

# Tips for faculty to reduce grading stress at the end of a semester

## WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

This resource provides tips and considerations for instructors to reduce grading workload, improve efficiency, and attend to their own wellbeing, particularly at the end of a semester, by revising course design, assignments, or teaching practices.

## HOW DO I USE IT?

Review the considerations below when planning courses or assignments or when preparing to grade or evaluate student work. The practices and tools noted below are hyperlinked to CET resources that provide step by step explanations in more detail. You can select the strategies that are appropriate for your course, discipline, student population, or teaching modality. [CET](https://cet.usc.edu/contact-us/) is available for individual or group consultations to support you in identifying options that both meet your learning goals for students, and help you maintain a manageable workload.

### Considerations for designing assignments:

* Consider asking a colleague or scheduling a consultation with CET to review [assignment descriptions](https://cet.usc.edu/teaching-resources/assignment-description-template/) and give feedback on whether instructions and expectations are being clearly communicated to students. Improved clarity can reduce the likelihood of student questions about the assignment.
  + *Consider adding a description of what kind of collaboration is permitted so that students will feel more empowered to seek support from peers as they study or prepare for an assessment.*
* If you are able to adjust due dates, consider collecting or assessing large or summative assignments in the weeks prior to the end of the semester.
  + *To help maintain student motivation in the concluding weeks, consider including a follow-up reflection, presentation or group assignment that is lower-stakes and/or requires less faculty time to grade.*
* To support effective student preparation on large, complex, or higher-stakes assignments, consider [scaffolding](https://cet.usc.edu/teaching-resources/instructional-scaffolding/) the work over the course of the semester.
  + *Break down the assignment into smaller parts that can be assessed over time.*
  + *Consider assigning parts of an assignment as group or pair work to reduce the number of submissions that need to receive feedback from an instructor.*
  + *Allow for one or more drafts where students have a chance to receive feedback from the instructor, TAs or peers before the final submission.*
* In disciplines where facts are accessed through reference material rather than memory, fact recall skills may be unnecessary. Higher order skills like synthesizing or analyzing facts may be more important. In such cases, consider eliminating time spent on grading fact recall by allowing students to use notes or reference material to identify facts covered in an assessment. Focus grading time on evaluating students’ ability to analyze or synthesize information.
  + *Provide students with a scenario they must analyze.*
  + *Provide reference material with the relevant facts needed for their analysis.*
  + *Identify the skills, concepts, or processes learned in class that they must use in their analysis.*
* Reflect on aspects of an assignment that contribute to grading workload, i.e. length, complexity, content outside of instructor expertise, and evaluate if those can be adjusted to better align with:
  + *course learning objectives,*
  + *relevant discipline or professional expectations,*
  + *realistic expectations for student skill level.*

### Considerations to make grading more efficient:

* [**Rubrics**](https://cet.usc.edu/resource-search-results/?frm_search=rubric) are tools that can clarify assignment expectations for students, simplify grading, and make assessment more equitable. There are a number of different rubric styles to suit a variety of assessment types.
  + Create rubrics for lower stakes assignments throughout the semester so that students are familiar with how these tools are used in your course.
  + Co-creating rubrics with students can help make students feel included and invested in the assessment process. These practices make high-quality final student submissions more likely and this work can be easier to assess as it will more closely align with instructor expectations.
    - *After self- or peer-assessment with the rubric, students can provide a rationale for their grade.*
  + Consider using the Learning Management System’s (LMS) integrated rubric function to reduce the need for instructor-generated feedback and to automate the tallying of grades. Contact your LMS support team to find out more about available assessment tools.
  + Sharing rubrics with students prior to the assignment submission or along with the assignment description can minimize student questions about grading criteria.
* Providing [**feedback**](https://cet.usc.edu/teaching-resources/effective-instructor-feedback/)in combination with or in lieu of numerical grades for all or part of earlier drafts of assignments can be motivating for students. It offers students the opportunity to improve work before submission of final products, which can make the final product easier to grade. Consider strategies to streamline your feedback approach or tailor to student needs, such as:
  + Creating a document to serve as a feedback “bank” containing the comments you use most often. These comments can be quickly pasted into the desired feedback forum (the LMS, or as comments on student submissions), significantly cutting the time spent repeatedly writing the same feedback to different students.
  + Using alternate forms of feedback such as critiques, peer review, or recorded verbal feedback to be shared with students.
  + Requesting that students submit an “exam wrapper”, that is, a short reflection or request for feedback on specific aspects of their work, to accompany submission of an assignment. This can help focus an instructor’s feedback, simplify grading and address individual student needs more efficiently.
    - For example: *“When you submit your recording, attach a document listing at least two aspects of the performance you feel were most successful and at least two aspects that you feel still need improvement. I will comment on those specific aspects of your assignment, as well as provide general feedback. You can refer to the assignment description and learning objectives for this unit for guidance.”*
  + Providing group or whole-class feedback on all or part of an assignment can help address common issues while freeing up time for instructors to provide more individualized feedback.
    - For example: *“The three most common areas in need of attention in the presentations were…” or “While I was impressed with the quality of writing in these drafts, I would like everyone to review the citation guidelines in our syllabus before you submit final drafts next week.”*
  + Because rubrics can help streamline the grading process, their use can free up time to provide feedback on specific aspects of an individual student’s work that stand out or require special attention.

### Considerations for course design and teaching practices:

* Consider reviewing the alignment of your planned assessments with course learning goals to determine if some assignments or parts of assignments are redundant and could be shortened or eliminated.
  + *Diversification of the types of assessments you use in your course can also reduce the potential for burnout for both students and instructors.*
* Ensure that grading criteria for your course and major assessments are clear and listed in the syllabus and review due dates for manageable spacing of tasks. This, as well as regular reminders, will help students set realistic goals to prepare for important assignments.
* If you work with co-instructors, TAs or graders, discuss assignments and division of labor for grading in advance. Consider conducting a “norming session” where co-instructors can align grading practices and expectations before grading submissions independently.
* Consider syllabus policies that allow students to drop the lowest grade on lower-stakes assignments, or the option to revise and resubmit an assignment.
* Proactively address student issues that could compound stress or difficulty at the end of the semester.
  + *For example, one might generate a form email to students who miss classes or important assessments with reminders about what support is available for your course or at USC, or individually encourage students to visit office hours.*
* Reflect on the relevance of existing assessments to the course, program, professional expectations and student interests to support motivation to engage meaningfully with demanding assignments.
  + *For example, if professionals in your discipline routinely write concise briefs or memos, longer research paper style assignments could be revised to reflect the skills students will use in the profession.*

### Considerations for instructor wellbeing:

* Review your personal and professional obligations in advance of large assessments and strive to set aside sufficient time in your calendar.
* Identify a feasible grading timeline and communicate it to students.
  + *For example: “Your research abstracts will be graded in the next 7 days”.*
* Identify practices that are sustainable and best suited to your work style, such as grading in short bursts, setting a timer, grading together with colleagues for support, or working on one question or portion of an assignment at a time.
* After completing grading, take time to reflect in the moment and make notes or revisions to the course design, assignment description, or implementation strategy that would make grading more efficient and enjoyable in the future.