



# Evaluating and Grading Student Work **1**

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We know that grades often cause anxiety for students. Receiving grades can be an emotional experience. While some students view it as a limited assessment of their work on one item, others take grades to heart and see them as reflections on their personal worth and success.

As difficult as grades can be for students, the grading process is also hard for teachers – particularly new ones. If you are grading for a professor, you wonder how to do so fairly and efficiently. If you are creating a course, you worry about how much to weigh different projects, assignments and exams.

However, if you are able to keep some basic principles in mind, grading can be an experience that enhances student learning. This module will address some important elements in the process of evaluating and grading students. Among the main points are:

- Evaluating student work is about more than simply assigning grades – comments that explain your assessment, and a willingness to have conversations about ideas, are important.
- You must be clear up front about your grading standards – explaining what level of performance is necessary for an “A,” for example.
- The goal of evaluating student work is to encourage students to continue learning, not to provide harsh feedback that decreases their intrinsic motivation.

## General Principles

We will consider selected elements of effective grading below. However, first it may be useful to present some important basic ideas in assessing student work:

Your grading standards should reflect course goals. If your course is designed to emphasize analysis and integration of ideas, then your assignments should reflect this. In addition, your criteria for grades should also be built around the degree to which students analyze and integrate ideas.

Your grading standards should be clearly stated. You should articulate, early in the course, how students will need to perform to earn an “A”: for example, how technically proficient must the writing be. You should also let students know the criteria for each assignment.

Give students a chance to learn your standards early. Do not wait until the mid-term to let students discover you have high standards. Assign a short paper or homework in the first two or three weeks of the term. Some professors like to grade these rigorously and give students a chance to re-write one assignment, reasoning that students will learn the course standards and perform accordingly for the remainder of the semester.

Grade only on academic performance. It is important that you grade a student’s work on its merits, not on personality, or whether he or she talks in class or is constantly arriving late, for instance.

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Assignments and tests should be weighted relative to their value to course goals.

As a rule of thumb, final exams or projects should be less than or equal to one-third of the final grade (Davis, 1993). Generally speaking, it is a good idea to give students a variety of types of assignments (papers, tests, homework, etc.) to demonstrate their ability and knowledge. You should weigh each according to amount of effort and its relation to course goals.

Generally, it is not a good idea to grade on improvement. Scholars (Davis, 1993; McKeachie, 1999) generally recommend against grading a student based on his or her improvement over the term, arguing that this is a difficult thing to measure. They suggest that it is possible to reward students for improvement by increasing their grade by all or part of a letter grade at the end.

When possible, use numerical rather than letter grades. It is generally easier to convert numbers to letters than vice-versa. In addition, numbers do not have the same emotional value for many students as do letter grades.

### The Mechanics of Grading

As a teacher, it is important that the grades you give to student work are fair and consistent. It is also desirable, from a more selfish standpoint, to grade as efficiently as possible. These two intentions may come into conflict – grading quickly can mean that the grades you give are not always fair or consistent. While there is no quick fix for grading, there are some things you can do to maximize your efficiency while grading fairly and consistently.

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State your criteria explicitly. Particularly in studio classes or in evaluating writing exercises, it is important to outline what you will be looking at when you evaluate student work. Does neatness count? Is posture important? How essential is good organization?

Read several papers before you begin grading. This is helpful in gaining a sense of the overall quality of the papers. You can see whether you might be expecting too much of students, what the common problems are and so on. It is also helpful in determining “model” papers for each grade – papers that represent the performance level students much reach to earn a particular grade.

Consider “norming” papers before you grade. If you are grading in a group, have each member pick two or three papers at random for entire group to grade. Then, discuss each portfolio until you all agree on a grade. Having done this, you will have a sense of the criteria for each grade – which will help ensure consistency.

Consider grading papers anonymously. Have students turn in their work with a title or cover page with their name on it. Turn that page back on all of the assignments before you begin grading so that you will not know whose work you are evaluating.



Grade only three to five papers at a time. Our mood and our energy level inevitably affect the grades we give. To avoid boredom or getting tired, grade no more than three to five papers before taking a break. When you resume, look at the last paper to be sure you were fair and consistent as you read it.

When you have finished, “norm” all the papers yourself. If you grade papers alone, particularly over several days, it is helpful to group the papers according to grade when you are done. Do all of the papers in the same grade range (e.g. the 80s, or B-range) generally have the same level of quality? If not, now is the time to make adjustments.

For tests, problem sets and short answers, consider grading in teams. When assignments and tests have multiple problems to grade, you may save time and ensure consistency by getting together in a team and each taking two or three problems to grade on all tests. While this may be somewhat tedious, it does allow each grader to get a sense of common problems and grade more quickly by focusing one’s attention.

Do not “split” grades. Some teachers like to give two or more grades on papers and assignments. For instance, one for content, the other for organization. However, this can suggest to students that the two are not connected, when in fact they are.

As suggested early in this module, commenting on student work is an important part of the educational process; simply assigning a grade is not enough – your comments tell the student why you graded as you did and how he or she can improve in the future. There are several benefits to commenting on student papers:

- Comments justify and explain the grade you have chosen to give. Students may justifiably question you when you return a paper with a “C” and no comments. They are less likely to question the grade when you have provided many comments and explained the grade.
- Comments let you give students feedback for continued improvement. Students can see what it is they need to do better or differently in the future to reach the standards for the course.
- Finally, comments can motivate and encourage students. When properly written, comments on student work can inspire them to continue working and improving as learners.

Following are some suggested ways to comment on student work from a constructive and educational perspective:

Comments should be balanced. Constructive comments generally reflect a balance between three kinds of comments: what was done well, what was weak, and how the student can improve.

Avoid over-marking student work. While you should comment frequently on student work, you must also be careful not to over-criticize. Too many negative comments can overwhelm and demoralize students. You may want to read a paper or exam first to get an overall sense of its strengths and weaknesses, and then comment on the prominent problems.

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### *Commenting on Student Work*

Gauge the tone of your comments to promote learning. Rather than writing “no!” when a student makes a mistake or is unclear, consider more constructive comments. Sometimes it may be appropriate to raise a question (“Are you suggesting this is the only reason Kennedy won the election?”) or allude to other ideas (“How does what you are saying here relate to what we have learned about gender stratification?”). Doing this encourages students to reflect and gives them a sense of how to enhance their work.

Explain the grade. Use your comments to help students understand why you graded their work as you did. For example, you might say, “While this paper has elements of excellence, occasional lapses in analysis and careless spelling errors have kept me from giving it a B.”

Write a mix of marginal and final comments. Research suggests that students learn best from a mix of marginal comments that make specific points in the text and final comments that summarize your overall impression of the work and explain the grade.

Write legibly. No matter how insightful and well-presented your comments are, they will have no effect if students cannot read them. Take time to write your comments carefully and encourage students to approach you if they have any questions.

### **Returning Tests and Papers**

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Returning students’ work does not have to be simply an administrative task that takes up valuable class time – it can in fact be a worthwhile learning experience. It provides you with a chance to give the entire class feedback that will help them see and explore relationships, applications and implications of the knowledge they have been studying.

Ask students what they thought of the test or assignment. You can begin by asking students to describe what they thought the most difficult areas of the assignment were and why. This gives you a sense of where they struggled and may need extra help.

Give students a sense of the class’s overall performance. Students typically like to know how they did in relation to their peers. Once you have graded all the work, see how the grades are distributed. Show students this distribution and talk in general terms about where the class seemed to do well and where it struggled.

Review those areas of the assignment where students struggled. If, while you grade, you keep track of those problems or ideas with which students most commonly struggled, you can take time when you return work to review some important concepts and provide the foundation for future learning.



## Handling Student Complaints

Invariably, no matter how careful and consistent you are, one or more students will raise a question about the grade they have received. Most students will simply want an explanation as to why they received the grade – a clearer sense of what your standards are. They certainly deserve this.

Setting out your criteria for grades early and making comments on each assignment will help cut down on the questions you receive. However, what should you do when a student approaches you and asks to talk about his or her grade?

Keep records of student performance. It is helpful to keep your own notes on the work of each student. This will help you in tracking his or her overall performance and will allow you to be prepared should any questions arise. You should hold on to this information for several years in case there are questions even after the course is over.

Be prepared. If a student approaches you with a question, it is preferable to set up a meeting and then arrive at the meeting ready to explain your decision. Come with any notes you have on the student's work, with an example of a model assignment or test, and with an explanation for how the student's work did not meet that standard. Some instructors like to ask the student to submit a paragraph explaining their question and why they think the grade should be changed.

Listen to the student. When a student wants to talk about the grade, your first task is to listen to their thoughts. Students want to be heard, and you can go a long way to diffusing a potentially tense situation by listening to their concerns before making any decisions. It is also important to keep an open mind about the matter. We all make mistakes and a student may have legitimate concerns.

Respond to the student. Once you have listened, it is time to respond to the student. You may show how he or she did not meet the standards. In that case, it is helpful to turn the discussion to what they might do in the future, pointing to specific examples in their work that can be improved for later success. If you think you may want to change the grade, it is acceptable to tell the student you would like to think about it, or that you need to consult with your supervisor, but tell them when you will get back to them. Students will respect your honesty and your willingness to think about it.

### Sources

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