

WAC:

Low-stakes writing

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Overview

1 | Defining low-stakes writing

- Understanding low-stakes writing
- Explaining LSW to your students
- Teacher-determined vs. student-determined writing

2 | Evaluating low-stakes writing

- Rubrics
- Responses
- Is evaluation necessary?

3 | Implementing low-stakes writing

- Situating LSW in your class
- Examples of LSW assignments

What is low-stakes writing?

University of Waterloo's Centre for Teaching Excellence frames LWS as follows:

Low-stakes writing encourages student involvement in course ideas, helps students keep up with readings and put content in their own words, helps instructors to see whether or not students are understanding the material as a course progresses, and prepares students for high-stakes assignments. Low-stakes writing also creates less stress for students and instructors, because it usually counts for a small portion (if any) of the total grade and tends to be quicker to mark than essays, lab reports, and writing portfolios.

How can we explain LSW to our students?

- **Determine the purpose of the LSW assignment**
 - Emphasize process over product, learning over demonstrated learning (Elbow).
 - Explain how it will fit into the course material and learning goals
- **Set time or page limits**
- **Explain evaluation processes**
 - Check system with accompanying rubric
 - Short responses
 - No response at all

Who determines the goals of LSW?

The teacher

- Teacher-determined writing seeks a specific result in LSW, such as students drawing a connection between two concepts or the definition of a key term in the student's own words. Teacher-determined writing often connects to a specific learning goal (Bean 108).

The student

- Student-determined writing allows the student to determine their goals for writing. The student has “more freedom to ask their own questions, pursue their own issues, do their own pondering” (Bean 108).

How to evaluate low-stakes writing

Check system with rubric
(*must define expectations)

Suggested format:

- ✓+ means the assignment was completed and exceeds expectations
- ✓ means the assignment was completed and meets most or all expectations
- ✓- means the assignment was completed and did not meet expectations

Short feedback

- Provide one sentence of feedback about the student's LSW with emphasis on the ideas presented.
- Provide one follow-up question to promote additional writing.

No response needed

Depending on the assignment and who determines the goal of the assignment, you may not need to respond at all.

Alternatively, you may have students read one another's work as an informal measure of checking for completion or comprehension. Try to incorporate peer checking into paired or small group work/discussion.

Situating low-stakes writing

Integrating into current course structure

- Where can you fit in LSW into your course structure? What materials are especially challenging or thought-provoking that you want students to spend more time with?
- Plan on using multiple LSW assignments in your course consistently.

Scaffolding assignments

- What high-stakes writing assignments (such as essays or reports) can you improve by adding LSW assignments to the invention and drafting stages?

In-class writing or online writing

- Consider where you want LSW to take place—in (virtual) class, in a private notebook, on discussion boards, padlet, hypothesis, etc. Each platform offers its own benefits for LSW.

Low-stakes writing ideas

Example 1: check-in during class — check-in with students by having them summarize the class so far and write questions they have about the material

Example 2: double entry journals — students take formal/normal notes and then write a commentary on their notes, adding questions, ideas, connections, etc

Example 3: writing dialogues — students put opposing views encountered in course materials or independent research into conversation with one another by writing a dialogue between those sources

Example 4: extended analogies — students explain a concept from class in terms of something they already know (ie. making the comparison “writing an essay is like training for a marathon” and expanding on it)

Low-stakes writing ideas

Example 5: focused freewriting — provide students with multiple prompts from which to approach the same topic

Example 6: thesis-statement writing — students summarize an essay's main argument in one sentence (this LSW is not exploratory, but still helpful)

Example 7: defining key terms/concepts — students define key terms or concepts learned in class

Example 8: directed paraphrasing — students write about a topic or concept from class in their own voice

Low-stakes writing ideas

Example 9: “explain it like I’m five”* – students explain a concept from class as if they were talking to a child. This LSW allows students to assume expertise on the concept.*

Example 10: what you already knew/what you know now* – before covering a new topic, have students write what they already know about it, after they’ve learned the topic, have them reflect on what they now know about the topic.

*These LSW ideas were contributed by Emily Helck, a writing instructor at Rutgers-Camden.

Works cited

[Low-Stakes Writing Assignments, University of Waterloo Centre of Teaching Excellence](#)

[Low-Stakes Writing, Michelle LaFrance, George Mason University](#)

["Informal, Exploratory Writing Activities," John Bean, *Engaging Ideas*](#)