

USING LOW-STAKES WRITING AS A TEACHING STRATEGY

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INTRODUCTION:

Writing can be incorporated into the classroom in a variety of effective ways that benefit both students and instructors. Instructors often use writing as the basis for formal assessment in the form of term papers, but this is only one of many ways to harness the power of writing in a classroom environment. Assessment of student writing to measure the degree to which a student attains mastery of subject is typical and worthwhile, yet writing can be integrated throughout the semester in ways that help students practice writing, learn course content, and work towards mastery. This paper introduces a number of ways to incorporate writing in the day to day classroom and explains why doing so may be of benefit.

TYPICAL STUDENT EXPERIENCES WITH WRITING

Students typically encounter writing assignments as large, formal assignments that carry significant weight on their final grade. As such, students may feel intimidated and/or anxious about writing assignments, and may map these negative feelings onto the idea of writing itself. Additionally, because the task of writing a long paper seems overwhelming, and because the subject content may be unfamiliar and perceived as difficult, students sometimes procrastinate. Students may also report that they “don’t know where to start.”

All of these potential snags may be mediated at least in part by actively incorporating writing in smaller but meaningful ways throughout the semester.

EMPLOYING LOW-STAKES WRITING IN THE CLASSROOM

When students are asked to complete shorter and less formal writing tasks and assignments rather than longer, formalized papers, this is referred to as “low-stakes writing.” This may look like a professor pausing after discussing a main point and asking students to spend a few minutes writing or summarizing the material she has just covered. It may look like a reading journal that is not graded for spelling or structure but is nevertheless a required component of the course. Or, low-stakes writing may take the form of students spending the last five minutes of class writing down their own answer to a provocative question posed by the instructor or summarizing the main points of a lecture. These “low-stakes” writing assignments may or may not be graded, but in either case, these less formal and more frequent writing exercises are effective in aiding students in their learning and writing skills.

BENEFITS OF LOW-STAKES WRITING

There are a number of benefits associated with low-stakes writing. One of these is that low-stakes writing is an easy way to “activate” the classroom.¹ Active learning is defined as instructional strategies that emphasize and require student engagement, and is differentiated from classrooms environments where the norm is for students to passively listen while an expert orally delivers information. We know that active learning strategies generally require higher levels of thinking and encourage students to be participants in the construction of their own

¹ White, C.P., Susan Reichelt, and Barbara Woods, “Low Stakes Writing as an Instructional Strategy to Engage Students,” *Family Science Review* 16, no. 1 (2011) 74.

knowledge. Active learning can be complex, but using low-stakes writing, in-class writing exercises can easily 'activate' the classroom and requires minimal planning and materials.

Additionally, asking students to stop and write during a class meeting can provide an opportunity for students to practice recalling information, and also allows students the time and space to practice writing about the subject at hand. Low-stakes writing assignments enhances student understanding by providing students an opportunity to explore, conceptualize, and integrate ideas with minimal risk.²

Small and frequent writing assignments can be an excellent way for both instructors and students to assess progress and check for understanding. If students find that they are unable to write about a given question, that provides real-time feedback for the student regarding what areas need attention. Similarly, if students find they can confidently complete the writing assignment, they will know they are on the right track. Even when these assignments are not graded, collecting low-stakes writing assignments can quickly give an instructor a picture of how the class is progressing as a whole. Instructors can collect the students' writing and flip through responses to quickly produce an accurate picture of where their students are.³

Finally, it is important to remember why higher stakes writing has long been a favorite assignment in higher education. Writing is powerful, and the process of writing requires students to form and articulate their own thoughts, opinions, and arguments. Writing requires students to exhibit creativity and thoughtfulness, and helps students learn material better and for an extended period of time, regardless of the subject- and this is as true for shorter writing processes such as notetaking as it is for longer processes such as essay writing. Why not harness the power of writing throughout the semester?

TYPES OF LOW-STAKES WRITING

FREE-WRITING IN THE CLASSROOM

Free-writing assignments are writing exercises typically done in class that do not conform to any particular or standardized structure, but allows students to write freely in response to prompts generated by the instructor. There are a number of ways to employ free-writing in the classroom, and four ways are described below.

In-Class Warm Up

In this exercise, an instructor assigns free-writing at the beginning of a class meeting. An instructor may choose a question related to an assigned reading, or may pull a provocative quote or controversial statement that relates to course content, or an instructor might ask students to recall three main points from the previous meeting. These questions are projected onto a screen or written on a board, and students are asked to begin class by responding freely in writing for the first few minutes of class.

This exercise accomplish several things. First of all, if students expect free-writing as part of their daily routine, there is a level of accountability built into the course structure that can encourage student to complete reading assignments more thoughtfully. It also encourages students to be actively engaged in the material from the first few minutes of class, and this can be helpful to get students interested and perhaps excited about the remainder of the class. Finally, if discussion is part of the class design, asking students to write down their thoughts at the beginning of class can help establish a base for any subsequent discussion. As students have already written their

² Linda Nilson, *Teaching at its Best* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 167.

³ Angelo, T.A. & Cross, K.P. (1993). *Classroom assessment techniques: A handbook for College Instructors* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993), 119.

responses down, they will be more inclined to volunteer their point of view, since they've already considered their response and put it into words.

This technique works equally well in science based and humanities classrooms. Consider the following scenarios:

Algebra: An instructor references a problem written on the board and asks students "What's the best way to start solving this problem, and why?"

Biology: The students just completed a reading that covers how vaccines work. An instructor asks students to consider, based on what they've learned, whether or not they would vaccinate future children. Students must explain their position and base their reasoning on assigned reading.

Introduction to Fiction: An instructor asks students to write about what motivated a character to act in the way that she did.

Think/Pair/Share

This strategy asks students to think about a question or topic, write down their own answer, then turn to a neighbor (pair) and exchange ideas, and then finally share perspectives with the entire class, and is easily used in classrooms of any size. When instructors ask all students to write down their answer to a question posed in class, there are a number of advantages when compared to simply asking and then calling on a student who raises their hand.

Asking all students to write down their answers requires every student to practice recalling information, form an answer, and shape that response into words. In contrast, when instructors simply call on someone who raises their hand, other students (and perhaps the majority of students) are allowed to sit back passively and wait for another student to provide the answer. Pairing with a peer allows each student to practice explaining their answer to a classmate, which can give students needed confidence to relay their answer to the entire class. Similar to in-class warm-ups, this activity helps establish a firm base for subsequent discussion because each student has written down an answer. This activity provided the additional step of allowing students to "try out" their response with a peer before sharing with the entire class.

Focus the Discussion

When conversation in the classroom gets off track, writing can be used to re-focus a discussion. An instructor can say, "Ok, Class, I want everyone to stop for a moment and consider the following question...." and then allow students a few minutes to write on the new topic at hand.

This technique can also be useful in diffusing tense or controversial discussions. The instructor can ask everyone to stop and write about their feelings or frustrations.

5-minutes summary

The last five minutes of class can be challenging in that students sometimes engage in the "backpack shuffle," or when students begin packing up their belongings just before class is actually finished. Using low-stakes writing is an excellent way to ameliorate this behavior while also providing students a chance to synthesize and recall the information they have just learned.

How to do it:

- About five minutes prior to the end of class, instructors ask students to write a paragraph that summarized the three main points of the day's lecture.

- Just before the end of class, the instructor writes three vocabulary words on the board and asks students to define these in writing before leaving.
- Instructors can ask students to write an “exit ticket” near the end of class. Students are asked to write down any lingering questions, points of confusion, or most interesting aspects of the class meeting. This strategy has the added benefit of providing a springboard for the next class meeting, when an instructor can say, “I noticed from the exit tickets that some people are confused about X, and so we will spend the first few minutes of class addressing this issue,” etc.

JOURNALING IN THE CLASSROOM

Slightly more structured than free-writing is the technique of using journals or learning diaries as a teaching tool throughout a semester. Journaling is a method of regularly recording observations, reflections, experiences, or ideas. Many espouse the value in journals as a teaching and learning tool that promotes reflection. Nilson notes that the ability for students, and particularly undergraduates, value the ability to explore their beliefs and solidify their ideas, and reflective journaling is one practice that encourages this personal development.⁴ Journals can take many different types, and some of these are described below.

Reading Journals

In this type of journal, instructors can require students to keep a journal throughout the semester, making entries for each assigned reading. The format of the entries can be more or less structured; an instructor may choose to let students direct the shape and content of their reflections, or an instructor may provide a template or a checklist for the types of things a student should include in each entry. Below are examples of each.

Ex. 1: Instructions for a less-structured journal

After each reading assignment, make an entry in your reading journal. You are encouraged to record your thoughts, impressions, and/or analyses of each assigned reading. Entries should be 300-500 words in length.

Ex. 2: Instructions for a more-structured journal

After each reading assignment, you will be required to make an entry in your reading journal. Each journal entry should include a summary of the main points of the reading. It should also include two quotes from the reading and two questions you have relating to the reading. Finally, you should include a paragraph of personal reflections that explore your own thoughts about the quality and content of the reading.

It is also possible to create specific prompts for each reading assignment that are tailored to lesson objectives.

Requiring students to keep a reading log throughout the semester adds a component of accountability for students, and also allows them prepare for any class discussions or exams that relate to the assigned reading.

Journaling from Prompts

An instructor may choose to give students writing prompts throughout the semester. This could take the form of ungraded, in-class activities, or an instructor may come up with a series of prompts to be distributed as a list at the beginning of the semester and graded throughout the duration of the course.

⁴ Linda Nilson, *Teaching at its Best* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 169.

Reflective Journals

These types of journals specifically encourage students to consider how class material is related to their own lives and experiences. There are a number of reasons why developing reflection is important in higher education. For example, reflection raises the awareness of oneself as a learner, reflection is a tool to promote learning, and helps students learn how to effectively direct their own learning.⁵ Other researchers note that journals are especially useful in developing critical reflection and self-awareness.

Learning Logs

Learning logs are a popular type of journal used in higher education where students are often asked to keep a record of what they have learned or observed. They are differentiated from other types of journals which often ask students to reflect on personal connections, whereas learning logs ask students to keep a record of accumulated knowledge and skills. Learning logs can help students take responsibility for their own learning, and also help students become more aware of what they have learned. One example of this type of journal is a biology lab notebook in which students record observations from each lab meeting, record data, and summarize what tasks were accomplished each day. Learning logs can be made more structured and complex by requiring students to engage in higher order thinking skills that require more than observation. For example, a more complicated learning log might require students to write down ideas about how an experiment might be redesigned or improved, what should be done next, or how knowledge accumulated might be applied to a different type of problem or scenario. The level of complexity can be tailored to the goals of the instructor and nature of the class.

Combination Journals

These journaling techniques can be mixed and matched or used in any combination to fit the needs of a particular class. For example, an instructor may ask students to keep a reading log that also includes a paragraph of reflection based on a prompt at the end of every entry. Or an instructor may combine a learning log with a more reflective strategy. For example, an instructor may ask students to keep a record of theoretical analyses of works of music, and also provide more reflective commentary on the significance or meaning of a work.⁶

GRADING LOW-STAKES WRITING

A number of approaches may be taken to grading low-stakes writing. These approaches range from not grading the writing at all to having significant weight placed on a completed journal that a student composed throughout a course. Grading journals can pose special problems for instructors, in that grading journals may be more subjective than other forms of assessment, and this is particularly true for less structured journals. One strategy to minimize subjectivity is to grade journals as a completion grade based on certain parameters (such as a minimum word count, timeliness, etc.). Another strategy is to present students with a specific rubric when the journal is first assigned. Single-point rubrics are excellent for efficiently providing feedback.⁷ Instructors should be thoughtful in articulating what the parameters would be for each category. Below is one example of a single-point rubric for journals, though instructors should tailor their rubrics to their specific course and expectations. Additional examples of rubrics can be found in the “recommended resources” section of this document.

⁵ Biggs, J. *Teaching for quality learning at university* (Buckingham, UK: Open University Press, 1999).

⁶ Morrison, K. “Developing Reflective Practice in Higher Degree Students through a Learning Journal.” *Studies in Higher Education*, 1996, 31, 317-332.

⁷ Gonzalez, Jennifer, “Meet the #SinglePointRubric,” *Cult of Pedagogy*. February 4, 2015. <https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/single-point-rubric/>.

Ex. ASSIGNMENT NAME:

Below Target Areas that Need Improvement	Target Standards for this Task	Above Target Evidence of Exceeding Standards
	Use this column to list specific criteria for the task <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Add bullets for specific details	
	Use this column to list specific criteria for the task <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Add bullets for specific details	

Finally, many instructors find that grading journals, particularly with large classes, can seem too time-consuming, even with the help of a rubric. One strategy is to tell students that you won't be grading the journals. In this case, it is important to explain why you require journal writing even though these are not all graded, being sure to describe the many benefits. Another strategy to minimize time would be to treat journals with a completion grade, or let students know that they should select their best entry to be graded. Another strategy to minimize time would be to set up a structure of peer-exchange, where students read and/or discuss each other's insights.⁸ Alternatively, instructors can commit to providing feedback on a certain number of entries throughout the semester.

SUMMARY

Low-stakes writing is an effective means of creating a more active, engaged, and reflective classroom environment. Two main approaches include free-writing and journal writing, and each of these strategies may be used in a variety of ways. Free-writing can be used to better utilize the first and last few minutes of class, and can also be used to focus the discussion and to encourage all students to articulate their own answers to a question. Journaling can be used both to encourage students to complete assigned readings as well as to reflect on the significance of the content. Using low-stakes writing strategies in the classroom allows students an opportunity to practice writing while exploring their own ideas and thought processes, ultimately helping increase students' awareness and responsibility for their own learning.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

Angelo, T.A. & Cross, K.P. (1993). *Classroom assessment techniques: A handbook for college instructors* (2nd ed.). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Biggs, J (1999). *Teaching for quality learning at university*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

⁸ McKeachie, W.J. and Svinicki. *Using High-Stakes and Low-Stakes Writing to Enhance Learning* in McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Professors. 2014.

Mckeachie, W.J., and Svinicki. (2014). "Using High-Stakes and Low-Stakes Writing to Enhance Learning" in *McKeachie's Teaching Tips: Strategies, Research, and Theory for College and University Professors*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.

Nilson, Linda B. (2019) *Teaching at its Best*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

White, C.P., Susan Reichelt and Barbara Woods (2011). "Low Stakes Writing as an Instructional Strategy to Engage Students" in *Family Science Review*, Volume 16, Issue 1, pg. 74-83.

Young, A.P. (1997). *Writing Across the Curriculum* (2nd ed). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Young, A.P., & Fulwiler, T. (1986) *Writing Across the disciplines: Research into practice*. Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook.

ONLINE RESOURCES:

On rubrics for journals:

<https://teachingcommons.lakeheadu.ca/rubrics-journals-journaling>

On benefits of low-stakes writing:

<https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/developing-assignments/cross-discipline-skills/low-stakes-writing-assignments>

On grading journals:

<https://www.edutopia.org/blog/student-journals-efficient-teacher-responses>