Low-Stakes Writing

"Low-stakes writing" (also called "writing-to-learn" activities) can be differentiated from "high-stakes writing" in a number of ways, but one of the most attractive features for those teaching "non-writing" classes, content heavy classes, or large lecture classes is that ***the instructor need not grade these assignments extensively, correct grammar, or address issues of organization.*** (A check minus, check, and check plus, very brief discussion in class about the types of answers received, *or* a one sentence comment on each page will often suffice to let students know you have seen/evaluated the work.)

Low-stakes assignments are different from assignments where writing would "demonstrate learning" (such as in formal response essays, essay exams, or research papers). In low-stakes writing-to-learn activities, students write to better understand course concepts and/or disciplinary practices.

Some Examples of Writing-to-Learn Activities: freewriting, loop writing, clustering, exit tickets, one-minute papers, journaling, and learning logs.

Tips for Making Low-Stakes Writing Work:
- When introducing the activity, give students your rationale for assigning it. Avoid characterizing it as less important than other forms of writing in class.
- If you're using a prompt, present it both orally and visually by writing it on the board or projecting it on the screen. (Exceptions include disciplines where response to oral instruction is valued.)
- Whenever possible, do the activity yourself before presenting it to students and/or do it along with them in the class. This makes a significant impact on student motivation.
- Before students write, describe next steps. Will the writing be collected? Discussed? Included in an assignment portfolio? Graded? If students are going to be able to be truly informal, they need to know that they aren't going to be judged on the quality of their exploratory writing.
- Be clear about time limits ("I'll stop you in 5 minutes"); when time is almost over, give 1-minute or 30-second warning.
- At the completion of the assignment, ask students to reflect on insights and developments.
- If you collect student writing, summarize, or at least highlight and comment on your findings during a subsequent class.

Useful Prompts for Low-Stakes Writing:
- What don't you know or understand [about our topic] that you would like to?
- What confused you most about what you read for/ what we covered today?

- What are the 3 most important things you learned today?
- What are the least important things you learned today?
- What is the main point of the article we just read?
- What are you struggling with in your writing/reading for our class today?
- What questions do you think will be on the test and why?

More complex exercises using low-stakes writing:

- Give groups of students a copy of a sample test question with a number of sample answers. Ask students to evaluate the answers—writing down their thoughts as individuals or as a group: are the answers accurate, do they answer the question, how well do they answer the question? This exercise is good for training students to write satisfactory short answers on tests.
- Ask students to write about a concept or to propose a key definition for the project you are working on. Ask several to read their definitions, then discuss the ways these definitions are and are not similar (and why?)
- Have students write a letter to a friend who has been sick the past week and explain what the friend has missed. Encourage students to look at the subject(s) you are covering comprehensively, rather than simply laundry listing course concepts.
- From NBio 301, 302 (University of Washington)

  Prompt: Write a 2 to 4 paragraph response in which you answer the following:
  a) Of the concepts presented since the last of these assignments, which one do you think you have the least solid understanding of?
  b) What is your current understanding of that concept?
  c) What specifically about your current understanding of that concept does not satisfy you? That is, what about your current understanding of that concept leads you to believe that your understanding is faulty?

  —Michael Kennedy, Neurobiology Professor, U of Washington