't work out. By sharing their topic ideas, they can observe how others are approaching the essay assignment and get more perspective on their own approach.

Assigning: After handing out and explaining a high-stake writing assignment, assign students a freewrite for the upcoming essay that asks them to discuss the topic they are considering writing about, the argument they are considering making, and/or their reasons for choosing this topic. Let them know that this freewrite will not be graded based on the quality of the writing and that they should use the assignment as an opportunity to explore and test out their ideas.

Sharing: Ask students to bring their freewrites to class and share them in small groups. Provide a few guiding questions for the discussion, such as, “What counterarguments might the student need to consider when writing about their topic?” “Does the student's position seem too predictable? What could make it more complex or original?”

Responding: After students have shared their freewrites, ask them what questions came up in their groups. You might also ask a student to share the ideas that came up in their freewrites with the full class before students share with each other, and your response to the student's freewrite could model the kind of discussion that should happen in small groups. Collect the freewrites and check off that they were completed.

Variations:

- Students could freewrite about their topic ideas in class right after receiving the assignment prompt. These freewrites could help students identify what interests them and come up with a topic. After a period of freewriting, students could be asked to share their topic ideas and your response to those who volunteer could model how to expand on essay topics.
- These could be assigned as more formal proposals. You could offer students a more structured set of questions as a prompt to guide their proposal. For an example of a proposal assignment, see the section on Pre-Writing Assignments in the resource [“Effective Assignment Sequencing for Scaffolding Learning.”](#)

- Proposals or freewrites can be posted on a blog or a CTools Forum so that the class can read about other students' topic ideas. The wider audience will offer them incentive to take this activity seriously. Once they are posted, you may skim the freewrites or proposals and, using the comments function in the blog or Forum, respond only to those students who have questions or seem to be headed in the wrong direction. If you choose this method, be sure to let students know that you will not respond to everyone and that if they have questions about their topics and do not receive a response from you, they should visit office hours.
- Students could tweet their working thesis, and their peers could retweet their posts with questions or concerns. For a handout with guidelines for tweeting a thesis, see [Supplement 2: "Twitter Assignments."](#)

Strategy 2: Writing Before and After Reading

If a high-stakes writing assignment will require a student take a position on a topic they will need to research or ask them to formulate an argument in favor of or against the position of an authority, you may consider asking them to write before and after reading. This low-stakes activity will allow students to gain a stronger sense of their own position and can function as an informal conversation between the student and the expert voice. By writing before reading the position of the authority, students can explore their own assumptions about a topic and can locate gaps in their knowledge. By freewriting after reading, students can address their assumptions from an educated perspective and can discuss the texts in light of their earlier position.

Assigning: Assign the student a freewrite to complete outside of class *before* they read a text by an authority on their paper topic. Ask them to explore their honest opinions, assumptions, and questions about the topic they have chosen to write about in their paper. You might ask them why they chose the topic, what position they are considering taking on it, and why. Then ask them to read what experts have to say about their topic (this might include readings you assign or research they do on their own). *After* they have read outside texts, ask them to explore their initial ideas about the topic—do they agree or disagree with their original position or with the authority's point of view? Do they have a mixed response? What has changed since their initial freewrite?

Sharing: Ask students to work in small groups to share what important takeaways they gained in their freewrites. What assumptions did they reveal and what considerations might they need to take into account when beginning their essay draft?

Responding: These freewrites do not require a response, though you should collect them and check off that they have been completed.

Variations:

- If you don't have time to assign writing both before and after reading, you might have them write only before or after they read.
- Students can be asked to use their freewrites to arrive at a working thesis and then the working thesis could be workshopped in class (for further suggestions on running a thesis workshop, see the strategy on "Speed" Peer Review in the resource ["Using Peer Review to Improve Student Writing"](#)).

- These can be done in CTools Forums. Students can post their original freewrites and then reply to their own posts. They could also be asked to comment on a few of their peers' freewrites.

Strategy 3: Writing about Models

It can be helpful to have students read and write about texts that model the kinds of writing they will need to do for a high-stakes assignment. This low-stakes activity is especially useful if the high-stakes essay will require a certain format, such as a lab report, or there are particular expectations for writing in your discipline that students need to follow. By observing the writing strategies used in models before they are given specific disciplinary guidelines for writing, not only will students have a better understanding of what they should do in their own essays, but they will also take a more active role in a discussion about rhetorical and disciplinary choices.

Assigning: Assign students one or two texts to read that model the kinds of writing they will be expected to do in their upcoming essay assignment. Ask them to take note of what they notice about the texts while reading and then write about the rhetorical or formal choices the writer has made in the text. You might ask that they choose three rhetorical or formal features of the text that stood out to them (such as the thesis placement, the style, or the use of headers) or you might require that they discuss the purpose of each section of a text (such as the introduction or the discussion section of a lab report). You might give them a word limit such as 250-300 words. This could even be written as a series of bullet points rather than a paper, if you prefer.

Sharing: On the day the assignment is due, ask the full class to share what features from the model they highlighted in their papers. Use this as an opportunity to clarify what the expectations are for writers in your particular discipline. Discuss what you expect from the students' essays based on what they discovered in the models.

Responding: Collect these papers and give students credit for having completed them.

Variations:

- The model text could be posted on a collaborative annotation website, such as eMargin, and students could post comments about what they notice in the model text in an online document that other students can see and comment on.
- Students could be asked to comment on a pdf version of the model text in Adobe Reader, and then the writing exercise could consist of a summary or overview of their annotations. They could also bring their annotated texts to class and share their annotations as part of a discussion.

Strategy 4: Writing Stages of the Draft

Because students don't always follow good writing practices, especially when asked to write papers for non-writing-intensive classes, it can be useful to assign stages of a rough draft as low-stakes exercises. Any stage is useful—for example, freewriting a paragraph that integrates sources or that introduces a counterargument; drafting the introduction or conclusion; or defining a term they will use in their essay—you can choose which stage to emphasize based on the particular needs of your writing assignment. One benefit of this low-stakes task is that the student can use these drafted pieces when creating their full rough drafts. These “stages” can also reflect on questions or problems that come up during the essay-writing process. Stages of the draft can then be shared in class for preliminary feedback or used to prompt discussions about papers in progress and the writing process in general.

Because there are so many options for this model, a handout of several writing exercises is included in [Supplement 3: “Process Journal Exercises”](#) and in [“Effective Assignment Sequencing for Scaffolding Learning.”](#) The following will outline only one option.

Assigning: After a high-stakes writing assignment has been given out, ask that students do some research on their topics and freewrite two different paragraphs that introduce the context or background behind the argument for the essay they are planning to write.

Sharing: Ask students to read both of their paragraphs to a peer. The peer must then choose which paragraph they feel better familiarizes them with the argument, stating clear reasons for their preference. Or the peer might suggest a blending of the two paragraphs.

Responding: Collect the paragraphs and give students credit for having completed them. If you have time and would like to get a sense of students' progress toward a draft, you might also consider reading these and underlining successful aspects of the paragraphs.

Variations:

- Some students may be asked to share with the full class so that you can facilitate the decision-making process. After students give each other feedback, you may also offer students time to further develop the paragraphs or to develop a working thesis based on the contextual angle they choose.
- You can assign several such low-stakes assignments in a “process journal” that students must hand in throughout the drafting cycle or with the finished essay. For a sample sequence of such assignments, see [Supplement 3: “Process Journal Exercises.”](#)
- You might ask students to tweet their working thesis during the drafting process. For a handout that includes guidelines on tweeting a thesis see [Supplement 2: “Twitter Assignments.”](#)

Resources

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