

## **FURTHER READING**

*Writing without Teachers*, Peter Elbow.

*Writing to Learn: How to Write—And Think—Clearly about Any Subject at All*, William Zinsser.

*Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*, John Bean.

## **FOR MORE INFORMATION**

[blogs.eciad.ca/cacfacultyhandbook](https://blogs.eciad.ca/cacfacultyhandbook)

[blogs.eciad.ca/wc](https://blogs.eciad.ca/wc)

**USING LOW-STAKES**

**WRITING**

**TO PROMOTE**

**CRITICAL THINKING  
AND CREATIVE!**



## **LOW-STAKES WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**

Typical university writing assignments are designed to get students to display or demonstrate learning, but **writing can be a form of learning** as well.

Low-stakes writing assignments are a great way to get students thinking on paper, in a way that we can see and learn from. They can be incorporated into any kind of course—lecture, seminar, studio—and they don't need to add heavily to your marking load.

The hallmark of low-stakes writing is that style / form / correctness don't matter. In these exercises, students are using writing as a way to think through and engage with course material. The goal is to write a **lot**, not write **well**.

## **IN-CLASS WRITING**

In-class writing is usually timed: anywhere from 5-20 minutes is an adequate amount of time to get ideas flowing. Keeping the time short makes it easier to focus only on writing without seeking out inevitable distractions. Writing by hand rather than on a computer also minimizes distractions, and research shows that handwriting engages learning and retention better than typing.

### **Ideas for low-stakes writing in class**

- Write to prepare for or process a critique
- Write in lieu of verbal critiques
- Write to preview a new topic to start the class
- Write to prepare for class discussions
- Write to reflect on learning from discussions, lectures, films, etc.
- Write in response to feedback on writing assignments
- Brainstorm to prepare for larger, more formal writing assignments
- Write to connect course material to personal or other interests (a good way to get to know students as people)
- Write to cool off a heated discussion (or revive a flagging one)
- Write questions during class to express confusion
- Write to prepare for a major assignment

## **EXTRA-CURRICULAR WRITING**

Outside of class, low-stakes writing can encourage continued engagement with course materials between classes. Some instructors collect this writing in the next class, while others ask students to post this writing to Moodle forums. Reflection assignments can ask students to reveal personal experiences, so are not always appropriate for full-class forum discussions.

Ideas for low-stakes writing outside of class:

- Reflections on class discussions, critiques, feedback (using the “what happened, what did I learn” model)
- Reflections on grades or feedback (using the “what I did, what I will do differently next time” model)
- Weekly research journals for a major research project
- Weekly learning journals outlining main takeaways from each class and connections students are making
- Reading responses (see Teaching with Reading handout)
- Online thinking pieces (forum posts) in response to questions posed by you or members of the class
- A list of questions about lectures, class discussions or readings that can be taken up in the following class

## **GRADING LOW-STAKES ASSIGNMENTS**

Low-stakes writing is not typically corrected or graded: some instructors collect them and/or mark them off as completed, but they rarely provide written feedback or an evaluative grade. Apart from a quick skim if you're curious, you don't even need to read them.

The value of this writing is in the process not the product. It is helpful, however, to assign some weighting to this writing—if only to signal its importance in your classroom. It might form part of a participation grade, you might assign a minimal weighting of 1-2% for each piece of writing, or a cumulative weighting of 10-20% for weekly low-stakes writing.