**Writing to Learn & Learning to Write**

**High-Stakes Writing**: writing to demonstrate learning; transactional writing which is meant to accomplish something (to inform, to persuade, to describe…). Examples include research papers and essays on tests.  This kind of writing is important because, as Elbow (1994) explains, “… if we don’t ask students to demonstrate their learning in essays and essay examines, we are likely to grade unfairly because of being misled about how much they have learned in our course” (p. 1).

**Low-Stakes Writing**:  writing to learn, discover, and shape meaning; expressive rather than transactional; short, sometimes impromptu, informal writing assignments that help students think through key concepts and ideas for the course while also practicing some features of discourse for a specific discourse community.

**Benefits of Low-Stakes Writing**

Students:

* encourages active learning – students learn key concepts and understand material more fully
* improves writing on high-stakes assignments
* improves communication overall.

 Instructors:

* stimulates class discussions
* promotes the idea of writing as a process rather than product
* prevents plagiarism
* serves as a useful tool for formative assessment (evaluate thinking and learning before high-stakes assessment)
* improves effectiveness of teaching.

**Writing to Learn Activities**

Writing to learn activities can be assigned as part of homework or lab work and/or implemented at several points during one class:

* the beginning to bring students to the context of your course and recall readings, homework, lab work, or previous lectures;
* during class to reflect on concepts and ideas, change the pace of the lecture or discussion, stimulate conversation when it slows; and
* the end to help students identify what they have learned or are confused about, promote comprehension of the ideas discussed that day, and provide the instructor with an idea of what was understood by the class and what was not.

Writers need to understand the **topic, purpose, and audience** for writing assignments in order to be prepared to respond effectively.  Consider, discuss, and have fun with RAFT (Role, Audience, Format, and Topic) when creating writing assignments.

Keep **your workload** reasonable while also providing regular feedback to students by using some combination of these methods:

* check off that students completed the task as a participation grade
* grade for one specific idea on + or – basis
* read and respond with one positive comment
* read and offer one suggestion
* grade selected or random writings
* ask students to select their best or most provocative piece
* have students to hand in writings that contain questions about course material
* pick up writing from 5 to 10 students each class or every other class
* collect two pieces of student writing at once and respond to both at once (allows comparisons like, “This piece is stronger than that one because…”)
* walk around while students are writing and discuss with 3 or 4 students the ideas being explored in their writing
* use different color pens or markings to note points in specific entries (underlined means strong idea, squiggly line means weak idea, X means incorrect idea)
* have students submit one collaborative piece of writing.

You do not have to explain why something is poorly written, suggest how to “fix” writing, or use grammar terms, but if a passage is unclear or confusing, say so.  Try to keep your response consistent with your goals for the assignment (task, purpose, audience) while responding as an **interested, intelligent reader.**

Students can engage in **self-assessment**, but response and evaluation criteria need to be discussed and established ahead of time and students should be guided through their first evaluations.   Peers can also serve as an audience in class or at home, orally or in writing, as a class or in small groups/pairs with multiple methods of **peer response**:

* read writing out loud either allowing response from peers or not
* conduct a gallery walk or writing swap where students read and respond to one specific aspect of each person’s piece in writing
* read and respond to another student’s writing in pairs.

Students are most valuable to each other when they respond as audience rather than evaluators or advice-givers.  Encourage them to respond as readers who reply with reactions and thoughts about topics and ideas.  Peer response, like self-assessment, requires guidance and practice.

**Attitude Is a Powerful Tool**

If you ignore writing as a way of learning and knowing, your students will also.  Let students know that you use and value writing by

* telling them how you handle writing tasks and obstacles
* writing with them and sharing your pieces also
* focusing on communication rather than correctness
* expressing your belief in writing as thinking rather than as a commodity.

**Hierarchy of Writing Concerns**

****

**Rhetorical task concerns**

* Does the writer understand the task?
* Does the Writer understand her audience?
* Does the writer understand her purpose?

**Global concerns**

* Are the ideas conveyed substantial? Meaningful? Engaging?
* Is the writing structured purposefully? Effectively?
* Does the writing develop in meaning, complexity, etc.?
* Has the writer chosen a tone and style appropriate for the task?

**Paragraph-level concerns**

* Does each paragraph develop a relatively unified idea?
* Is the content of each paragraph arranged logically?
* Are the ideas in the paragraph developed clearly?
* Does the author use appropriate evidence to support the main ideas of the paragraph?
* Does each paragraph connect logically, via transitions, to adjacent paragraphs?

 **Sentence-level concerns**

* Are sentences clear in meaning?
* Do sentences vary in length and type?
* Do sentences transition smoothly?
* Are sentences concise?
* Are sentences complete, avoiding unintended run-ons and fragments?

**Word-level concerns**

* Is diction precise, accurate, and appropriate to audience and purpose?
* Is verb tense consistent?
* Do subjects agree with verbs? Nouns with pronouns?
* Are words spelled correctly?

**Publication-level concerns**

* Is the heading formatted correctly?
* Are page numbers formatted correctly?
* Is spacing correct/appropriate?
* Is the document designed attractively, appropriately?
* Are citations accurate? Handled according to designated style?

Feedback Memo

All writers "luck up" once in a while, do a little something special in their writing that's unexpected or that has unexpected results with readers. But for the most part, writers work hard at drafting and revision, and each change seems part of a slow and arduous process of figuring out where to go, what to do, what to say. "Good" writers can also, then, talk about what they've done, taking responsibility for the choices they have made, articulating the reasons for those choices, recognizing the effects those choices may have on certain readers.

For the Feedback Memo, I want you to demonstrate your abilities as that second type of writer. If we spend time reading and responding to each other’s texts, then we should be able to talk about what the feedback was, what of it we used, what of it we didn’t use, and why. To that end, please draft a memo to me, as teacher-evaluator, to help me see your particular processes and what vision you have for this text (that I might have a context in which to read). Below is a template you can use for your memo:

|  |
| --- |
| Student NameCourse # & SectionTeacher NameDateFeedback Memo**Paragraph #1**: Purpose/Audience/Publication. Explain in one sentence what the purpose of your project is: are you trying to argue something? persuade a reader about something? tell a story to illustrate a point about the world? explore pertinent issues? etc . . . Then, tell me who your primary audience is (those you most want to write to) and why you chose them. Be sure to include what sort of publication site your piece would be appropriate for (or toward which you're working even if you're not really ready yet for that space).**Paragraph #2**: Detail the feedback you received on this project. At what points in your writing process did you get feedback? Who gave you this feedback? What steps did you take to understand and consider the feedback you received? What topics did you reject in favor of this one? How did your topic evolve from what you knew at first to what you know now? (Other comment relevant to topic evolution)**Paragraph #3**: Describe the specific suggestions you integrated into your revisions of this project. What revision suggestions did you get? From whom? Which did you choose to use? Why? Which did you reject? Why? Where in the project did you make these changes? What effects do these choices have on your project/your readers? Why? |

You should be able to produce this memo in one single-spaced page. If you can't say it in one page, cut cut cut. Sometimes, to write reflective/analytical pieces like these, we start by rambling, trying to figure out what we have to say.

**Creating a Feedback Plan**

When we respond to student writing, each factor of the response construct affects the others. Melzer’s heuristic helps think through these factors and their implications to help instructors create more sophisticated response plans that invite students to play a more central role in learning and assessment. This flexible planning tool is informed by the results of his national study of response to college writing along with a review of fifty years of empirical research on teacher and peer response along with student self-assessment. How could you use this tool in your writing-intensive course?

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Question** | **Options** | **Notes** |
| Who will give feedback at various times throughout the project? Why? | Self Peers Tutors Teachers Wider audiences  |  |
| What should the feedback focus on? Why? | Metacognition Transfer Growth Processes Products  |  |
| When will they give feedback? Why? | On initial ideasOn intermediate draftsOn final draft |  |
| What kind of feedback will they give? Why? | ContentOrganization StyleGrammar |  |
| **Question** | **Options** | **Notes** |
| What contexts should responders consider?  | Student Responder Course Assignment genre Discourse community Institution Sociocultural context  |  |
| What will be the goal of the feedback? Why? | To promote revisionTo evaluate |  |
| How will they give feedback? Why? | An endnoteMargin comments correctionsA matrix or rubric Oral or audio feedbackOnline comments |  |
| Where will they give feedback? Why? | In class At homeOnline |  |
| What modalities should responders use?  | Face to face Print  Electronic Audio Video  |  |

D. Melzer (2023) *Reconstructing Response to Student Writing: A National Study from Across the Curriculum*

**Response Statement**

It is important to communicate with students about the feedback you provide. Craft a one paragraph “response statement” to share with your students at the beginning of the semester and before sharing your feedback with students. Use the questions and space below to brainstorm.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Question** | **Response** |
| Why do you respond? |  |
| How do you expect students to use your feedback? Why?  |  |
| What is your philosophy or approach to responding to student writing? How does your approach to response fit into your overall philosophy of teaching writing? What informs this philosophy?  |  |
| What have been your more/less successful or effective response strategies?  |  |

Response Statement: Sentence Starters

* I would like you (students) to understand that my feedback
* I intend for my comments to be...
* I approach each text [not] as...
* I would like for you (students) to accept responsibility for...
* My role in your use of this feedback in revision is [not]...