When writing is high stakes for students--that is, when it counts for a lot in their final grade--it becomes high stakes for us too. High stakes writing often creates a tenser and more adversarial relationship between us and our students to undermine the trust we need for good teaching and learning. In order to reduce this possibility, we need to be strategic with high stakes assignments. We can help students do their best work by planning high stakes assignments well--and giving them plenty of low-stakes writing. When they do their worst work, it makes life harder for us in many ways. Here are some suggestions for high stakes assignments:

 Make assignments clear and put them in writing. Along with the assignment, tell the criteria or factors that you will count most (e.g., applying course concepts to new instances? creative thinking? clear structure? correct citations?) Asking merely for "good writing" often brings out the worst. See sample *grids*, below, for a way to articulate your criteria.

 It will help enormously if you can illustrate what you are looking for with examples of a successful past paper or two--and perhaps call attention to particular passages to illustrate where something is done well and not so well. (If the samples are on another topic, they don't so much invite mindless imitation.)

 High stakes papers are an opportunity to ask students to learn the style, conventions, and "discourse" of the field--to learn write like professionals. But they also provide opportunities to ask them to write about course material in the field *to an audience of general readers.* Such writing still needs to be of professional quality. Students often learn concepts better and write more clearly when they are trying to address nonprofessionals.

 For any paper that counts for a lot, build in a chance to revise. If possible give feedback to the draft: your limited responding time is much more productive helping them improve drafts than writing autopsies on finished (dead) papers. Grids can help you give quick responses to drafts. But even if you absolutely cannot give feedback to a draft, you can still promote revising by requiring students to hand in a draft three to seven days before the final version is due. You can be perfectly open about this--telling them that you are using your authority to force them to *have time to re-think and revise.* Acknowledge honestly that you cannot give feedback, but you will still collect these drafts, and grade them down for not handing them in. Also, crucially, this will give them time to compare and discuss drafts among themselves and get peer response. Note how this minimal requirement takes *no time at all* from you or your syllabus.

 It makes sense to demand good copy editing--a good level of mechanical correctness. This doesn't mean we have to give feedback on spelling and grammar. We demand typing or word processing, but we don't give help on it. I always emphasize that they can and should get *help* on copy editing: virtually all writers do. It doesn't make sense to demand that all students master grammar and spelling, but it makes excellent sense to demand that all know how to take the necessary steps for producing clean copy.

Grading.
Faculty are normally required to give students single letter grades at the end of the course, but I find it helpful to avoid putting these one-dimensional quantitative verdicts on individual papers. This doesn't mean withholding evaluative feedback on papers; rather it's an opportunity to give more. Let me suggest a moderate strategy and then a more radical one for doing so.

Moderate strategy: use explicit criteria or grids. Single letter grades on papers are highly ambiguous since they tell nothing about which features of a paper are strong and weak. In their high stakes ambiguity, regular grades invite controversy and animosity and often make students feel helpless. Grids come to the rescue here. A grid asks us to give "multiple grades" on a paper, but makes this a non-onerous task, because each grade needs only three levels of quality: strong, satisfactory, weak. (Or four if you want: excellent, good, fair, poor.) Here's an example of a grid:

Weak	Satisfactory	Strong	
☐	☐	☐	Mastery of course concepts
☐	☐	☐	Use of examples
☐	☐	☐	Organization, structure, guiding the reader
☐	☐	☐	Language, sentences, wording
☐	☐	☐	Mechanics: spelling, grammar, punctuation, proofreading
☐	☐	☐	Overall

Here's an example of a grid used as a mini-file on a computer (no response = satisfactory):

Genuine Revision, Substantive Changes, Not Just Editing:

Ideas, Insights, Thinking: *Strong. I liked the way you complicated things by exploring points that conflict with your main point.*

Organization, Structure, Guiding the Reader: *Weak. I kept feeling confused about where you were going--though also sensing that my confusion came from your process of complicating your thinking. This confusion would be GOOD if it weren't a final draft.*

Strong Clear Voice:

Mechanics: Citations, Spelling, Grammar, Punctuation, Proofreading: *Weak. Because of all the mistakes, this paper doesn't fulfill the contract and is not acceptable. I'll call it acceptable this first time IF you give me a fully cleaned up version by next class.*

Overall: *Unsatisfactory for now.*

[Of course I often write an additional discursive comment at the end.]

Putting a grid-based multidimensional grade on a paper takes virtually no more time than trying to figure out a single-letter grade, and it's far more useful to the student, more accurate, and less likely to generate resentment and argument. Grids also permit me to give fast minimal feedback on final drafts so that I can use more of my responding time on drafts.

More radical strategy: use a grading contract. I prefer to grade with a contract. In effect, I say, "If you do the following activities, you are guaranteed a B for the course. These activities require effort and care, but anyone can do them. They have nothing to do with *quality* or *judging* (however, if you do them all, your writing *will* get good enough so you deserve the B you were guaranteed.) For grades higher than B, we are back to the game of judging quality: you must write papers I judge to be excellent or of honors quality. (See the sample contract.)

Note: *Contract grading does not do away with evaluation or judgment; it simply decouples judging from grading.* That is, I continue to give lots of the evaluative (and non-evaluative) feedback I normally give to students on their writing, but my evaluation has nothing to do with their grade (up to the level of B). Far from undermining evaluation, contracts make evaluation healthier and more productive of learning. That is, conventional grades pretty much force students to do what teachers suggest in their feedback; students tend to have either a knee-jerk trust that the teacher must be right--or sometimes a knee-jerk skepticism. With my contract, students are forced to *think* about whether my feedback makes sense because they don't have to go along with it. But the contract says they still have to do substantive revising.

Advantages of contract grading:

☐ Contracts reduce tension and arguments around grades. They give students control over their grade; they know pretty well at every moment what course grade they are in line for.

☐ With normal grading, students don't really think about my evaluative feedback; they just do what I say or imply. With the contract, they are safe for a B even if they *don't* have to do what I say. But they have to make substantive revisions. They actually have to think about whether my evaluation makes sense. Thus contracts make evaluation more effective for learning.

☐ Contracts let me put my effort into what I enjoy: figuring out which activities most reliably cause learning. They also let me ask directly for those qualities in writing that matter most to me (e.g., exploring perplexity). I can spend very little time doing what I hate and distrust: trying to *measure numerically the quality* of writing or learning.