

The Prevalence of Low Stakes Writing and Writing-to-Learn Activities in WI Courses

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What is Low Stakes Writing, and Why is it important?

Low stakes writing and writing-to-learn activities (see table 1) include assignments such as in-class writing exercises, ungraded activities, and reflective writing opportunities. Table 1 poses the characteristics of low stakes and writing-to-learn activities in contrast to high stakes writing activities, which include assignments like independent research and scientific papers, essay exams, and writing assignments that carry a high percentage of a final grade.

Low Stakes Writing...	High Stakes Writing...
Is frequent; e.g., assigned weekly.	Is infrequent; e.g., limited to 2 papers.
Is informal; e.g., uses personal pronouns, does not cite claims.	Is formal; e.g., avoids personal pronouns, cites research to support claims.
Questions and reflects on the subject matter of the course.	Synthesizes and reports the subject matter of the course.
Has minimal to no impact on the final grade for the course; e.g., equates to participation grade.	Has significant impact on the final grade of the course; e.g., one letter grade.
Is a <i>resource to learn</i> the subject matter and <i>develop</i> writing skills.	Is a <i>mechanism for evaluating</i> a student's knowledge of the subject matter and writing skills.

Table 1. To understand the nature of low stakes writing, it is helpful to compare it to high stakes writing.

The benefits of low stakes writing are listed below (see table 2) for learning and teaching the subject matter of the discipline and for learning and teaching writing skills. Low stakes writing is particularly beneficial for multilingual writers, because it allows them to practice the different academic discourses they will encounter and must recreate in higher stakes assignments.

Benefit Type	Low stakes writing...
Subject Matter	Helps students understand and retain the subject matter.
Subject Matter and Writing	Helps students practice communicating the subject matter in their own "language," which prepares them for understanding and using the terms of the discipline.
Writing	Improves students' writing skills.
Writing	Raises students' confidence and reduces writing anxiety.
Writing	Particularly helps multilingual writers, because it resembles speech more closely than high stakes assignments.
Instruction and Evaluation	Familiarizes faculty with their students' writing abilities, so faculty can anticipate and prioritize areas for improvement before evaluating high stakes assignments.
Instruction	Prepares students to engage in class discussion and fosters critical thinking.
Evaluation	Takes less time to evaluate than high stakes assignments

Table 2. Low stakes writing is beneficial for both students and educators and impacts both the subject matter and the writing portions of the WI course.

Note that there are no known distinct benefits between writing completed in class or out of class, which I investigated in my research for the RE/V project.

Current Use of In-Class Low Stakes Writing in WAC Program

After analyzing syllabi, faculty interviews, and classroom observations of eight Fall 2015 WI courses of varying disciplines and class sizes, I found:

- Seven of the eight courses (87.5%) assigned at least one low stakes assignment.
- Seven of the eight courses (87.5%) assigned at least one in-class writing assignment.
- Six of the eight courses (75%) wrote at least one low stakes assignment in class.

Further analysis of the interview transcripts showed that the two WI faculty who did not assign any low stakes writing in class were also the only WI faculty who gave the most negative responses to the questions, “Students write well enough,” (i.e., they responded, “strongly disagree”) and “Students do not write at an acceptable level,” (i.e., they responded, “strongly agree”).

WAC Program Recommendations

The WAC Program recommends that all instructors of WI courses include opportunities for low stakes writing and writing-to-learn activities to support their student writers. Low stakes writing has been shown to:

- improves students’ abilities to understand, synthesize, communicate, and retain subject matter;
- improves students’ writing abilities and critical thinking skills;
- increases classroom engagement;
- is especially helpful for multilingual students; and
- adds minimal to no increase in grading workload.

For examples of low stakes writing assignments and writing-to-learn activities please see the resources on the WAC program web site.