

WRITING TO LEARN

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1. WHAT ARE THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN HIGH AND LOW STAKES WRITING?

High Stakes Writing is Writing to Demonstrate Learning: This is the kind of writing most of us think of as "college writing."

- Its object is to allow the student to show you what she knows.
- It is expected to follow the conventions of formal academic prose and may be expected to follow additional conventions that are specific to your discipline.
- It can be written in or out of class.
- It is expected to be error free when written outside of class.
- It consists of essay tests, out of class essays, research papers and projects, book reports, lab reports, analyses of case studies etc.
- It is graded.

Low Stakes Writing is Writing to Learn: This is the kind of writing I'm arguing for.

- Its object is to simulate thought, generate ideas and connections, keep students engaged and thinking during class, and /or give us information about our students.
- It is usually short and informal.
- It can be written in or out of class.
- It can consist of myriad tasks from one-word responses to short essays.
- Although it is messy, it is never corrected.
- Although you may give credit for it, it is never graded.

2. WHY SPEND TIME IN CLASS HAVING YOUR STUDENTS WRITE?

- **Low stakes writing improves high stakes writing.** That is, writing in class—to learn—produces better writing on papers and essay exams and can even produce better scores on objective tests.
- **It improves the climate in the classroom** by making students active participants in the class.
- **Low stakes writing improves discussion** by making it likely that everyone has something to say—because they will have something written down.
- **It can ease student anxiety about writing** in general and about writing for you specifically.
- **Low stakes writing lets you spot misunderstandings that are epidemic in a class;** it also lets you identify specific students who are having trouble. You can spot these problems before—not after—the first exam or paper.
- **Low stakes writing is excellent practice for taking essay tests.** It can address the gap between material a student thinks he knows and the ability to communicate it to someone else. (This gap is usually the product of the study technique students refer to as "going over" the material without any attempt to engage with it.)
- **It is a way for your students to practice a specific skill or kind of thinking important in your discipline.**

- **Low stakes writing gives you practical information about what your students know and don't know.** You can use short, painless low stakes tasks to demonstrate that they did the reading, that they understood the reading, that they understand what you've been talking about for the last 15 minutes, that they are having difficulty understanding an idea, term, principle, etc.
- **Low stakes writing is a way to encourage and give credit for reading before class and taking notes during class.** This is a way to give shy students a chance for credit for reading and thinking about the material. It can also be used to encourage taking notes in class and while they read by allowing the use of those notes on in-class writing such as quizzes.
- **It gives students a risk-free environment in which to try out new ideas, take creative risks, or ask questions they are too shy to ask out loud.**
- Finally, low stakes writing can give you a chance to get to know your students better. You can design tasks that encourage students to share past experiences with classes like this one or that allow them to express their anxiety over—or pleasure at doing—this kind of work.

3. HOW SHOULD YOU RESPOND TO LOW STAKES WRITING?

"Students learn more from writing than from our responses to their writing."--Peter Elbow

I'm addressing responding to the writing before I address the writing itself because, having given writing workshops for years, I know that this is the number one issue.

Rule #1: In Low Stakes writing, correctness is never an issue. Read for the thoughts expressed, not for correctness. Don't correct spelling, grammar, punctuation, or even your pet grammar peeve. As students have more thoughts, they will get better at expressing them.

Rule #1A: Don't assume that poor writing means poor writing skills. Writing that does not communicate should be seen first as reflecting the student's problem with understanding the material or understanding your directions. Even excellent writers will write poorly when they don't really know what they're talking about.

Rule #2: There are levels of response to Low Stakes writing. Not every piece of writing should be handled the same way. You should never assume that all writing has to be corrected, evaluated or even responded to. You can respond in many ways:

- **Response A: No Response** Students can produce private writing for your course. This can be done as a journal or in class. Give credit for everyone in class that day or simply count the pages filled in a journal.

Advantages of allowing some writing to remain private

- It gives students a safe place to learn fluency (i.e. the ability to write enough)
- It gives practice at putting words on paper in a manner that can become as natural as speaking.
- It gives students practice in carrying on a dialogue with themselves, at asking and answering their own questions.
- It leads students to take more risks and thus to discover new lines of thought.
- Adolescents, older returning students, and students from other than the dominant culture find it good to have a space where they can express themselves without thinking about what is acceptable or obsessing about correctness.

- *Response B: Peer Feedback* Put students in pairs or in groups of three or four. They can read each other's work and respond verbally in class, read and respond at home, or read and respond online.

Students need a little guidance with this. Move slowly. Start with no feedback, with one student reading aloud to the other without comment. Move to "tell back," where one student reads aloud and the other retells what he or she heard. Then go to positive feedback, where the listener responds with one or two things that were good. Finally, mix positive and constructive feedback. Ask students to "suggest one way to improve the essay" rather than "find a mistake." And instruct students to always balance one constructive point with one positive point.

- *Response C: Teacher comments* This is what most of us think of when we think of responding to student writing. It's this response that leads us to Rule #3.

Rule #3: Keep your response to low stakes writing simple and similar. After you experiment with different kinds of responses, be as consistent as possible in your feedback mode.

Some ways to respond:

- Give check marks: ✓, ✓+ and ✓-
- Create an "up or down" response: Acceptable/Unacceptable, Pass/Fail, Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory, Enough information/Insufficient information
- Give points. Some assignments get points just for getting done. (You can even give points without reading what they wrote.)
- Create a simple rubric.
- Underline only, using a straight line for a sentence (or part thereof) that is clear and a squiggly line for one that is unclear. (This is Peter Elbow's suggestion.)
- Ask a single question that will guide their next writing. ("Which point is most important?" "How does this fit with yesterday's discussion?")
- Write a single sentence. ("I can see your point." "I disagree, but your argument is good.")
- Respond with "Thanks."
- Before you read their responses, have students exchange writings and respond to each other verbally or in writing, in pairs or in groups of three or four. Then add a single sentence of teacher response. ("I agree with Tom." "I like it when you guys disagree because it shows you're thinking." "You got some good advice.")

4. WHAT KINDS OF LOW STAKES WRITING TASKS IMPROVE STUDENT PERFORMANCE ON TESTS?

A Good Word For Objective Test Items: If you struggle with determining whether a student's poor essay is a result of inadequate writing skills or inadequate knowledge, try having some objective questions on the test, too. A student who is a whiz at the objective questions but does poorly on the writing may, indeed, need help with writing. But if students do poorly on both, you have more evidence that they just didn't know the material.

Low Stakes Writing To Improve Performance on Objective Tests:

- Give them a single multiple choice question and ask them to write 1 or 2 sentences about why each response (a-d) is either correct or incorrect. This works best if you allow a few minutes for students to talk with each other about their responses.
- Do the same with a true/false item, asking for a brief explanation.
- Ask them to define a term using complete sentences and giving an example that demonstrates their understanding.

- Use test items from old exams to give students a preview of your testing style.

Low Stakes Writing to Improve Performance on Essay Tests: Although you can have students read each other's responses to this kind of writing, it is more helpful if you give the student some idea of how their response would have done on an actual test.

- Give students a real essay question from an old exam and 3 or 4 answers to it. (You can collect these or write them yourself.) Ask them to rank the responses from best to worst, explaining the ranking in a few sentences. Give them time in class to talk with each other about their responses. Explain how you would rank them and why. This can be done as a group exercise in class, an individual exercise at home, or posted on your web page for the course.
- Give them a test question and about the same amount of time to write an answer as they would have on a test. (Or give them a shortened question and shortened length of time.)

- Ask them to write a full sentence definition of a term, then use it in a meaningful sentence or two that establishes an appropriate context. For example:

Definition: Manifestation means demonstration. (Sounds good. The student seems to know the word.)

Sentence: The angry voters held a manifestation on the mall in Washington. (Uh-oh.)

Sentence: The picket line was a manifestation. (This sentence still doesn't prove that the student knows the word's meaning and use.)

Sentence: The picket line was a manifestation of the workers' frustration.

- Use a short in-class writing to teach them how to do comparison and contrast. They frequently produce an explanation of A followed by an explanation of B without articulating how they are alike or different. Teach them to specify how A is like B, how A is unlike B, and that they have to do both steps to get full credit on your test.
- If they will have to explain steps in a process, ask them to explain a simple process, related or unrelated to the class. Sometimes trying to explain how to brush your teeth can point out the kind of clarity a process explanation has to have.
- Divide the class into as many groups as there are steps in the process, and assign the explanation of one step to each group.
- Provide the answer and ask them to write the question.
- Ask them to write test questions. This works best in pairs or small groups. If you use one of their questions on the exam, you both validate the exercise and teach them to do this for themselves when they study.
- Use post-test writing to help them reflect on their performance and to give you feedback about how they prepared. The aim is to make them aware of their own study habits and change them if they are unproductive. This kind of writing can be largely objective and anonymous. (Give 5 or 10 points to everyone in class that day.)