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**USING**  
**WRITING**  
**TO PROMOTE**  
**CRITICAL THINKING**



## LOW-STAKES WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Typical university writing assignments are designed to get students to display or demonstrate learning: what we grade are the final products of the research, thinking and writing processes. But a lot of research has been done about the value of writing as a form of learning (see William Zinsser's *Writing to Learn*).

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.

This mode of writing, often called freewriting, was championed by writing scholar Peter Elbow (see *Writing Without Teachers*, 1973).

## 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: [theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/05/to-remember-a-lecture-better-take-notes-by-hand/361478/](http://theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2014/05/to-remember-a-lecture-better-take-notes-by-hand/361478/)

### Ideas for low-stakes writing in class

- Write to preview a new topic to start the class
- Write to prepare for class discussions
- Write to reflect on learning from class discussions, lectures
- 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
- "Scaffold" tasks for larger assignment: sequenced low-stakes writing activities that get students ready to write a more major piece
- Write to prepare for or to process a critique
- Write in lieu of verbal critiques

If you want to allow more time for writing, say to prepare for a more formal writing assignment, it may be helpful to break the writing sessions into smaller chunks using the Pomodoro technique: [energizedacademic.com/2017/08/25/do-you-pomodoro](http://energizedacademic.com/2017/08/25/do-you-pomodoro)

### Extracurricular low-stakes writing

Outside of class, low-stakes writing can encourage continued engagement with course materials.

Some ideas:

- Weekly journals
- Reading logs / responses
- Online class discussions (forum posts)
- Thought papers or thinking pieces: short (one page) responses to a set question
- Reflections on class discussions or critiques

## 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 value to this writing—if only to signal its importance in your classroom. It might form part of a participation grade, or 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.