

Writing to Learn: Good Learning, Not Good Writing

High-Stakes Writing: writing to demonstrate learning; transactional writing which is meant to accomplish something (to inform, to persuade, to describe...). Examples include research papers and essays on tests. This kind of writing is important because, as Elbow (1994) explains, "... if we don't ask students to demonstrate their learning in essays and essay examines, we are likely to grade unfairly because of being misled about how much they have learned in our course" (p. 1).

Low-Stakes Writing: writing to learn, discover, and shape meaning; expressive rather than transactional; short, sometimes impromptu, informal writing assignments that help students think through key concepts and ideas for the course while also practicing some features of discourse for a specific discourse community.

Benefits of Low-Stakes Writing

Students:

- encourages active learning – students learn key concepts and understand material more fully
- improves writing on high-stakes assignments
- improves communication overall.

Instructors:

- stimulates class discussions
- promotes the idea of writing as a process rather than product
- prevents plagiarism
- serves as a useful tool for formative assessment (evaluate thinking and learning before high-stakes assessment)
- improves effectiveness of teaching.

Writing to Learn Activities

Writing to learn activities can be assigned as part of homework or lab work and/or implemented at several points during one class:

- the beginning to bring students to the context of your course and recall readings, homework, lab work, or previous lectures;
- during class to reflect on concepts and ideas, change the pace of the lecture or discussion, stimulate conversation when it slows; and
- the end to help students identify what they have learned or are confused about, promote comprehension of the ideas discussed that day, and provide the instructor with an idea of what was understood by the class and what was not.

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Writers need to understand the **topic, purpose, and audience** for writing assignments in order to be prepared to respond effectively. Consider, discuss, and have fun with RAFT (Role, Audience, Format, and Topic) when creating writing assignments.

Keep **your workload** reasonable while also providing regular feedback to students by using some combination of these methods:

- just check off that students completed the task
- grade for one specific idea on + or – basis
- read and respond with one positive comment
- read and offer one suggestion
- grade selected or random writings
- ask students to select their best or most provocative piece
- have students to hand in writings that contain questions about course material
- pick up writing from 5 to 10 students each class or every other class
- collect two pieces of student writing at once and respond to both at once (allows comparisons like, “This piece is stronger than that one because...”)
- walk around while students are writing and discuss with 3 or 4 students the ideas being explored in their writing
- use different color pens or markings to note points in specific entries (underlined means strong idea, squiggly line means weak idea, X means incorrect idea)
- have students submit one collaborative piece of writing.

You do not have to explain why something is poorly written, suggest how to “fix” writing, or use grammar terms, but if a passage is unclear or confusing, say so. Try to keep your response consistent with your goals for the assignment (task, purpose, audience) while responding as an **interested, intelligent reader**.

Students can engage in **self-assessment**, but response and evaluation criteria need to be discussed and established ahead of time and students should be guided through their first evaluations. Peers can also serve as an audience in class or at home, orally or in writing, as a class or in small groups/pairs with multiple methods of **peer response**:

- read writing out loud either allowing response from peers or not
- conduct a gallery walk or writing swap where students read and respond to one specific aspect of each person’s piece in writing
- read and respond to another student’s writing in pairs.

Students are most valuable to each other when they respond as audience rather than evaluators or advice-givers. Encourage them to respond as readers who reply with reactions and thoughts about topics and ideas. Peer response, like self-assessment, requires guidance and practice.

Attitude Is a Powerful Tool

If you ignore writing as a way of learning and knowing, your students will also. Let students know that you use and value writing by

- telling them how you handle writing tasks and obstacles
- writing with them and sharing your pieces also
- focusing on communication rather than correctness
- expressing your belief in writing as thinking rather than as a commodity.

Developing Writing to Learn Activities

1. Think of a course you have taught and with which you are familiar. Identify an important pedagogical goal for a portion, segment, or assignment of that course.
2. Identify the type of writing activity (format) that would help achieve the pedagogical goal.
3. Record the topic, purpose, and audience for that writing activity.
4. Describe how students may go about completing the task. How would you do the assignment if you were a student? Can or should the assignment be broken down into smaller steps?
5. Explain how the task will be graded or scored.

A Brief List of Genres:

Journal Entries
Personal Letter
Greeting Card
Schedule/Things to Do List
Inner Monologue
Classified or Personal Ads
Philosophical Questions
Top Ten List/Glossary or Dictionary
Poetry
Song Lyrics
Autobiographical Narrative
Contest Entry Application
Speech or Debate
Textbook Article
Encyclopedia Article
Dialogue of a Conversation among Two or More People
Short Story
Talk Show Interview or Panel
Character Analysis or Case Study
Comedy Routine or Parody
Liner Notes
Picture book
Chart or Diagram with Explanation and Analysis
Brochure or Newsletter
Time Line or Chain of Events
Map with Explanation and Analysis
Magazine or TV Advertisement or Infomercial
Travel Brochure Description
How-To or Directions Booklet
Local News Report
Comic Strip or Graphic Novel excerpt
Glogster
Blog
Letter to the Editor
Newspaper or Magazine Feature/Human Interest Story
Obituary, Eulogy or Tribute

Intervening in the Writing Process: One Strategy

As you are assessing or responding to a piece of student writing, it is helpful to identify what stage of the writing process the student is in and then identify the skills that can be worked on in that stage. This flow chart can help give you an idea of the writing process and help to identify at what stage a student may be. It is important to realize that a writer can move to any stage of the process at any time. Movement does not have to be linear and not all parts are always needed.

