



Low-Stakes Writing: What, Why and How?

What is low-stakes writing?

We can define low-stakes writing by what it is *not*: Low-stakes writing is not writing that produces a finished, polished product, and it is not graded.

Low-stakes writing asks students to put course concepts into their own words, to grapple with challenging ideas, to apply course theories to novel situations, to reflect on course materials, and/or to prepare for discussion.

It can be done during and outside of class and can take many different forms depending on what you want students to think about, apply, or try out.

Why use low-stakes writing?

Low-stakes writing is a valuable learning tool that can be used across disciplines. You can use it to check understanding, to find out what questions students have, to pinpoint course material or concepts that are particularly challenging for students, to begin the process of working on a high-stakes, graded assignment, to have students apply theories, and to encourage students to engage deeply with readings and lecture material.

So students feel less pressure when working on low-stakes tasks, explain to them that the writing will not be graded but that you're interested in finding out how they engage with the task. Then, when reading their responses, focus on the ideas and not on grammatical or prose details.

Keep in mind that low-stakes writing will not be graded. Hence, your responses can be minimal or can be entirely verbal and shared with the class. Collecting and responding minimally to the writing can help your students to know that you take their writing, ideas, and questions seriously and that you're interested in what they have to say.



How to use low-stakes writing?

There are many possibilities for low-stakes writing, so don't feel limited to options listed here. In general, though, make certain to develop low-stakes writing tasks that encourage critical thinking. If students are asked to analyze and think deeply about material, the task will be much more useful as a learning tool. You can have students

- Respond to an open-ended question before beginning discussion
- Take a position on an issue and then have a peer respond to that view
- Design quiz or exam questions in various formats (e.g., multiple choice, short essay, etc.)
- Jot down how two different theories or perspectives contrast
- Write about a topic that interests them before they settle on one for a high-stakes writing task
- Explain what material from the course they find most (or least) applicable to their non-academic lives
- Pinpoint any concerns they have about the course material or an upcoming high-stakes assignment
- Journal about key ideas from assigned readings
- Take the final few minutes of class to write down 1 or 2 questions about the material covered that day
- Explain the relevancy of a key concept to a peer who is not enrolled in the class
- Respond to short surveys and open-ended questions using Google forms
- Apply a theory from the course to something (i.e., a current event, a personal experience, a new text) outside of the course

When deciding how to use low-stakes writing, consider carefully its purpose. Do you hope to increase student engagement during discussion? Do you want to encourage them to start on a major project? Check for understanding? Find out what confuses students? Design the low-stakes writing task to fit that purpose and explain the purpose to your students.

Additional resources

"Integrating Low-Stakes Writing into Large Classes" (University of Michigan's Sweetland Center for Writing)

<https://lsa.umich.edu/sweetland/instructors/teaching-resources/integrating-low-stakes-writing-into-large-classes.html>

"Benefits of Low-Stakes Writing" (University of Iowa's Center for Teaching)

https://teach.its.uiowa.edu/sites/teach.its.uiowa.edu/files/docs/docs/Benefits_of_Low-Stakes_Writing_0_ed.pdf

"Low-Stakes Assignments" (DePaul University's Teaching Commons)

http://teachingcommons.depaul.edu/Feedback_Grading/low-stakes-assignments.html

