

HIGH STAKES AND LOW STAKES IN ASSIGNING AND RESPONDING TO WRITING

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Most people feel writing as a high stakes activity—speaking as a low stakes activity. But this is largely an accident of how we *use* writing and speaking in our culture.

Writing is learned in school and virtually everything we write in school gets at least *some* evaluation. (If teachers are busy, they'll at least try to circle a few errors and perhaps give an informal grade.) Thus, for most people, the stakes usually *are* higher for words they write than for words they speak. No wonder people associate writing with pressure and anxiety. For us teachers too, writing assignments usually bring pressure since we feel they have to evaluate them and count them toward the final grade—and it's hard if not impossible to give a fair grade to a piece writing.

But even though we tend to use speech much more casually and loosely than we use writing, speech is not as good as writing for low stakes thinking. Speaking is dangerous. Words once spoken can never be taken back. If we say the wrong thing, our friend, supervisor, or loved one never forgets it. Most long term relationships have had to survive a history of things both parties wish had never been spoken.

Actually, *writing is better than speaking* for low stakes uses. We don't have to show our written words to anyone unless or until we are satisfied. We can safely explore perplexing, difficult, or scary issues; we can take risks. Writing, then, is ideal for *both* high and low stakes thinking and language.

- **High stakes**—for demonstrating learning. Unless we ask students to demonstrate their learning in essays and essay exams, we cannot trust our final grades. Students often *seem* to know things on short-answer or multiple-choice tests that they don't really understand.
- **Low stakes**—for learning, figuring out, and exploring new and complicated ideas. When there's frequent low stakes writing, high stakes writing goes better—for students and teachers alike.

Specific uses and benefits of low-stakes writing: see the handout.

Middle stakes assignments: “think pieces.” These are exploratory pieces that ask students to think through a topic on paper. They are not essays and don't have to be organized around a single point, but they are not just messy freewriting either. They need to be cleaned up enough so they are not unpleasant to read. Describe them as thoughtful letters to an interested friend.

Consider a ritual of a weekly think piece—just a couple of pages. They make students do the reading on time and come to class, and they need little or no response (see below).

Assignments can be open (“Write about what's interesting to you in this week's reading”). But think pieces can also be used to specify a particular *intellectual task* for students to engage in as they read (e.g., “*Compare these two concepts from the reading . . .*” “*Compare this concept from the reading to some experience from your lives.*” “*Write a short story that brings this concept to life.*”) Learning is vastly enhanced if you take five to ten minutes at the start of class for students to read them out loud to each other in pairs or in small groups on the day they are due.

High stakes essays.

- Avoid the single final “**terminal paper.**” It involves much work and little learning—and often lots of padding. Students seldom learn from our feedback, since the course is over before they get it—if they come by to pick up their papers. It's more productive to use several shorter essays.
- Build in **drafting and revising.** Even in non-writing courses, try these stages:
 - ▷ **Pre-draft exploratory writing** related to the topic of the paper: freewriting done in class or a think piece done for homework. As students do this writing, there's no need for them to know they are setting out to write a high stakes essay.

▷ **Solid or midprocess draft** based on an explicit assignment: their best thinking so far. This is for sharing with classmates and feedback from you. (See below about feedback.)

▷ **Final draft.** It asks for substantive revision, *but* spelling and grammar don't yet matter. Students need to learn the difference between revising and editing. This version is graded.

▷ **Supplementary publication version—edited.** The only task is to get surface mechanics right. Help is allowed.* It's due a class or two after the final draft—and just needs half a minute to see if the copy-editing seems successful. The grade doesn't count unless or until it is successful

Responding without ruining our lives

- **On medium stakes think pieces.** Just a **check or check-plus**—along with straight lines in the margin where it's strong and wavy lines where it's problematic.
- **On high stakes essays.** Devote most of your available response time to feedback on midprocess drafts. Response at this draft stage helps them *improve* their paper—instead of just being an autopsy. When final drafts come in (or supplementary publication drafts), you can move quickly and respond by just making checks on a grid (see handout). Then just collect “final publication drafts” on the next class and glance quickly to see if copy editing is successful.

Grading. It's quicker and easier—*and more valid!*—to use fewer levels of quality. Fewer distinctions means fewer wrong calls and fewer student complaints about small distinctions. Four levels are enough for high stakes essays (e.g., **unsatisfactory, weak, good, excellent**). It's perfectly reasonable to derive conventional course grades (A through F) from a series of these four-step grades (along with other factors like attendance, meeting deadlines, progress, &c.).

Better yet, devise a **contract** for grading (see handout).

Peer response. Peer response is good (see my *Sharing and Responding*), but it is difficult and takes lots of class time. I'd use it sparingly unless you are actually teaching writing. Instead emphasize **peer sharing**: they read to each other and either (a) just listen and respond only with “Thank you”; or (b) discuss the ideas that came up—but not the quality of the writing. You may not realize how much learning comes from this process of just reading their own writing aloud and listening to the writing of others. We get powerful feedback on our language and thinking through the organs of **mouth and ear**. The process is enjoyable and takes little class time.

A Note About Plagiarism. When stakes are high, students will be tempted to plagiarize. Best to *prevent* it with techniques like these: (1) Collect lots of low stakes informal writing so students know that you know their style or voice. (2) On high stakes essays, assign very specific, idiosyncratic topics. (E.g., “*Apply this theory to that set of particular data.*” “*Describe your reactions to X and then go on to . . .*” “*Give a sympathetic summary and then a critical summary of what X----- writes on p 134, and then write an essay of your own reflections about it.*” “*Write a short story that illustrates the principles we've studied this week.*”) (3) Require drafts and revisions (and cover letters that explain their revisions). (4) If it's a large course with different section leaders, have those leaders make up different assignments for think-pieces and essays—so students are less tempted to share work between sections.

*It's not feasible to require that all our students be able to get rid of all mistakes without help; what they need to learn is how to get they help they need for a publication draft that is “virtually free from errors.” Do not most of us get help in copy editing before we submit writing to a high stakes audience?