



Keeping stakes low allows for more focused practice

Using Low-Stakes Writing Tasks

Good writing requires frequent practice as well as opportunities for growth that allow students to take risks to develop their skills. Yet high-stakes writing (like graded reports, essays, and other texts) can disincentivize students from taking the risks that might be needed to improve their writing. One solution is to use frequent low-stakes writing tasks. How can you do so? This handout provides some tips.

1. Keep the stakes low

The point of low-stakes grading is not to spend a lot of time grading students' work. Instead, low-stakes writing helps students generate critical thinking, process key course ideas, and practice their writing. Some different ways to assess such tasks include:

- Collect low-stakes writing and provide brief feedback
- Collect a random sampling of the tasks (5 or so, perhaps) for marking
- Do not collect such writing, but give participation grade for completing the tasks
- Do not collect the tasks, but simply use them as discussion starters

2. Minute responses/takeaways

Set aside short spans of time – which can be just two to five minutes – so that students can respond to a question that you pose. Allowing students to write down their thoughts encourages everyone (not just frequent contributors to discussions) to think through issue that you deem important. These minute papers can be used as notes for students to use during a class discussion, or they can be turned in so that you can see their thinking and/or assess students' writing in a quick, informal way.

“Teaching Spotlights” are small but impactful ways for professors to keep consistent pedagogical improvement at the forefront of their teaching practice.

Additional resources

Christiansen, Heather Rebecca and Andrew Rasmussen. "[Writing to Learn in the Natural Sciences: Does Source Material Matter?](#)" *Journal of College Science Teaching*, vol. 47, no. 1 (Sept./Oct. 2017): pp. 57-65.

Georgetown University Writing Program. "[Incorporating Low Stakes Writing.](#)"

Reem, Jaafar. "[Writing-to-Learn Activities to Provoke Deeper Learning in Calculus.](#)" *Primus*, vol. 26, no. 1 (2016).

Shumskaya, Maria; Sasmita Mishra; and Laura Lorentzen. "[Online Low-Stakes Assignments to Support Scientific Lab Report Writing in Introductory Science Courses.](#)" *Journal of Microbiology Education*, vol. 21, no. 3 (2020).

University of Waterloo Centre for Teaching and Learning. "[Low-Stakes Writing Assignments.](#)"

Another option is to end a class, or cap a discussion of an assigned reading, with a written "takeaway." Ask students to write down what they learned from a class session or assigned reading, or you can alternatively ask them to isolate what they felt was most important in a discussion or reading.

3. Application responses

Another low-stakes activity is to have students write down a real-world application of the theory or idea that you are discussing in class. These can be kept anonymous and handed in so that you can use their responses to check their understanding of the information – and you can both praise good applications as well as gently explain the confusion behind erroneous suggestions.

4. Part of the process

You can assign small tasks that move toward a larger writing task, such as essay/report outlines, points-to-make lists, or other similar preparatory tasks. These can be used to begin discussion of student work in tutorials, or can be the means through which you provide feedback on students' ideas for larger writing tasks.

5. Seek more ideas

For ideas of different in-class writing tasks, see [this great list of exercises](#) from the Writing Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. You can also schedule a consultation with staff at Colby's Center for Teaching and Learning to talk about what will best suit you, your course, and your students.