

High-stakes and Low-stakes Assignments

High-stakes assignments—such as term papers, final presentations, and midterm exams—constitute significant portions of a course grade, usually extend across multiple weeks, and therefore typically demand that students master much content and many skills. Conversely, low-stakes assignments do not carry substantive grading weight (they may even be ungraded entirely), take less time for students to execute, and often focus on a small body of skills and/or content.

Low-stakes assignments are critical tools for **scaffolding** toward higher-stakes ones. An ungraded draft of a final paper, for example, creates opportunities for recursive development and **formative feedback**, while weekly problem sets enable students to discretely practice skills they'll later synthesize on a final exam. Low-stakes assignments can also allow for risk taking, ideation, and exploration, and need not be explicitly pegged to a high-stakes assignment.

Some strategies for partnering high- and low-stakes assignments:

Align low-stakes work with high-stakes assignments to ready students for success with a complex challenge—and make your **summative** grading easier.

- Identify the skills students will need to have mastered in order to succeed in the high-stakes assignment, and assign low-stakes work that develops those skills explicitly.
- Be transparent with students about these connections so they understand the purpose of their low-stakes assignments.
- Ask yourself, “What skills must be developed before others are tackled? How can I group skills so they can be practiced together? What skills will have the highest impact on overall success?”

Examples of low-stakes assignments

- **Focused Freewriting.** Students are given a specific objective to complete in class; the nature of these prompts is virtually limitless, and can be tailored to development of any skill, including summary, ideation, and analysis.
- **Response Papers.** In one or two pages, students summarize and respond to a reading.
- **Proposal Writing, Thesis Statement Drafting, Outlining, Section Drafting.** Students are given specific parts of the whole to work on, and are then encouraged to revise and incorporate into the final draft.
- **Peer Review.** Students are given opportunities to receive and give feedback to others working on similar assignments.

References

- Elbow, Peter and M. D. Sorcinelli. “Using High-Stakes and Low-Stakes Writing to Enhance Learning.” *McKeachie’s Teaching Tips*. 13th Ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2010.
- Elbow, Peter. “High Stakes and Low Stakes in Assigning and Responding to Writing.” *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, vol. 69, 1997, pp. 5-13.

See also

Formative and Summative Feedback
Growth Mindset
Scaffolding Student Learning
Writing to Learn