3 "Is This for a Grade?" Understanding Assessment, Evaluation, and Low-Stakes Writing Assignments

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Overview

Grades are an important part of school.[1] Among other things, they tell students how well they met assignment outcomes, whether they are on track to pass their courses and graduate, and if they qualify for certain scholarships and extracurricular activities. However, grades are also the cause of a great deal of stress and anxiety, especially when the stakes are high. This essay examines low-stakes writing, a broad category of assignments and activities that are designed to shift students' focus away from grades and towards their writing and learning. The goal of this essay is to encourage discussion between teachers and students about the role of grades in the context of low and high-stakes writing assignments. It does so by discussing the differences between low-stake and high-stakes writing, why low-stakes writing is minimally graded or not graded at all, and how low-stakes and high-stakes writing relate to assessment and evaluation. The essay concludes with four recommendations for how students can change their mindset toward low-stakes writing.

Introduction

I often waited until the last minute to complete writing assignments when I was a college student. I usually started the day before the assignment was due and wrote late into the night. I didn't reread or revise. I worried that revising would slow me down, that I would realize how bad my writing was, get discouraged, and lose momentum. On the rare occasions that I got an early start, I still completed writing assignments without rereading, revising, or even proofreading typos. Completing writing assignments at the last minute and trying to "get it right" the first time meant that my *final* drafts, the ones that were graded, were really *first* drafts.

During my junior year, I took an English class with a professor who required students to write rough drafts of literary analysis essays before completing final drafts. Our rough drafts weren't graded, and the professor didn't look at them. Instead, students workshopped drafts in small groups during class. I don't remember the feedback that I received from my peers, but I do remember how helpful it was just to read my writing out loud. Not only did I find mistakes, like missing commas, but I also found places where my meaning wasn't as clear as I thought that it was. Workshopping drafts didn't suddenly transform me as a writer, but it did slowly lay the groundwork for new habits that helped me with more difficult assignments during my senior year.

Like me, you will probably turn in first drafts as final drafts at some point, maybe because you procrastinated, or you had to prioritize assignments in other classes, or life outside of school took precedence. But you will also have teachers who, like my English professor, teach you how to use *low stakes* writing practices like rough drafts and peer workshops to produce better final drafts. These teachers know that first drafts don't reflect what you are learning in the class or your writing skills. They also know that writers need feedback and that making it a habit to just write first drafts won't help you grow as a writer or prepare you to meet the challenges of *high stakes* writing in school and your everyday life.

Low-Stakes Writing Before the High-stakes Final Draft

Writing is *high stakes* when someone evaluates it and the outcome of that evaluation is important to you. The essay you write in a history class is

high stakes if the essay grade impacts your standing in the course. A job application is high stakes when you really want to work for a particular employer. Even a text message to a friend can be high stakes if you are worried about what to say and how best to say it. With each of these examples, you can use low-stakes writing to help you generate, revise, and edit before turning in the final draft, uploading the completed application, or pressing send on the text.

Despite the name, *low-stakes* writing isn't the opposite of *high-stakes* writing. It's more like a constant companion, always there to provide help and support when you need it. Experienced writers make low-stakes writing a central part of their writing processes, and you can too. Consider the three examples above. If you aren't happy with your thesis statement for the history essay, you might write several new ones and pick the best. For the job application, you might write a list of the skills you acquired and job duties performed during your summer internship. You could write a rough draft of the text message and ask a trusted family member to read it and offer suggestions. Noted writing scholar and teacher Peter Elbow says that the payoff for writing like this is that "we get to throw away the low-stakes writing itself but keep the neural changes it produced in [our] heads" (5). In other words, you can use low-stakes writing strategies like brainstorming, listing, and rough drafts to assess, reflect on, and think about your writing as you work towards the final draft. It turns out that these neural changes are so transformative that educators across disciplines and subject areas have expanded the concept of low-stakes writing beyond producing better final drafts.

The Broader Benefits of Low-stakes Writing

Other kinds of low-stakes writing assignments you might encounter in school include reading responses in economics classes (Beam), letter writing in a calculus class (Jaafar), reflective journals in clinical nursing programs (Sasa), and online discussion boards in science classes (Shumskaya et al.). You might complete low-stakes writing assignments that help you study for high-stakes exams (Stevenson), prepare for class discussion (Drabick et al.), and conduct library research (Stewart-Mailhiot). Assignments like these improve your chances of earning better grades on high stakes final drafts, quizzes, exams, and major projects, but you also gain many other benefits.

In her article "Breaking Free: The Benefits of Non-expository, Low-stakes Writing Assignments in Psychology Courses," professor Dr. Rebec-

ca D. Foushée surveys more than twenty years of empirical research about low-stakes writing assignments. Her research suggests that low-stakes writing assignments such as "in-class freewriting, letters, poems, online discussion boards, reflection exercises, journaling, short papers, group writing activities, reaction papers, and problem-solving exercises" benefit students far beyond high-stakes essay writing (40). Her research suggests that low-stakes writing assignments help you:

1. **Build your confidence as a writer**. Activities like brainstorming, rough drafts, and peer response improve your sense of ownership and agency with writing because you are the one making decisions about the quality and direction of your learning and writing, not the teacher.

2. **Improve your mental and emotional health**. While writing isn't usually assigned as a form of therapy in school, "incorporating assignments which provide opportunities to blog, journal, discuss, or share personal perspectives may promote [your] social and emotional development" in addition to helping you learn new genres (Foushée 42).

3. **Be more creative**. Because the requirements for low-stakes writing assignments are often more loosely defined, they provide you more opportunities to be creative with your thinking and writing. This kind of creative freedom gives you "psychological 'space'" to make mistakes, process course materials at a deeper level, produce personal insight, and learn from experience" (Foushée 43).

4. **Better understanding of course content and improve learning**. Foushée's research suggests that assignments like journaling and discussion boards encourage reflection and self-assessment, both of which "facilitate learning" (43). This is why you might encounter low-stakes reflective writing in a math class or personal narratives in psychology and biology, courses that traditionally focus on technical or scientific writing.

5. **Develop awareness of self and others.** Foushée's research also suggests that because of its expressive and reflective nature, low-stakes writing helps you better understand yourself and others and builds "interpersonal communication" skills that you will use throughout school and life. Small group activities are a great ex-

ample of Foushée's point because they provide a space in which to practice listening, talking, and collaborating.

Most of the low-stakes writing assignments Foushée researched were either ungraded or minimally graded, usually with a completion grade. When you are assigned a low-stakes writing assignment, you might feel like the work is less meaningful than the high stakes assignments that account for much more of your course grade. However, Foushée's research demonstrates that you will not only improve as a writer and learner, but you will gain the benefits described above. Let's look at an example of low-stakes writing and consider how grades might negatively affect the goals of that writing.

Zero Drafts: An Example of Ungraded Low-Stakes Writing

In her *Writing Spaces* essay "From Topic to Presentation: Making Choices to Develop Your Writing," Beth L. Hewett describes how she writes "zero drafts" early on in her writing process. Her zero drafts aren't "neat and tidy or super correct sentence-wise," and they aren't intended to be workshopped or shared with others, not like the more organized "first drafts" that she writes later (63). The goal of her zero draft is to "[get] the writing started" and "[begin] to organize ideas" (63). It's a way of using writing to discover what she has to say about her topic. Her zero draft can be full of unfinished thoughts and sentences, notes, sketches, lists, anything.

When you were asked to write a zero draft for class, it could be counterproductive for the teacher to grade it the same way that a final draft is graded. If your zero draft were graded, it would almost certainly affect how you wrote it. Instead of focusing on developing your ideas, you might get distracted by things like organization, word choice, and punctuation that aren't as important early on in your writing process. Ungraded low-stakes writing, as Foushée's research suggests, gives you more freedom to take risks and be creative, both of which are key to developing a sense of ownership and control over your writing.

The problem is that most of us, students and teachers, are so accustomed to everything being graded in school that it can be difficult to trust the process of writing without grades. When I introduce students to "quick writes," which are similar to zero drafts, at the beginning of the semester, someone inevitably asks, "Is this for a grade?" I would have asked the same question when I was a student. Teachers who are new to assigning low-

stakes writing also have concerns about not assigning grades. I initially worried that I wasn't doing my job if I didn't grade quick writes and that students wouldn't take the assignment seriously. These are important questions and concerns, and one of the steps that students and teachers can take to find answers and reach a common understanding is to have conversations about the problems that grades create.

The Problems with Grades

Researchers and educators have long criticized grades. For example, Dr. Stephen Tchudi notes that "Grades are extremely limited in their degrees of freedom, for they take a vast array of data and condense it into a single symbol that, in itself, doesn't communicate very much" (xv). One reason they are condensed into a "single symbol" (e.g., A, B, C, D, F) is that grades need to communicate information about student performance to a wide range of audiences who each have different needs and expectations (Cizeck 17). You want to know where you stand in a class. The registrar needs to know if you have satisfied course prerequisites and are making progress towards your degree. The financial aid office might need to know your academic standing as it relates to scholarship requirements. Advisors use course grades to answer all sorts of questions, as they help you and other students decide which classes to take. Athletic departments, fraternities and sororities, student activities associations, and honors societies all use grades to determine students' standing within those programs and organizations. Dr. Gregory J. Cizek, a professor at UNC-Chapel Hill who studies grading practices, critiques this system, arguing that grades "are primitive tools for accomplishing the diverse communication demanded of them" (18). Cizek says that the depth of the information communicated by grades ends up sounding "more like two tin cans and a length of string than [cell] phones and fiber optic lines" (Cizek 18).

Prominent "ungrading" advocate and researcher, Susan D. Blum, notes that students often see grades as "arbitrary and inconsistent" with wildly ranging criteria that don't always make sense and vary greatly from class to class and teacher to teacher, even within the same subject area (56). For example, one teacher places a lot of grade weight on class attendance where another doesn't grade attendance at all. One famous study from my field of Writing Studies asked fifty-three experienced readers in six different academic and professional fields to grade 300 student essays. The study found that from the pool of 300 graded essays, "101 received every grade from 1–9; 94 percent received either seven, eight, or nine different grades;

and no essay received less than five different grades" (Diederich 6). These results illustrate how difficult it is to find consensus about writing quality, even amongst professionals. You may have noticed the differences between the grades you get on writing assignments with different teachers, even when the assignments are similar. This might be because those teachers put different weight on different aspects of writing; one teacher values originality and creativity while another values conciseness and clarity.

Educator Jesse Stommel believes that grades aren't good indicators of learning because "they too often communicate only a student's ability to follow instructions, not how much she has learned. A 4.0 or higher GPA might indicate excellence, but it might also indicate a student having to compromise their integrity for the sake of a grade" (28). Stommel's observations are echoed by Raisa Chowdhury, an Industrial Engineering and Economics major at Northwestern University. Chowdhury writes:

> If I got an A in a class, it must mean I learned everything that class had to offer. Right? Not quite. It means that I performed according to the class's requirements: turning in all homework consistently, attending classes, doing just well enough on exams, and meeting all guidelines on grading rubrics. Which means if I got an A, I performed well.

As Stommel and Chowdhury attest, grades can reflect students' abilities to meet course requirements, but meeting those requirements doesn't necessarily translate into meaningful learning.

Another problem with grades is how much time and mental energy we spend thinking about them. Sometimes it feels like accumulating grades is the whole point of school. That's understandable considering the quantity of assignments that receive grades and how much time and energy you spend thinking and talking about grades. In a typical college class, you'll receive grades for a wide range of assignments and activities related to your achievements and performance—individual assignments, group assignments, class participation, attendance, tests, quizzes, final exams, and/or online assignments. These grades determine if you pass a course, make progress towards your degree, and graduate. They also produce a two-digit Grade Point Average (GPA) that you probably won't remember a year after you graduate and that most employers won't ask for. Your teachers also spend a lot of time and energy thinking about grades, especially when we write and revise syllabi and assignments every semester, are constantly cautioned against giving too many high grades, and are limited to a single

letter to communicate the richness of what students learn and achieve in a class.

Finally, there are some who argue that the excessive attention some students give to grades is unhealthy and potentially harmful to their mental and emotional well-being. Dr. Michael H. Romanowski, whose research includes the sociology of education, believes that some students' obsession with grades can lead to fears of failure (e.g., failing to meet their own and others' expectations) and that grades can become tied to their sense of self-worth. He also believes that focusing too much on grades can negatively affect learning. "Students elect not to think for themselves," Romanowski writes, "because they are more concerned with pleasing the teacher and securing a high grade than learning or developing independent, critical, and creative thinking skills" (149). Prioritizing learning over grades will help you focus on the things that matter most, such as critical thinking and engaging deeply with course material.

All of these problems with grades, their inability to convey complex information about student learning and performance, the lack of consensus about writing quality, success based on following instructions, and the distractions and stress grades cause undermine the benefits of low-stakes writing that Foushée found in her research, including building your confidence as a writer, nurturing creativity, and improving learning. This is why your teachers don't grade low-stakes writing assignments the same way that they do high-stakes writing assignments. They want you to shift your focus away from grades and toward the learning that low-stakes writing facilitates. One thing that can help you make that shift is understanding that grades are only one part of much broader systems of assessment that help teachers understand and make decisions about teaching and learning.

The Role of Grades in Broader Systems of Assessment and Evaluation

When I began researching grades several years ago, it became apparent to me that there is a complex web of terminology, philosophies, and definitions that often change depending on the audience (e.g. students, teachers, administrators, government entities, and others involved in education). Cizek argues for clarity in discussions about grades and provides a useful roadmap for the bigger picture of what he and others call *assessment*. According to Cizek, grades are one small part of much larger assessment processes that happen all the time in school. Assessment, he says, is "the planned process of gathering and synthesizing information relevant to the

purposes of a) discovering and documenting students' strengths and weaknesses, b) planning and enhancing instruction, or c) evaluating and making decisions about students" (Cizek 16). Let's examine Cizek's definition more closely.

Cizek explains that assessment is "the planned process of gathering and synthesizing information" (16). The information gathered and synthesized can be virtually anything, from quantitative data, like how many freshmen are first-generation college students, to qualitative data, like responses to questionnaires about dining services. Teachers, academic departments, administrators, and state education boards all gather and synthesize information for *three purposes* says Cizek. To help explain those purposes, I'll use examples from first-year composition (classes like Freshman Composition or Composition I & II). Many students take a first-year composition (FYC) class, and that's where you are likely to first encounter low-stakes writing assignments in college. They are also classes that I regularly teach.

The first purpose of assessment, according to Cizek, is for "discovering and documenting students' strengths and weaknesses" (16). Despite class sizes that average from 20–25 students or more, FYC teachers try to individualize instruction as much as possible. In other words, we try to adapt our teaching to meet the learning needs of each student. It's helpful to know something about your past experiences with writing, your goals for the class, and what you see as your strengths and weaknesses with writing. FYC teachers often assign short, ungraded writing at the beginning of the semester to help us quickly assess and document these things for reference when we work with students during conferences, office hours, and/or workshops.

The second purpose of assessment is "planning and enhancing instruction" (Cizek 16). Teachers put a lot of time and effort into planning and enhancing our classes. We consult with other teachers, share resources, attend workshops, and research "best practices" for instruction. Once the semester begins, we can gather information directly from students by observing how they interact with course material and each other during class. This is where low-stakes writing assignments fit it and provide assessment information. I read quick writes and drafts in my FYC classes to give students feedback, but I also read them to get a better idea of how students understand an assignment, where they are struggling, and where they are succeeding. I use this information to plan the next class meeting (e.g. "Let's work on our narrative essays today because we're still having trouble with scene writing.") and provide better one-on-one instruction during student conferences.

The third purpose of assessment is "evaluating and making decisions about students" (Cizek 16). Cizek is careful to point out that there is a difference between "evaluation" and the two other forms of assessment. *Evaluation* is an assessment process that involves "making judgments about student performance or ascribing value to the results of [teachers'] observations" (Cizek 17). While the other two forms of assessment are for collecting information about students' performance in order to modify our teaching, evaluation is about measuring students' performance against a set of "standards regarding what is acceptable, superior, or good enough" (Cizek 17). Those levels of performance are typically expressed in the form of a grade (Cizek 17).

Sometimes it is difficult to know what standards will be used to measure your writing performance. If you have ever had your writing graded with a rubric, then you have seen one example of how teachers attempt to make those standards transparent. If your teacher doesn't use rubrics, look for evaluation criteria on the course syllabus or assignment prompt. Jeremey Levine's essay "What Are We Being Grade On?" in *Writing Spaces Volume 4* provides helpful advice on how to read a teacher's evaluation criteria—even if those criteria aren't clear.

To summarize, teachers collect and communicate assessment information all the time. Some of this information, such as observations of small-group work, helps us adapt our teaching to improve student learning. At key points during the semester (e.g. final versions of assignments, midterm and final grades), we evaluate students' performance and learning by measuring student achievement against a set of standards. That evaluation is communicated in the form of a grade. The important takeaway here is that low-stakes writing assignments aren't just about improving your writing, creativity, understanding of course material, etc. They also improve instruction by giving teachers a more complete picture of your learning than high-stakes writing alone.

How to Change Your Mindset toward Assessment and Low-stakes Writing Assignments

It can be difficult to write without grades at first. That's why it is important for teachers and students to have conversations about grades and the expectations for both high-stakes and low-stakes writing assignments. Those conversations will help you shift from a mindset that is grade-focused to one that is learning-focused. There are also things that you can do

on your own to get the most out of low-stakes writing assignments. Here are four suggestions.

1. *Attend class*. A 2010 quantitative analysis of eighty years of research about class attendance in college found a significant correlation between attending class and higher grades and GPAs. "Indeed," the researchers said, "the relationship is so strong as to suggest that dramatic improvements in average grades (and failure rates) could be achieved by efforts to increase class attendance rates among college students" (Credé 289). This is especially true when low-stakes writing assignments involve group work during class meetings. If you aren't in class, you don't get the benefits of that ungraded learning, writing, and collaboration. Even if you complete the assignment at home, you might miss out on additional instructions and examples.

2. *Faithfully participate in low-stakes writing assignments.* Not every low-stakes writing assignment or activity will work for you, but you won't know if you don't give it an honest try. You might even find a way to adapt the activity to better meet your needs. When I took FYC many years ago, the professor taught us how to write full-sentence outlines for every major essay. The process was tedious and boring; however, I kept at it and eventually found that I like writing outlines because they help me develop ideas and sentences for longer drafts.

3. *Pick one or two low-stakes practices that work for you and use them in other classes.* Pay attention to the low-stakes writing assignments that you like the most, especially the ones that help you produce better final drafts, improve your critical thinking, and/or help you understand the content of the class you are taking. These might include activities like journaling, brainstorming activities, writing outlines, reflective writing, annotating assigned readings, and peer response. Chances are that if these assignments help you in one class, they will help you in others. They will probably also help you with writing outside of school.

4. *Communicate with your teacher about grades, but understand if they are reluctant to evaluate your writing at that moment.* Remember that assessment produces feedback, while evaluation produces judgments (e.g., grades). "Is this good enough for an A?" "Am I doing this right?" "Is this what you want?" are all evaluation ques-

> tions. Not only do these questions invite simple answers, but they also ask readers to judge the quality of your writing. Your teacher may not *want* to judge the quality of your writing while you are still engaging in low-stakes writing. Remember that the goals of low-stakes writing assignments include encouraging creative thought, making deeper connections with course content, and building your confidence as a writer. You can't focus on those goals if you are also focused on a grade.

One of the best ways to get better assessment feedback is to write author's notes. The next time you share a draft with someone, include a brief note that tells readers: (1) one thing that you like about your draft; (2) one thing that you don't like; (3) two or three specific questions that you want them to answer about your draft ("Revision Practices"). Writing an author's note helps you quickly assess your draft and helps readers provide better feedback by drawing their attention to the parts of the draft that you want to talk about.

More than anything, I encourage you to take full advantage of every low-stakes writing assignment. Grades are obviously important, but they don't tell you very much about your writing and learning. Low-stakes writing assignments are an opportunity to move beyond just writing for a grade. Without the constant pressure of grades, you are free to take risks, try something new, and challenge yourself.

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Teacher Resources for "'Is This for a Grade?'": Understanding Assessment, Evaluation, and Low-stakes Writing Assignments

Overview and Teaching Strategies

The inspiration for this article came from the many times students asked questions along the lines of, "Is this for a grade?" and "Do we have to turn this in?" These are reasonable questions. Students want to know the relative weight of individual assignments in the broader scope of coursework. This is often because they are making decisions about how best to manage their time with so many school, work, and home obligations. I was also inspired by questions like, "Is my writing good enough?" and "Is this what you want?" These are also reasonable questions. Students want to ease their fears about success in courses they see as particularly difficult or with which they've struggled in the past. However, evaluation questions like these tend to reinforce a grade mindset that can be counterproductive for low-stakes writing.

My goal with this essay is to kickstart conversations about grades—what they do and don't represent—and why there are often fewer evaluation moments in college compared to high school. I recommend that students read this chapter when low-stakes writing is first introduced in a class. You can engage students' prior knowledge about grades before they read the chapter by having them discuss the first question below. Note that students may have a difficult time understanding the difference between low-stakes and high-stakes writing. Ask them to identify and discuss examples of each that they previously encountered in school. This will give them a personal point of reference while reading this essay.

Questions and Prompts

1. Think back to the last time you completed a high-stakes writing assignment under pressure. Maybe it was a timed writing exam or a project that you waited until the last minute to complete. What was that experience like? How did you feel about what you wrote? How might those feelings and experiences have changed how you think about and approach writing now?

2. This essay is about high-stakes and low-stakes *writing*. How can *reading* be high-stakes and low-stakes? What are some examples? How might your experiences with high-stakes and low-stakes reading prepare you for reading in school and your everyday life?

3. Teachers, school administrators, and employers have argued for decades about "grade inflation." Discuss what you think "grade inflation" is and why some might see it as a problem while others don't.

4. Pick a low-stakes writing activity from the class in which you are reading this essay and try it out in your other classes. Share what you learned after a week or two. As a class, discuss how the skills you learned from the activity might transfer to other contexts, including outside of school.