Low-Stakes Writing

Below are some ideas for informal, exploratory writing assignments and activities you can incorporate into your course without adding to your grading load.

Response Papers
Require students to write a one- or two-page response to an assigned reading, either an analysis or a summary. They can read from these responses to stimulate class discussion.

Reading Logs
Have students keep a log in which they write informally about assigned readings. They might summarize the text, argue with it, evaluate it, or connect it to personal experience.

Questions
Ask students to brainstorm a list of questions they have about a text or a topic. They might do this individually or in groups, and the questions can serve as starting points for a class discussion, or as a way to brainstorm topics to explore in a future essay or paper.

Online Discussions
Have students post a designated number of comments — interpretations, reactions, close readings, or even answers to specific questions — and require them to respond to a given number of their classmates' postings. These can be posted on a blog, Google group or Blackboard, or printed out and handed in.

Double-column Writing Exercise
The student divides a sheet of paper in half, vertically. On one side, the student summarizes the content of a painting or article, and on the second side, he or she thinks critically about the work's context, influences, etc. This reinforces the double role of the scholar: understanding works that are difficult in themselves, and also contextualizing them.

Freewriting
Ask students to summarize and respond to the day's lecture by writing for 10 minutes at the end of class. Or, spark class discussion by asking them to free-write at the beginning of class about the reading they prepared for the day. They might respond to a prompt you provide, brainstorm a set of questions themselves, or simply write a list of words that come into their mind.
**Inkshedding**

Have students free-write or respond to a prompt. When they've written for a few minutes and come to a pause in their thinking, they exchange papers, and respond to a classmate's writing on the same page. This exercise is a way to provide students with an immediate sense of a reading audience, and to allow everyone in the room to engage in a conversation on the page.

**Drawing / Mapping**

Ask students to approach the reading differently by diagramming the structure of a story or essay you have read (does it look like a traditional narrative arc?). Or, ask them to draw a poem you've read: Is it more like a realistic portrait or an abstract piece?

**Point of View**

Provide students with an excerpt from our reading and ask them to re-write it from another point of view. This might get them thinking about audience, style and word choice. Or, ask them to write a diary entry from the perspective of a particular character.

**Stage a Debate or an Interview**

Have students write a dialogue between two different authors you've read. This is a great way to encourage them to put different texts into conversation. Or, ask them to write an imaginary interview with an author. What questions would they ask these writers if they could meet them face-to-face?

**Explanation Letters**

Have students write an informal letter in which they explain a difficult concept or reading to a casual audience, such as a younger sibling or a friend.