**Low-Stakes Writing Activities for the Quantitative Classroom**

Patrick Bahls, UNC Asheville

pbahls@unca.edu

Why use low-stakes writing in quantitative courses?

1. **Such writing is useful.**

* It can help students brainstorm ideas before discussions or before more involved writing projects.
* It can help students organize ideas, analyze them, and synthesize them.
* It can help students come up with and reflect on new arguments and evidence in support of (or in opposition to) their ideas.

1. **Such writing is fast.**

* Many low-stakes writing activities take mere minutes to perform.
* Many such activities require little or no response from you as an instructor.
* Many such activities fit naturally into even the most crowded of courses (without detracting or distracting from disciplinary content).

1. **Such writing is fun.**

* Many low-stakes writing activities can be made playful or whimsical.
* There is a game-like quality to some of these activities which can egg students on.
* The constraint provided by some activities can be joyfully liberating.

What are some easily-adaptable low-stakes writing activities?

1. *Object-ive writing*. Select a material object, or an image depicting such an object, and write about the object for a fixed amount of time. (You can write for as little as five minutes, or as long as a half-hour or more.) Write about the object, describing its nature, reflecting on your relationship to it, and uncovering connections between it and its surroundings. Well-chosen objects challenge students to think deeply about concepts closely related to a particular course.

This exercise helps to develop a greater understanding both of the object written about and of you as the writer. Should we believe the poet William Carlos Williams’s dictum “no ideas but in things!,” then we must believe we can chart our way in the world through the objects we bring with us on the way.

1. *Focused freewriting and its variations.* Write without stopping for a fixed amount of time on a prompt or topic (set a timer for this). Pay no attention to grammar or spelling or punctuation, and if you get stuck simply write “I’m stuck stuck stuck,” or some other such nonsense over and over. The goal is to turn off your “internal editor” and let your ideas flow freely.

If you would like, loop your freewriting: after you’ve finished, select a word or phrase you’ve written which strikes you in some way and perform another freewrite on that word or phrase. Repeat as desired!

1. *Doubting and Believing.* This exercise helps you examine all sides of an issue without (or with less) prejudice and bias. Given a particular topic or reading, write about it first as a stalwart “doubter,” questioning every claim and assertion. Demand proof or evidence. This activity will help you spot weaknesses in an author’s claims or soft spots in your own propositions.

Next, write about it as an unswerving “believer,” buying into every claim without concern for evidence or argument. Taking this position will help you follow up on consequences of the author’s claims or of your own proposition by letting you focus on the “ah! but then we know that…” aspects of the claims.

Together the “doubting” and “believing” pieces will give the student a tremendous amount of useful data on which she can pen a more involved piece of writing.

1. *Poetry.* Write in poetical form. Use your some aspect of your subject as a constraint on the structure, the content, or the theme of your poem:

* Write a poem about DNA whose shape suggested a double helix.
* Write a poem about geometry whose syllabic structure has something to do with pi.
* Write a limerick or haiku about Newton’s First Law of Motion.

1. *Dialogues.* Write a dialogue between two individuals, one of whom is coaching the other through some tricky aspect of the course material. The “coach” must be knowledgeable, but must convey that knowledge to her friend in clear and conversational (not technical!) language. The “trainee” must use his half of the dialogue to help uncover difficulties and sticking points in the content being addressed.
2. *Intrigue, Confusion, and Confidence.* In order to generate ideas for discussion or more formal writing, ask students to respond to a topic with three sentences:

* The first indicates something the student found intriguing.
* The second indicates something the student found confusing.
* The third indicates something about which the student feels he can speak confidently.

1. *Microgenres (tweets, texts, Facebook status updates).*  The extreme brevity of these genres forces students to choose their words (and sometimes even characters) with care and precision. This helps them to get to the heart of a matter, enabling them to develop clear and cogent theses, hypotheses, or arguments. Internet memes even provide an opportunity to engage both textual and visual elements to compose a piece (a wryly humorous one, perhaps) with relevant disciplinary content.

* Write a Twitter tweet (140 characters at most) explaining the Krebs cycle.
* Write a text (160 characters at most) to a friend who missed an economics class on the qualitative interpretation of a price curve.
* Compose an internet meme related to the second part of the Fundamental Theorem of Calculus

**Resources**

Bahls, P. (2012). *Student writing in the quantitative disciplines: A guide for college faculty.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bean, J. (2012). *Engaging ideas: The professor’s guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom, Second edition.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Dunn, P.A. (2001). *Talking, Sketching, Moving: Multiple Literacies in the Teaching of Writing.* Upper Montclair, NJ: Boynton/Cook.

Elbow, P. (1973). *Writing without teachers.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Gottschalk, K., & Hjortshoj, K. (2004). *The elements of teaching writing: A resource for instructors in all disciplines.* Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s.

Peterson, A. (1996). *The writer’s workout book: 113 stretches toward better prose.* Berkeley, CA: Nation Writing Project.