

Uses and Benefits of Freewriting and Low Stakes Writing

Ways to Using Freewriting In Class:

- 5-10 minutes of writing at the start of class to help students bring to mind their homework reading or lab work or previous lectures.
- 5-10 minutes after posing a question for discussion or after a presentation or film clip--or simply when things go dead. Low stakes writing for exploring reactions always makes it easier for students to talk up in a discussion.
- 5-10 minutes at the end of class or lecture to get them to think about what's been discussed.
- 5 minutes at the end of class to write to us about what they learned that day: what was the main idea for them? what was going on for them during that class? This helps them integrate what they've heard, and if we collect it, we learn what's getting through and what isn't.

If I have a new class with students who will resist the idea of writing I don't collect, I start off collecting it for a few sessions, but I stress that I won't grade or comment; I'll just check to make sure they used the writing to explore the topic. This way, I can teach them that it's not a waste of time write in a low stakes exploratory way. After a few sessions, I stop collecting and let these pieces be entirely private--or just for sharing with others. (Sometimes I take a few minutes more for students to read these pieces aloud to a partner or small group--helping them learn from each others' thinking.)

When asking students to do low stakes writing in class, it's important for the teacher to write too. Otherwise students see it as a babyish exercise for beginners rather than what it is: a process that adult professionals and academics find profitable. (If you devote ten minutes of every class to low stakes writing on a writing project of yours, you can get a lot of ground covered and keep the thinking percolating even through periods when you can't find three hours of uninterrupted time.)

Ways to Use Out of Class Freewriting and Low Stakes Writing:

Many teachers require students to keep a journal of informal and probably personal reflections to readings and classes. The goal is to get students to connect what they are studying with the rest of their experience, thoughts, and feelings. Some teachers read journals; others treat them as private and just check that students are writing. It can be productive to get students to trade journals weekly with a peer--perhaps for a response, perhaps not. Some students have a hard time connecting with journal writing; they feel it's useless and artificial--especially if no one else reads it. Teachers sometimes ask instead for a weekly letter to a classmate or friend in which they reflect on the course material.

How Freewriting Helps Students Think and Write Better

- It helps students involve themselves more actively in the ideas and subject matter of the course. During a lecture or discussion, there are usually only a minority of minds in the room that are active. During low stakes writing, virtually all minds are actively processing the ideas of the course.
- It helps students become more adventuresome and questioning. When students write for a grade, they tend to play it safe--making large generalizations and running away from what they are not sure of. Freewriting increases the chance that they will explore perplexity--something they need not only for the sake of learning but for the sake of greater conceptual depth in their finished essays. It also increases the chances of cognitive movement: a mind engaged in working out a train of thought. This contrasts with static writing that merely records completed or past thinking.
- It helps students find their own language for the issues of the course: their own analogies and metaphors for academic concepts. Learning a discipline means learning

its discourse, but it also means learning not to use that discourse. Students don't really know a field until they can write and talk about the material in their own lingo--in their informal, "home" or "personal" language that is saturated with experience.

¶It helps improve students' high stakes writing. In their high stakes writing, they often struggle in nonproductive ways and produce terrible and tangled prose. Freewriting (despite carelessness and mistakes) usually fosters a livelier, clearer, and more interesting voice--writing that sounds like it came from a person. I've almost never seen a piece of freewriting I couldn't easily understand, but I've seen lots of high stakes writing that students have worked very hard on--and found it impenetrable.

¶It helps students learn to write with full attention to their thinking. Many students have never experienced writing with full attention to their thoughts. Their writing has always been for a grade, and much of their attention has gone to worries about mistakes in language, spelling, or wording.

¶It helps students learn meta-cognitive thinking. There's a special application of low stakes writing to math and science courses--and to problem solving in general: asking students to write the story of the steps their minds went through as they tried to solve a problem. It helps their thinking for students to share these meta-cognitive stories.

¶It helps students learn to talk to themselves. It's a prime mark of wise and educated persons to be able to pursue a train of thinking inside their own heads--with no one else to talk to. Private low stakes writing helps students learn this valuable skill.

¶It helps students do better on high stakes essay tests. Teachers sometimes say, "We can't do low stakes freewriting because we have to concentrate on high stakes timed writing exams." But freewriting is an ideal preparation for high stakes tests. After students are well practiced with regular private no-topic freewriting, we can use freewriting as direct practice for exams. We can set test-like topics; we can give them longer and longer sessions to match exam times. In short we can give them practice with *all* the exam conditions. *Except* for the danger and risk. Practicing in these conditions, they can learn to think on their feet and explore different ways of handling topics and organization. When they hit the real exams, they will be more comfortable and more confident.

How Freewriting and Low Stakes Writing Help Us Teach

¶Regular low stakes assignments get students to keep up with the assigned reading every week. When students put off the reading till exams or major papers, they learn less from discussions and lectures--and class goes dead.

¶It helps us with our commenting on their papers. With frequent low stakes pieces, we don't have to grade or comment on any writing till they are already warmed up and fluent. And when we've already seen a number of their low stakes pieces, we don't have to panic when they turn in a high stakes essay that is tangled or impenetrable or looks brain damaged. We can just say, "Come on. I know you can write what you are trying to say here a clear lively voice. I've seen you do it."

¶It gives us a better view of how students are understanding the course material and reacting to our teaching--indeed, how their minds are working. We can see interactions between their thinking and their feelings--and how course material relates to other realms of their life.

¶And don't forget: freewriting and low stakes writing takes little of our time and expertise. We can require it but not grade it. We can read it but not comment on it. In many cases we don't even need to read it. Yet we can get students to read each other's informal pieces--and (if we want) discuss them.

[Adapted from "High Stakes and Low Stakes in Assigning and Responding to Writing" by Peter Elbow. In *Assigning and Responding to Writing in the Disciplines*, edited by Mary Deane Sorcinelli and Peter Elbow, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1997.]