

Low-stakes blackboard discussion boards: Professor Orrette Wauchope (General Chemistry I) assigns low-stakes writing as homework to get students applying concepts from class lecture to their daily lives

What do students do?

In groups of 10, students comment in response to a prompt or to a peer in their group

They do this several times per semester

How does Professor Wauchope respond? (Enrollment: ~80)

Assigns 1 point for a “reasonable original comment,” for a total of 5% of overall course grade

Discusses a few comments in class, tying them back to lecture content, and addressing misunderstandings

Sample Prompts

On atomic structure and the scientific method: If scientists found a new particle and they thought that it was the smallest part of an atom, how could they be sure that there wasn't anything smaller? Is there anything not made of atoms?

On naming compounds: Look in your food pantry at home and pick a food item. Look at the ingredient list and pick one of the chemical compounds listed. What is the identity of the compound you selected? Is the compound ionic or covalent? How can you tell?

In Orrette's words: I was a little skeptical that it would work but I was surprised that it worked so well and I got full participation. I didn't get any complaints from the students, it looked like they really enjoyed the experience. I think the most exciting thing that I saw was that the students started talking to each other about chemistry. More importantly, they started realizing that chemistry is involved in several aspects of our daily lives.

Low-stakes groupwork to prepare for class discussion: Professor Donna Gitter (Law of Business Organizations) assigns low-stakes writing to encourage close reading and to prepare students for class discussion.

What do students do?

Read articles before class
In groups, write in response to prompts that elicit evidence-identification and then analysis
Writing can take place at home or during class time (in breakout rooms)

How does Professor Gitter respond? (Enrollment: ~30)

Reads through responses
Assigns “checks” for completion, nothing more
Factors completion into class participation grade (10-15% of course grade)
Uses prompts as starting point for class discussion

Sample Exercise: Comparing Corporation Law in California vs. Delaware

*See appendix for complete assignment handout

	California	Delaware
1. How are the rules for fiduciary duty made?		
2. What is standard for a fiduciary to investigate a business decision?		
3. What is standard for duty of care?		
4. What are exculpation rules?		
5. What are rules for self-interested transactions of fiduciaries?		
6. CA or DE?		

In Donna's words: When I called on students for the factual information, they were more willing to speak up because they had prepared it. Then, when we had a policy discussion about which approach better protects business people, investors, and other stakeholders, the students were more likely to venture an opinion because they felt confident that they knew the facts on which their answer was based. Students did complete the assignments and most did so thoughtfully. I got the sense they appreciated the variety of an in-class writing assignment. I could see by their furrowed brows that some students appreciated the chance to think before answering. The course had 31 students, but I could have used these just as well in a class of 80.

Read, think, groupwork, share: Professor Diogo Hildebrand (Marketing Strategy) uses this low-stakes, in-class activity to help students learn how to acknowledge alternative viewpoints and constructively communicate opposing viewpoints, while also practicing skills of listening and communicating effectively in a meeting. .

What do students do?

Complete assigned readings before class
During class, take private notes, discuss in groups, and present informally to class

How does Professor Hildebrand respond? (Enrollment: ~65)

Visits groups during groupwork to support productive, collaborative participation
Listens to presentations and highlights observations for whole-class learning
Incorporates credit into participation grade

Sample Exercise: Case Role-Play

Abridged. See Appendix for full activity description

In advance: Students read a business case study with at least two possible courses of action.

Step 1: Students choose or are assigned a course of action to support. They spend 5 minutes in class individually identifying the strongest justifications for this course of action.

Step 2: In small groups, students share their ideas and listen actively to achieve consensus on their strongest justification to present to class.

Step 3: Groups present, and a few groups are also asked to share on the group's process of achieving consensus.

In Diogo's words: In low-stakes assignments, I am typically not concerned with grading. To increase student engagement, I might incorporate the low-stakes assignment into a high-stakes assignment. I also try to build the activity such that the student receives feedback from at least another student. [...] Students typically welcome the opportunity to do something besides just listen to the teacher. The issue is getting them to do the preparatory work. This is why this works best if incorporated as part of a higher-stakes assignment. This convergence of goals ensures that most of the class actually does some of the work at least.

Informal reflection journals: Professor Brian Haggerty (Fundamentals of Ecology) uses regular informal journal assignments to promote metacognition on content learning.

What do students do?

Complete informal journal entries periodically through the semester in response to engaging prompts

How does Professor Haggerty respond? (Enrollment: ~90 / ~180 across 2 sections)

Simple check for completion, plus quick individual feedback using a response bank
Personalized feedback for exceptional efforts
Discuss trends with the whole class

Sample Journal Assignment: Learning Goals

Abridged. See Appendix for full activity description

Following the professor's own self-introduction to the class, students write informally to reflect on their goals for the semester: What topics or issues related to environmental sciences would you like to learn about and why? Students are also invited to share anything that's on their mind heading into the semester.

In Brian's words: Low-stakes activities don't have to take much time, but the more authentic reflection they put into it the stronger their personal and intellectual outcomes will be. In an average lower-stakes activity, roughly 15% of students do the bare minimum, 50% do a really good job that shows genuine reflection, 35% do exceptional work showing deeper cognitive and emotional evaluation.

When I first started doing lower-stakes assignments like this I had to figure out when/how to deploy them against the higher-stakes quizzes and projects. A few semesters ago, student reviews showed overwhelm with volume of activities. Last semester they praised the pacing and complementary activities. It can just take time to test out optimal pacing.

In-class low-stakes writing: Professor Jared Peifer (Management and Society) uses a variety of low-stakes writing activities to provide opportunities to reflect deeply about course content, and to practice communicating persuasively by linking claims to supporting evidence.

What do students do?

Perform brief in-class writing frequently over the course of the semester in response to regularly recurring prompts

How does Professor Peifer respond? (Enrollment: ~45 / ~90 across 2 sections)

Collects writing
Assigns simple grade (e.g. 1 point for completion / the day's attendance credit)
Skims through to understand what landed from the lecture
Addresses recurring questions in next class
For some in-class writing, minimal feedback is provided

Two sample prompts, each repeated frequently over the semester

Keeper and Question (*Description from Jared's syllabus)

You need to write about one "aha" moment you had from the class; something you want to "keep." It should be about the content of the lecture and can be just one sentence. For instance, you might write, "I never realized that globalization requires me to apply my moral compass to people all around the world; people I will never meet." You will also need to write a question you had about the lecture content. This will help me determine if I need to follow up and make something more clear. You might write something like, "What is the difference between a multi-national corporation (MNC) and transnational corporation (TNC)?"

Reaction Notes (*Description from Jared's syllabus)

After each persuasive presentation, students will have about 10 minutes during the virtual session to type their reactions. To be clear, those who give the persuasive presentation are also required to write a reaction note. Reaction Notes are "low stakes" writing, and meant to encourage students to type out their thoughts right away. Reaction Notes will be graded. You will not be graded on grammar or spelling or paragraph structure because it is understood that 10 minutes is not enough time to finesse these details

In Jared's words: The Reaction Notes are a routine exercise so the students can practice identifying claims and evidence. Like going to the gym every week. By the end of the semester, most students have figured it out, but not all of them. I give them individual feedback like "this is not strong supporting evidence of the claim you identified. Read the section on claims and evidence in the syllabus again." I give .5 points for a Reaction Note response that indicates the student doesn't know what strong supporting evidence looks like. I'm not even really trying to process whether the student accurately writes about what the presenter said, and just focusing on the written answer.

Mini-presentations of case analysis: Several faculty teaching Business Policy assign condensed individual mini-presentations to help students prepare for the higher-stakes group presentation.

What do students do?

Prepare and record themselves presenting a 2-3 minute presentation on an assigned case

How does the instructors respond? (Enrollment: ~28 - 45)

Watch videos across semester (students choose from multiple cases)
Assign grades using a simple rubric, sometimes include brief comments
Discuss class trends to help students prepare for higher-stakes final presentation

Mini presentation assignment prompt

Choose either the 3rd or 4th case covered this semester. Assume the role of an external consultant hired by the firm's corporate leadership and deliver a short (2- 3 minutes) presentation identifying a strategic issue faced by the firm and a recommendation to address the strategic issue. Specifically, your mini presentation must:

- Address your audience (in relation to their rhetorical context, e.g. C-Suite, Board of Directors)
- Identify the strategic issue faced by the firm
- Provide at least one piece of concrete evidence to show that this is a strategic issue
- Identify a specific recommendation
- Support that recommendation with one piece of evidence to show that it would help resolve the strategic issue
- Post your video on VOCAT the night before the case is being covered in class.