

1. Frequent low stakes assignments get students to keep up with the assigned reading every week. When students put off the reading till an exam or major paper, they learn much less from discussions and lectures. And when only the teacher and a few diligent students have done the reading, the whole course tends to lose steam.
2. Low stakes writing helps students be active learners. Too often students function as merely passive receivers. Low stakes writing helps students involve themselves 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 a piece of low stakes writing, virtually all minds are actively processing the ideas of the course.
3. Low stakes writing helps students find their own language for the issues of the course; they work out 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. That is, students don’t know a field until they can write and talk about what’s in the textbook and the lectures in their own lingo, in their informal, “home” or “personal” language that is saturated with experience.
4. When students do high stakes writing they often struggle in nonproductive ways and produce terrible and tangled prose. When they do low stakes writing, their writing is usually livelier, clearer, and more natural--often more interesting--in spite of any carelessness and mistakes. I’ve almost never seen a piece of low stakes writing I couldn’t easily understand. But I’ve seen lots of high stakes writing that students worked very hard on that was impenetrable.
5. Low stakes writing improves the quality of students’ high stakes writing. With frequent low stakes pieces we ensure that students have already done lots of writing before we have to grade a high stakes piece--so that they are already warmed up and fluent in their writing. Their high stakes pieces are more likely to have a clear, alive voice. And it’s no small help to their high stakes writing that we have seen a number of their low stakes pieces. Then, when they turn in a high stakes essay that is awkwardly tangled or even impenetrable, we don’t have to panic or despair; we can just say, “Come on. You can write all this in the clear lively voice I’ve already seen you using.”
6. Low stakes writing gives us a better view of how students are understanding the course material and reacting to our teaching. We get a better sense of how their minds work. We can see better the interactions between their thinking about course material and their thinking about other realms of their life, between their thinking and their feeling. We get better glimpses of them as people.
7. Many students have never had the experience of writing with full attention to their thoughts. Because all their writing has been for a grade, much of their attention goes off to questions of whether the language, spelling, or wording is right.

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.

And don't forget:

8. Low stakes writing takes the least time and expertise from us. 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 others' informal pieces--and perhaps even discuss them.