

## Low-Stakes Writing Prompts You Can Use in Your Classroom Today

Here is a list of low-stakes writing prompts from University Park Campus School teachers that you can adapt to fit your needs.

### Across-the-Board Low-Stakes Writing Prompts

- **What do you notice?** "Whether it's a poem or a mathematical or science phenomenon, your students can't answer wrong," says Principal Dan St. Louis. "You can say, 'What do you notice? What does that make you think of? Why do you think you noticed that? What stood out to you about that?'"
- **What's one thing that you know and one question that you have?**
- **Write a "Dear Confused Student/Absent Student" letter.** UPCS teachers give to their students this writing assignment after they have mastered certain content. Students write a letter to a hypothetical student who has missed class, is confused about the content, or who will take the class next year. This low-stakes writing exercise allows students to explain in detail what they know and how they know it in order to help the hypothetical student. They may describe common pitfalls, flawed thinking, or advice on how to approach the material or problem.
- **Translate this technical terminology into your own words.** UPCS seventh-grade science teacher James Kobialka has students create an interactive notebook. Instead of taking notes on what he says, they use this notebook to translate the science terminology and concepts they're learning into their own words through low-stakes writing assignments, activities, and discussions. One side of the notebook is for academic language, and the other side is for their own words.
- **Come up with a list of questions on \_\_\_\_\_ (any topic).**
- **Predict what's going to happen.** When Kobialka taught his students about what happens to mass during a chemical reaction, before doing experiments and observations, he had them predict whether the mass would increase or decrease, and why.
- **Why or Why Not?** UPCS teachers give their students a prompt and the answer. Students talk about what makes it good or not good, and explain why. (For example, it includes or lacks specific vocabulary, charts, evidence of answering all parts of the prompt, or use of data in a meaningful way).
- **Have your students grade a sample piece of your work.** To help students understand the importance of following a rubric, to assess how they use rubrics, and to identify their gaps in understanding, six UPCS teachers will answer a biology prompt. All of them have varying levels of familiarity with the content, but only one of them is a biology teacher. Students will evaluate each of their responses first without a rubric, and then with a rubric.
- **Create exam journals.** An exam journal allows students to reflect on concepts that they got wrong on an exam or quiz, and gives them another opportunity to demonstrate full understanding. "First, they summarize what the question was asking and analyze where and why their errors occurred," explains UPCS tenth-grade math teacher Kyle Pahigian. After reviewing their peer and teacher resources, they write the correct answer, and demonstrate their understanding by explaining why that answer makes sense. The exam journal is graded separately from the original exam or quiz.

## English Language Arts Low-Stakes Writing Prompts

- **What would you do if \_\_\_\_\_ happened to you?** Ask this question before your students read about it happening to a character.
- **What's your favorite line, sentence, or word in this passage, and why?**
- **Create a general list of ways to respond to a piece of literature.** Give this list to your students at the beginning of the year. It can include things like:
  - Connect what you're reading to your life, the world, or another piece of literature.
  - What is the tone of a certain paragraph?
  - Rewrite the end of a book or piece of literature.
  - Write a letter to a character giving them advice about something.
  - Character sketch: Write an "I am" poem about a character.
  - Track a character's change from the beginning of the novel to the end. What plot developments compel this change?
  - Author's intention: What was said? Choose a passage, and summarize it. Why was it said? What purpose does it serve in the text as a whole? How does the author want it to affect the reader?

## History Low-Stakes Writing Prompts

- **What's the most surprising piece of the story for you?**
- **Use political cartoons.** Ask what the cartoonist is trying to say about this time in history? Model this first by responding to a different political cartoon.
- **Examine images and symbols.** What do you think a particular image or symbol represents? Whose perspective is missing? What might that group say about it?
- **Textbook or primary source?** Compare and contrast a textbook version and a primary source version of an event.
- **Dig into a primary source.** Pick a line from a primary source and ask a question, and then write your response to that question.

## Science Low-Stakes Writing Prompts

- **Assess vocabulary understanding.** Categorize vocabulary into three buckets: I get it, I sort of get it, and I have no idea.
- **How would a scientist describe \_\_\_\_\_?**
- **Seek connections.** Show several pictures or videos that don't necessarily appear to be connected. Have your students describe what they see and how they might be connected to each other.
- **Uncover common misconceptions.** Jody Bird, a University Park science teacher, uses the following low-stakes writing prompt for the example above: "You've got a sore throat. Your Mom suggests that you should gargle with salt water. You take her advice and feel better. Why might this work?" Give your students the same prompt three to four times throughout the unit, suggests Bird. As they gain content knowledge, they will add to or change their responses each time they work on the prompt. "These types of prompts help to uncover misconceptions, and also show students their growth and knowledge

acquisition,” she explains. (By the way, gargling with salt water to soothe a sore throat has to do with osmosis rather than germs.)

- **Make predictions.** Before reading out of a textbook, have your students look at headings and make predictions about what the text will tell them. Also, have them ask questions that they think the text may be able to answer.
- **Come up with a way to show \_\_\_\_\_ with a movement.** If students are hesitant to write (for example, about a star exploding and coalescing), having them first use their bodies to describe a concept may make it easier for them to articulate their ideas in writing. You can ask them to explain why they used their bodies in a particular way to demonstrate a scientific idea.

### Math Low-Stakes Writing Prompts

- **Show examples before teaching definitions.** Show your students examples and nonexamples of something that they haven't seen before, and have them describe what makes an example and what makes a nonexample. If you're teaching about polygons, before giving your students the definition, you can draw on the board or give them handouts with two columns labeled "Polygon" and "Not a Polygon." Draw various shapes in the appropriate columns. "Rather than looking up definitions or being told what the term means," explains Pahigian, "the kids look at the two columns of examples and nonexamples and describe what it takes to be one vs. the other. They come up with their own definitions through this low-stakes writing assignment, share with their groups, and then share with the class so we can condense it into a nice, solid definition."
- **Sort by characteristics.** Have your students sort shapes based on their characteristics and describe what they notice. Pahigian suggests having your students sort triangles into groups based on how they look. "The kids end up sorting them into groups with the same shape and different sizes" she says. "Then they describe what each group has in common -- matching up congruent angles and determining ratios of side lengths -- to develop a definition of similar triangles based upon what they've noticed."
- **Students share their skills.** Have your students explain something to the class that they know how to do and that everyone can access. Have this lead into specific skills that you want your students to develop.
- **Recognize patterns.** List patterns on the board, and ask how students would recognize a certain concept. Pahigian suggests showing them a list of numbers from real-world data or something they've built, such as the number of blocks it takes to make a design in figure one, two, three, and so forth. Have them identify patterns in the numbers and connect those patterns to what they see in the design. "Which parts of the design are always constant? Which parts change based on the figure number? They tie these concepts into finding rules, such as linear, quadratic, cubic, and exponential equations."
- **Apply word problems to abstract math.** Word problems can make abstract math concepts more concrete. Pahigian uses the following word problem to help her students translate expressions like "4 less than x" from words into algebra:

Miss Pahigian's age is 22 years less than Jon Bon Jovi's.

1. Who is older?
2. If you start at Jon Bon Jovi's age, how do you get to Miss Pahigian's age? Explain in words.
3. Write your answer to number two using algebra. (Let  $j$  = Jon's age and  $p$  = Miss P's age.)

4. Who is younger?

5. If you start at Miss P's age, how do you get to Jon's age? Explain in words.

6. Write your answer to number five using algebra.

Extension: Using the situation above as a model, create your own example, and show me; then, trade with a partner and solve!

- **Introduce new math concepts with word problems.** Use word problems to introduce new math concepts before bringing up the term. Pahigian combines the following low-stakes writing assignment (adapted from the textbook, *Discovering Geometry*) with group work to help her students understand the **segment addition postulate** before introducing the term to them.

Midway through a 2000-meter race, a photo was taken showing the positions of all five runners. The picture shows Antonio 20 meters behind Desuray. Desuray is 50 meters ahead of Stefano, who is 20 meters behind Cathy. Cathy is 40 meters behind Nelson. At this point in the race, who is ahead? Who is in second? Third? Fourth? Fifth?

1. On your own, come up with the positions of all five people.

2. Jot down (in complete sentences) how you found where each runner was.

3. Then, share with your group how you did it. If your results are different from your partners', explain why.

4. Did your partners accept your reasoning? If so, what convinced them?

"The phrase *segment addition postulate* is added on as a side note at the *end* of the activity," explains Pahigian. "It is not a daunting, unfamiliar phrase because the kids have already used their own knowledge to describe and work with it before knowing what it was."