

Low-Stakes Writing: Writing to Learn, Not Learning to Write

University Park Campus School uses low-stakes writing to scaffold instruction, develop student voice, and foster critical thinkers. Edutopia - May 10, 2016

University Park Campus School (UPCS) uses low-stakes writing every day and in every subject to foster student voice, self-confidence, and critical thinking skills.

Low-stakes writing is a tool to help students build comfort with sharing and developing their thoughts through writing. A defining element of low-stakes writing is how it's graded -- the grade doesn't carry a lot of weight. This removes much of the pressure from having to do the assignment a certain way, putting value instead on student thought, expression, and learning, rather than punctuation, grammar, or getting a correct answer the first time.

"The most important thing about it for me is that it's not censored, and it's not too highly structured," explains James Kobialka, a UPCS seventh-grade science teacher. "Students aren't being told exactly what to do. They're allowed to have freedom, and they're not so worried about it that they try to write what they think they want me to see, or that they're tempted to plagiarize. It's about them getting their own ideas down, and then being able to interact with those ideas, change them, and revise them if they're not correct."

Low-stakes writing:

- Increases students' comfort with expressing their ideas and empowers student voice
- Creates more investment and ownership in student learning
- Prepares students for high-stakes writing and testing
- Is adaptable for any subject
- Allows for differentiation

UPCS offers only honors curriculum. "In every class in this building, you have kids of all levels of prior academic achievement," says Principal Dan St. Louis, including kids who are "high flyers," kids with Individualized Education Programs who are receiving special education support, students with disabilities, and English-language learners. "And it's an all-honors curriculum, which means that we're providing high-level material that's intended to scaffold them to do college work by the time they graduate," he adds.

About 75% of UPCS students have learned English as their second language, and students enter the school two to three years below grade level in reading and math. "By the time our students take their high-stakes exams in tenth grade, 50% of them score *advanced* in ELA and math," explains St. Louis. "The majority of the remainder of students score *proficient*, and no student has ever failed their English exam."

When students write a high-stakes essay or take their high-stakes exams, they're prepared. "If I asked students to write a paper on *A Streetcar Named Desire*, I knew that they had already written several times on the play through their low-stakes writing assignments," St. Louis recalls. "They had given all of the characters some thought, had formulated ideas, and had supported those ideas with evidence. They had plenty of ammo to work with. Massachusetts' high-stakes exam requires students to write a lot. Our students pass these exams because they are absolutely unafraid to tackle new situations through writing."

How It's Done

Strategy 1: Grade Low-Stakes Writing Simply

Because University Park uses low-stakes writing assignments as a tool to help build student understanding around a concept, they're not being graded on getting correct answers but on the effort they put into understanding something new. Low-stakes writing doesn't always show mastery. Instead, it shows each student's learning process to get there.

"Low-stakes writing is not about the right or wrong answer," says Kobialka. "It's about trying something out. It's about using evidence, even if you're not really sure what using evidence looks like, or even if you're not sure if your evidence is right. It's about getting stuff down. Eventually, it's about coming back to it and saying, 'I did get that right. That's great. I could just rewrite

this, and it could be part of an essay.' Or coming back to it and being like, 'I was totally wrong. I need to fix that because someone else has shown me that it can be different.'"

As a low-stakes writing assignment, when Kobialka asked his students why they think atoms have mass while chemical bonds don't, he wasn't looking for a correct answer right away. Instead he wanted his students to share their initial thoughts about *why* to build their foundational knowledge around that concept. "We're not going into electrons and electron size relative to proton size and whether they're sharing or being taken away," says Kobialka. Instead, he wants them to share their thinking around that concept. "The kids who think more concretely think about it as an issue of size, like atoms are small, but bonds are even smaller, which is kind of accurate. Whereas students who are more abstract can say, 'Atoms are matter and bonds are energy, and there's no mass there.' For a middle school student, that's what I want them to start thinking about," explains Kobialka.

In Kobialka's class, if his students complete the assignment -- regardless of grammar, spelling, or being right -- they get 100%; if they turn in an assignment late, they get 70%; and if it's incomplete, they get nothing. By removing the pressure of needing to be right, students see how their thoughts and voice are being valued. Writing becomes a tool for learning, fostering critical thinking skills, and developing voice, instead of tool for being judged.

"I feel like it's a disservice to grade kids harshly on what should just be their thoughts," adds Kobialka. "There's nothing wrong with getting something wrong. And if you make every assignment a high-stakes assignment, they get the message that they failed."

Strategy 2: Have Your Students Share Their Low-Stakes Writing

Low-stakes writing exercises at UPCS almost always include sharing with a partner, group, or the class, then reflection and revision. Sharing their writing helps students to expand upon their own thinking, as well as take more ownership of their learning process. As Kobialka explains, "In science, there's usually a right answer. When I'm doing low-stakes writing, I'm asking kids to get their thoughts on paper, and then through sharing with partners or sharing out loud, I'm asking the whole class to come to a consensus. You get a student-generated answer, which everyone in class can learn from."

When Kobialka was teaching his students about conservation of mass, instead of giving them the definition, he showed them a picture and asked, "What do you notice about the atoms on both sides? How can you explain that?" It was from their observations and group discussion that they came up with their own definition for conservation of mass. "From there," he says, "once that consensus is formed, I'll ask somebody to write it on the board, and we'll talk about the key concepts."

Tip: Students become more invested in their learning when the answers come from themselves and their peers, rather than their teacher.

Strategy 3: Differentiate Learning Through Group Work

Sharing low-stakes writing through [group work](#) is also an opportunity to differentiate learning. All students are differentiated within groups. In Kobialka's science class, they share their low-stakes writing assignments with each other and then make annotations on that writing based on the group discussion. "I knew that students who did not answer correctly would have someone in their group who could say, 'This is what I got,' and their annotation can be more of a correction," he says. "The students who already achieved what I wanted them to do had the chance to annotate and add something else, like another example or a diagram."

Meghan Rosa, a UPCS seventh- and eighth-grade English language arts teacher, has her students share their low-stakes writing homework at the beginning of each class. "It's important that they're sharing because it's an idea generator," she says. "When they hear what other people are saying, it gets them thinking, and it motivates them to write more based on the conversations that come about between partners."

The next step is giving each other feedback and identifying what's good in a classmate's writing, explains Rosa. "That's the thing that they carry with them to the next step, or that's the thing that their partner then says, 'Oh, I want to do something like that in my piece, too.'"

Strategy 4: Use Challenge Questions Instead of Giving Traditional Feedback

Accept that your students' low-stakes writing assignments won't be (and don't have to be) perfect. It can be challenging to avoid pointing out what they do wrong, but Rosa observes that once you get comfortable with your students' work not being perfect, so do they.

Instead of pointing out their errors, she recommends these strategies for giving feedback:

- I like this here. Do more of that.
- Tell me more about _____.
- An example or some descriptive language would be helpful here because _____.
- Can I ask you a challenge question about this?

"Many students internalize traditional feedback ('You need to change this or that') as insulting, or as a sign of weakness," explains Rosa. "Rather than feel shame for what they have not yet done, I use **challenge questions**. To invite someone to take on a challenge is to offer them a new opportunity to learn more and express themselves more clearly and convincingly moving forward."

She suggests a few challenge questions that you can adapt:

- Unlike your intro, your conclusion seems a little rushed. If you could rewrite that last paragraph to appeal to a reader's sense of justice like you did in paragraph one, what might you change?
- I had a tough time getting a picture of your grandmother. Can you describe what she looks like and what she was wearing that day? I think doing so will help bring her to life for the audience.
- Can you think of an example that could help you prove your point that _____?
- You used a lot of *pathos* in the essay. If you were going to incorporate more *logos*, what's some data you would look up?
- Someone who disagrees with you on this might say _____. What's a counter-argument that you could offer this dissenter?
- I was a little unclear on what you meant by _____. Can you please reword it to help me understand?

Rosa doesn't avoid asking any student a challenge question, but she does ask some students more challenging questions than others. "I do, however, ask all students permission before asking them a challenge question," she adds. "In the five years since I've adopted the practice, I've never been turned down."

Strategy 5: Create Open Questions

Open questions are broad and non-threatening invitations that anyone can interact with.

"When working with worksheets or textbooks, they'll often have specific, closed questions," says Kobialka. "If you can figure out how to open up those questions, you've got a low-stakes writing assignment."

For example, here's what the difference would look like for students in his science class counting atoms on both sides of a chemical equation:

Closed question: Why are the atoms on both sides the same?

Open question: What do you notice about the atoms on both sides? How can you explain that?

Make sure that your open questions focus on what students observe and not on specific facts that you want them to know. "From those observations and responses, you can pull the facts that you want them to know," says Kobialka. "I'll give them the term after they've noticed it, but I will pull the idea of conservation of mass from the work that they're doing today, even though I haven't mentioned that topic to them at all. Instead of me just giving them the definition, they have this concrete link between something they did and the scientific concept. It's much more memorable."

Sample Low-Stakes Writing Prompts You Can Use in Your Classroom Today

[Here is a list of low-stakes writing prompts from University Park Campus School teachers](#) that you can adapt to fit your needs. (Download the below low-stakes writing prompts as a PDF).

Low-Stakes Writing Prompts for any Subject

- **What do you notice?** "Whether it's a poem or a mathematical or science phenomenon, your students can't answer wrong," says Principal Dan St. Louis. "You can say, 'What do you notice? What does that make you think of? Why do you think you noticed that? What stood out to you about that?'"
- **What's one thing that you know and one question that you have?**
- **Write a "Dear Confused Student/Absent Student" letter.** UPCS teachers give their students this writing assignment after they have mastered certain content. Students write a letter to a hypothetical student who has missed class, is confused about the content, or who will take the class next year. This low-stakes writing exercise allows students to explain in detail what they know and how they know it in order to help the hypothetical student. They may describe common pitfalls, flawed thinking, or advice on how to approach the material or problem.
- **Translate this technical terminology into your own words.** Kobialka has students create an interactive notebook in his science class. Instead of taking notes on what he says, they use this notebook to translate the science terminology and concepts they're learning into their own words through low-stakes writing assignments, activities, and discussions. One side of the notebook is for academic language, and the other side is for their own words.
- **Come up with a list of questions on _____ (any topic).**
- **Predict what's going to happen.** When Kobialka taught his students about what happens to mass during a chemical reaction, before doing experiments and observations, he had them predict whether the mass would increase or decrease, and why.
- **Why or Why Not?** UPCS teachers give their students a prompt and the answer. Students talk about what makes it good or not good, and explain why. (For example, it includes or lacks specific vocabulary, charts, evidence of answering all parts of the prompt, or use of data in a meaningful way).
- **Have your students grade a sample piece of your work.** To help students understand the importance of following a rubric, to assess how they use rubrics, and to identify their gaps in understanding, six UPCS teachers will answer a biology prompt. All of them have varying levels of familiarity with the content, but only one of them is a biology teacher. Students will evaluate each of their responses first without a rubric, and then with a rubric.
- **Create exam journals.** An exam journal allows students to reflect on concepts that they got wrong on an exam or quiz, and gives them another opportunity to demonstrate full understanding. "First, they summarize what the question was asking and analyze where and why their errors occurred," explains UPCS tenth-grade math teacher Kyle Pahigian. After reviewing their peer and teacher resources, they write the correct answer, and demonstrate their understanding by explaining why that answer makes sense. The exam journal is graded separately from the original exam or quiz.

English Language Arts Low-Stakes Writing Prompts

- **What would you do if _____ happened to you?** Ask this question before your students read about it happening to a character.
- **What's your favorite line, sentence, or word in this passage, and why?**
- **Create a general list of ways to respond to a piece of literature.** Give this list to your students at the beginning of the year. It can include things like:
 - Connect what you're reading to your life, the world, or another piece of literature.
 - What is the tone of a certain paragraph?
 - Rewrite the end of a book or piece of literature.
 - Write a letter to a character giving them advice about something.
 - Character sketch: Write an "I am" poem about a character.
 - Track a character's change from the beginning of the novel to the end. What plot developments compel this change?
 - Author's intention: What was said? Choose a passage, and summarize it. Why was it said? What purpose does it serve in the text as a whole? How does the author want it to affect the reader?

History Low-Stakes Writing Prompts

- **What's the most surprising piece of the story for you?**

- **Use political cartoons.** Ask what the cartoonist is trying to say about this time in history? Model this first by responding to a different political cartoon.
- **Examine images and symbols.** What do you think a particular image or symbol represents? Whose perspective is missing? What might that group say about it?
- **Textbook or primary source?** Compare and contrast a textbook version and a primary source version of an event.
- **Dig into a primary source.** Pick a line from a primary source and ask a question, and then write your response to that question.

Science Low-Stakes Writing Prompts

- **Assess vocabulary understanding.** Categorize vocabulary into three buckets: I get it, I sort of get it, and I have no idea.
- **How would a scientist describe _____?**
- **Seek connections.** Show several pictures or videos that don't necessarily appear to be connected. Have your students describe what they see and how they might be connected to each other.
- **Uncover common misconceptions.** Jody Bird, a University Park science teacher, uses the following low-stakes writing prompt for the example above: "You've got a sore throat. Your mom suggests that you should gargle with salt water. You take her advice and feel better. Why might this work?" Give your students the same prompt three to four times throughout the unit, suggests Bird. As they gain content knowledge, they will add to or change their responses each time they work on the prompt. "These types of prompts help to uncover misconceptions, and also show students their growth and knowledge acquisition," she explains. (By the way, gargling with salt water to soothe a sore throat has to do with osmosis rather than germs.)
- **Make predictions.** Before reading out of a textbook, have your students look at headings and make predictions about what the text will tell them. Also, have them ask questions that they think the text may be able to answer.
- **Come up with a way to show _____ with a movement.** If students are hesitant to write (for example, about a star exploding and coalescing), having them first use their bodies to describe a concept may make it easier for them to articulate their ideas in writing. You can ask them to explain why they used their bodies in a particular way to demonstrate a scientific idea.

Math Low-Stakes Writing Prompts

- **Show examples before teaching definitions.** Show your students examples and nonexamples of something that they haven't seen before, and have them describe what makes an example and what makes a nonexample. If you're teaching about polygons, before giving your students the definition, you can draw on the board or give them handouts with two columns labeled "Polygon" and "Not a Polygon." Draw various shapes in the appropriate columns. "Rather than looking up definitions or being told what the term means," explains Pahigian, "the kids look at the two columns of examples and nonexamples and describe what it takes to be one vs. the other. They come up with their own definitions through this low-stakes writing assignment, share with their groups, and then share with the class so we can condense it into a nice, solid definition."
- **Sort by characteristics.** Have your students sort shapes based on their characteristics and describe what they notice. Pahigian suggests having your students sort triangles into groups based on how they look. "The kids end up sorting them into groups with the same shape and different sizes" she says. "Then they describe what each group has in common -- matching up congruent angles and determining ratios of side lengths -- to develop a definition of similar triangles based upon what they've noticed."
- **Students share their skills.** Have your students explain something to the class that they know how to do and that everyone can access. Have this lead into specific skills that you want your students to develop.
- **Recognize patterns.** List patterns on the board, and ask how students would recognize a certain concept. Pahigian suggests showing them a list of numbers from real-world data or something they've built, such as the number of blocks it

takes to make a design in figure one, two, three, and so forth. Have them identify patterns in the numbers and connect those patterns to what they see in the design. “Which parts of the design are always constant? Which parts change based on the figure number? They tie these concepts into finding rules, such as linear, quadratic, cubic, and exponential equations.”

- **Apply word problems to abstract math.** Word problems can make abstract math concepts more concrete. Pahigian uses the following word problem to help her students translate expressions like “4 less than x ” from words into algebra:

Miss Pahigian’s age is 22 years less than Jon Bon Jovi’s.

1. Who is older?
2. If you start at Jon Bon Jovi’s age, how do you get to Miss Pahigian’s age? Explain in words.
3. Write your answer to number two using algebra. (Let j = Jon’s age and p = Miss P’s age.)
4. Who is younger?
5. If you start at Miss P’s age, how do you get to Jon’s age? Explain in words.
6. Write your answer to number five using algebra.

Extension: Using the situation above as a model, create your own example, and show me; then, trade with a partner and solve!

- **Introduce new math concepts with word problems.** Use word problems to introduce new math concepts before bringing up the term. Pahigian combines the following low-stakes writing assignment (adapted from the textbook, *Discovering Geometry*) with group work to help her students understand the **segment addition postulate** before introducing the term to them.

Midway through a 2000-meter race, a photo was taken showing the positions of all five runners. The picture shows Antonio 20 meters behind Desuray. Desuray is 50 meters ahead of Stefano, who is 20 meters behind Cathy. Cathy is 40 meters behind Nelson. At this point in the race, who is ahead? Who is in second? Third? Fourth? Fifth?

1. On your own, come up with the positions of all five people.
2. Jot down (in complete sentences) how you found where each runner was.
3. Then, share with your group how you did it. If your results are different from your partners’, explain why.
4. Did your partners accept your reasoning? If so, what convinced them?

"The phrase segment addition postulate is added on as a side note at the *end* of the activity," explains Pahigian. "It is not a daunting, unfamiliar phrase because the kids have already used their own knowledge to describe and work with it before knowing what it was."

A Tool to Empower Student Voice

Whether you're using low-stakes writing in English, math, science, or history, and whether you want to develop your students' critical thinking skills or lead them to discovering specific facts on which they'll be tested, low-stakes writing engages your students, develops their voice, and fosters agency. "Low-stakes writing gets kids more comfortable in academia and more comfortable with expressing their ideas," concludes Kobialka. "In the educational climate we live in, we don't always want students to express ideas. We want students to answer questions, and we want students to have semantic knowledge. Low-stakes writing allows students to have a voice, even as they're engaging with semantic tidbits that we think -- or that the state thinks -- that they should have."