

# Comp Quickreads

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## Low and High Stakes Writing

### Some Examples of Low-Stakes Writing

**Journals:** Probably the most common low-stakes writing found in composition classes, journal entries might be guided, such as focused responses to particular questions, part of a dialogue journal, where the instructor and student carry on a conversation through the journal, or open-ended and closer to freewriting.

### Freewriting or Quickwrites:

These (usually) in-class activities help students work through what they know and understand and what they don't know, which helps instructors gauge student comprehension. They also serve as effective invention strategies, especially for blocked or anxious writers.

### Role-playing writing:

Students might be asked to write a dialogue to explore another person's role or perspective, or "record" an imagined interview with an author, expert, or someone holding a contrary opinion.

**E-writing:** Electronic discourse is becoming more commonly used for informal low-stakes writing. Students might be asked to participate in online chats, post to a bulletin board, or take part in an email discussion. Students might also be asked to create their own blog or respond to blog entries, though the public nature of blogs and blog postings complicates the idea of informality.

In our professional lives all of us engage in a variety of writing tasks, each with its own purpose, intended audience, and associated conventions, and increasingly instructors are attempting to create a similar variety of writing tasks in their classrooms. Besides providing students with a variety of writing tasks, instructors also hope to encourage more writing by students without increasing the already heavy "paper-load" instructors face. Everybody agrees that students should do more writing, that more writing will lead to better writing, and that writing is essential to learning. But how do already overburdened instructors balance the legitimate pedagogic need for more writing by students with the equally legitimate claim of too much student work and not enough time to respond to it?

An important distinction that has emerged in response to this problem is that between "low-stakes" and "high-stakes" writing. Most instructors are already familiar with high-stakes writing, because they already require it of students. High-stakes writing is usually formal, structured writing that is assigned a grade. The writing might be take-home or timed, and the grade is usually a significant part of the course grade. In general, high-stakes writing is supposed to:

- demonstrate what students have learned
- follow the conventions of formal academic prose (as well as discipline specific conventions)
- be relatively error free (when written outside of class)

High-stakes writing assignments are stressful for students and involve considerable work for the instructor.

Low-stakes writing falls under the general category of "writing to learn" pedagogy and is often used in writing

classes as invention strategies. Low-stakes writing is also often used to assess quickly how well students understand course material. The writing is usually

- short and informal
- impromptu (in-class) or take-home
- intended to stimulate thought, and keep students engaged and thinking during class
- never corrected or graded

While the instructor might read low-stakes writing, the instructor should avoid lengthy comments, corrections, or even assigning a grade. Instead of a grade, most instructors use a simple acceptable or not-acceptable system (i.e. credit or no credit, check or minus) or simply "handed-in" or "not handed-in." If the instructor chooses to provide a comment, it will usually be directed to the content of the writing and not the form. For example, an instructor might need to signal in a comment a problem, such as a student not responding to a journal topic, inappropriately paraphrasing in a summary assignment, or otherwise misunderstanding the writing assignment. In general, comments, if used at all, should be brief.

Listed below are some examples of low-stakes writing assignments:

Journals  
Freewriting or Quickwrites  
Mini essays  
Role-playing writing  
E-writing

Low-stakes writing can also serve as pre-writing for high-stakes writing assignments. In-class brainstorming activities might lead to brief paper proposals which might lead to a formal paper. In short, low-stakes writing is not a substitute for high-stakes writing, but research seems to indicate that it improves student performance on high-stakes writing assignments.