

**WAC:**

**High-stakes writing**

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# Overview

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- Choosing a genre
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# What is high-stakes writing?

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Peter Elbow describes high-stakes writing as “demonstrated learning.” While low-stakes writing is an opportunity for students to learn *through* writing, high-stakes writing is a chance for students to show what they’ve learned.

Elbow describes the role and reception of high-stakes writing in a course:

*“We cannot give fair course grades unless we get a valid sense of how much students have learned and understood. For this, we need high stakes writing. The stakes are high because it needs to be good and it bears directly on the course grade. But most [instructors] are not trained [to teach writing] and will understandably feel some apprehension about high stakes writing: especially about devising topics, commenting, and grading. The stakes are high for teachers as well as students.”*

# Using learning goals to design HSW

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- Analyze your course learning goals to determine what demonstrated learning should appear in the HSW assignment
  - What topics, methods, or theories should students demonstrate competency or mastery in?
  - What mechanics in the field should students demonstrate competency or mastery in?

# Choosing a HSW genre

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- What written documents are most prevalent in your field?
- What genre would provide students with the greatest opportunity to present what they've learned?

*For example, an economics student might not benefit from writing a term paper on a single economic theory. Such an assignment will only demonstrate one or a few aspects of what the student learned in the class. The student might instead benefit from writing a series of memos in response to real-world economic developments that have arisen over the course of the semester. The student may write these memos throughout the semester, revise them, and submit them as a portfolio. This HSW genre will ultimately be more applicable to the student's field.*

# Examples of innovative HSW genres

- Multimodal project incorporating visual or aural elements
- Creative writing projects
  - Rewriting a text from a new perspective
  - Explaining a theory or concept through analogy or extended metaphor
  - Imagining the experience of another person and describing it through poetry or prose
- Reflection papers
- A [subject] autobiography, in which students recount their experiences with [subject]
- Profile or ethnography on someone or some group in the field
- Extended dialogue between authors/texts/central figures
- Micro-theme papers

# Scaffolding HSW

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- Using backward design, scaffold the HSW assignment so that students have enough time to work on it and understand the process of writing HSW assignments.
- **Backward design:**
  - Learning goals → HSW assignment goals → HSW assignment sheet → LSW focused on one aspect of HSW (try including multiple LSW)
- **What students see:**
  - Receive HSW assignment sheet → LSW: in-class activity → LSW: freewriting activity → LSW: thesis development activity → HSW first draft → LSW in-class activity → HSW final draft

# Designing HSW assignment sheets

Each HSW assignment sheet should disclose the role of the student as they engage in this writing (their purpose), to whom they are writing, the format or genre in which they are writing and its relevant conventions, and the task. Ideally, the task will be presented as an intriguing problem for the student to address or solve. Engaging students in problem-based learning means they have a clear goal in their writing, and they get experience solving problems in their chosen field.

How much are you assessing the writing itself as opposed to the demonstrated mastery of material/skills?

- **RAFT**
  - Role (or purpose)
  - Audience
  - Format (or genre)
  - Task
- **TIP**
  - Task as
  - Intriguing
  - Problem
- For more on RAFT and TIP, see Bean's explanation on pages 97-100 of *Engaging Ideas*, chapter 6.

# HSW assignment sheet examples

Compare and contrast the assignment sheets here and on the next slide.

## EXHIBIT 6.1

### Considering the Effects of Small Variations in Assignment Design

Suppose that you are a nursing professor with two goals for a research assignment: (1) you want to deepen students' thinking about controversies in alternative medicine and (2) you want to create a writing assignment that will help your students learn to read the professional literature with sophistication and to do the kind of critical thinking, inquiry, analysis, and problem-solving required of nurses. You decide to have your students investigate the controversy over therapeutic touch (TT), a form of alternative medicine in which the healer is said to effect therapeutic changes in the patient's energy field by moving his or her hands slightly above the patient's body. Consider the following five assignment options and the discussion questions that follow:

#### Assignment Option 1

Write an eight- to ten-page research paper on therapeutic touch. Follow APA conventions for documentation.

#### Assignment Option 2

You are a staff nurse at a large urban hospital. Recently the hospital became embroiled in a major controversy when several nurses were discovered to be practicing TT on patients without the permission or knowledge of their supervisors or of attending physicians. The hospital governing board reprimanded the nurses and issued a general statement forbidding the practice of TT, which they called "non-scientific quackery." Research the professional literature on TT, looking especially for evidence-based studies. Then write a four- to five-page argument, addressed to the hospital governing board, supporting or attacking the board's decision to forbid the practice of TT. Support your position with reasons and evidence based on the professional literature.

# HSW assignment sheet examples

Which options appeal most to you? Why?

Which options would be best-suited for your students?

In these examples, is there opportunity to combine multiple options to make a scaffolded assignment?

From John Bean's *Engaging Ideas*, chapter 6.

## Assignment Option 3

Assume that you and several colleagues seek grant funding to do a controlled research study on the efficacy of TT for reducing anxiety and pain in surgery patients. Research the current professional literature on TT and then write the "review of the literature" section of your grant proposal.

## Assignment Option 4

Do a literature search to find several empirical studies of TT. Choose one of these studies for this two- to three-page paper. Write a critical review of your selected article in which you (1) summarize the purpose, method, and results of the study (in your own words—don't copy the abstract) and (2) write a critical review of the article in which you analyze the extent to which it provides or doesn't provide a scientific basis for regarding TT as evidence-based medicine.

## Assignment Option 5

Should schools of nursing and major nursing organizations give their imprimatur to TT? In some quarters, nurses are being ridiculed for their attraction to "new age mysticism." In other quarters, nurses are praised for their openness to modalities of healing other than Western science. For this assignment write an eight- to ten-page exploratory research paper that describes chronologically your own search for a personal answer to this question. The paper should start with a reflection on where you stood on this issue before you began your research, and why. (Being confused or uncertain is OK.) Then write a first-person, reflective narrative of

your thinking process as you investigated your question by researching the professional literature, talking with classmates, and drawing on your own personal experiences, memories, and observations. Your narrative should include a summary of at least three professional articles, followed by your own intellectual wrestling with that article's ideas. By the end of your essay, sum up how your ideas evolved during your process of research and reflection. You will be rewarded for the quality of your exploration and thinking processes. In other words, your goal is not to take a stand on this issue, but to report on your process of wrestling with it.

Discussion Quest

# HSW assignment sheet examples

What is effective about this assignment sheet?

Which aspects of this sheet can you apply to your own assignment sheets?

What would you change about this assignment sheet?

From John Bean's *Engaging Ideas*, chapter 6.

## EXHIBIT 6.3

### McLeod's Assignment Handout for First-Year Seminar

One of the most prominent topics in the historiography of colonial Latin America has been the nature of the encounter between Amerindians and Europeans beginning in 1492. According to a recent review essay by historian Steve J. Stern, one of the three main paradigms or frameworks for interpreting the conquest has been that of the conquest as an "overwhelming avalanche of destruction," characterized by the military defeat and demographic collapse of indigenous populations, the brutal treatment and ruthless economic exploitation of surviving natives by rapacious conquistadors, and the forced disappearance of pre-Columbian cultural, political, and social ways. Based on your reading of Inga Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatán, 1517–1570*, would you agree with this view of the conquest as one of extreme destruction and trauma? If so, why? If not, what is the best way to describe the nature of the encounter between Spaniards and Amerindians in colonial Latin America?

Using Clendinnen, *Ambivalent Conquests*, as well as the other readings, lectures, and discussions we have had in this course, write a **4–6 page (typed, double-spaced, stapled) essay** answering the above question. The assignment is due **October 10**. Assume that you are writing an academic paper for an undergraduate conference on Latin America. Also assume that your audience has NOT read this assignment and will attend your conference session because your title hooked their interest. Your introduction should explain the problem-at-issue before presenting your thesis. Because this is an academic paper in history, follow the manuscript form of the *Chicago Manual of Style* and Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. I will grade your paper using the following rubric:

#### Introduction and Thesis Statement

10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1	0
Explains problem to be addressed; provides necessary background; ends with contestable thesis statement; thesis answers question			Problem statement missing; problem poorly focused; thesis unclear, not contestable, and/or does not fully answer question				Paper begins without context or background; paper lacks thesis statement; reader confused about what writer is attempting to do			
Quality of ideas and argument										
20	18	16	14	12	10	8	6	4	2	0
Strong insights; remains focused on question; effectively links course materials to question; good historical reasoning			Some good insights; loses focus on question or gaps in argument; connections between question				Fails to adequately answer question; contains no clear argument; descriptive rather than analytical; tends to			

# Evaluating HSW

## Rubric

A rubric can be a helpful description of what a “good” assignment will look like. A good rubric, therefore, must clearly outline what is expected of the student/what mastery should be demonstrated in the assignment.

What generic masteries will you evaluate in the assignment?

What task-specific masteries will you evaluate?

## Grading contract

*“Students are given a list of all the course activities that the teacher thinks are important sources of learning, and students are guaranteed a course grade of B if they simply perform them all with good faith or decent effort.... The teacher gives normal feedback on all these activities where it’s appropriate...but for the grade of B, judgments of quality are irrelevant. This system tends to get more students to do the work yet gives them a large foundation of safety; it reduces the degree of adversarialness in grading. Yet judgments of quality come into play for grades higher than a B.”*

(Peter Elbow, “How to Enchance...”)

## Feedback

Ideally an instructor will use a combination of these three evaluation forms, but perhaps most helpful to the student will be feedback.

Using a rubric can prompt feedback, asking you to elaborate on why the student earned that level of credit.

Avoid giving feedback that is based on preference in favor of feedback that speaks to more objective **strengths and weaknesses in writing** (a rubric will help avoid this).

# Works cited

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Formal Writing Assignments, *Engaging Ideas*, John Bean

Using Rubrics to Develop and Apply Grading Criteria, *Engaging Ideas*, John Bean

Assigning and Grading High-Stakes Essays: Concrete Suggestions, Peter Elbow

How to Enhance Learning by Using High-Stakes and Low-Stakes Writing, Peter Elbow

Skeleton process--from chaos to coherence, Peter Elbow