

Effective Efficient Grading and Commenting

Notes gathered by Rich Slatta, Prof. of History; Director, First Year Inquiry Program

Version 2.0 9/16/2015

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Purposes of Grading

"Grading serves two main purposes for students: 1) their course performance is evaluated on their understanding of the content and in relation to the other students; and 2) they receive feedback on specific strengths and weaknesses in their knowledge and skills." (Iowa State U.)

Grading is a complex context-dependent process that serves multiple roles:

- **Evaluation.** The grading process should produce a valid, fair, and trustworthy judgment about the quality of each student's work.
- **Communication.** The grade itself is a communication to the student, as well as to employers, graduate schools, and others. The grading process also spurs communication between faculty and students, among faculty colleagues, and between institutions and their constituents.
- **Motivation.** Grading affects how students study, what they focus on, how much time they spend, and how involved they become in the course. Thus, it is a powerful part of the motivational structure of the course.
- **Organization.** A grade on a test or assignment helps to mark transitions, bring closure, and focus effort for both students and teachers.
- **Faculty and student reflection.** The grading process can yield rich information about what students are learning collectively and can serve as the first step in systematic assessment and information-driven teaching.

(Walboord and Anderson, *Effective Grading*, 2d ed. 2010, p. 2)

Learner-Centered Grading

To make evaluation more learner-centered, the purpose and processes involved need to change. In the realm of purpose, we need to better balance the two reasons why we grade student work. Teachers have the professional responsibility to certify the level at which students have mastered the material. And that purpose has come to dominate both faculty and student thinking about graded learning experiences. But students do work that teachers evaluate for a second reason: completing it promotes learning. The design of assignments influences what students learn, how well they learn it, and what skills are developed in the process, and these lead to the main point of this chapter. Activities and assignments can be designed to realize more of their potential to promote learning. Unfortunately, all too often it's the grades, not the learning experience, that matter most to students and teachers. Learner-centered teaching attempts to redress that imbalance with activities, assignments, and assessment strategies that include a stronger and more deliberate focus on learning.

As for the processes of evaluation, they need to involve students. That doesn't mean that teachers hand over grading responsibilities to students. In learner-centered classrooms, teachers are still in charge of grades. But students are involved in activities that develop their self- and peer-assessment skills. Leaving students out of the process lessens the chance that these important skills develop during college. Self- and peer-assessment skills develop best when they are taught: explicitly and students have the opportunity to practice them.

Source: M. Weimer, *Learner-Centered Teaching* (2d ed. 2013: 168-9).

The role and limits of grades

Grades are important, undeniably so. They function as gatekeepers in, through, and out of postsecondary institutions. The more selective the college or university, the higher the entrance GPA required. Many institutions now control enrollment in majors, and acceptance depends largely on GPA. At the end, college GPA plays a significant role in determining postsecondary educational opportunities, including whether students can attend graduate school, med school, law school, and other professional programs. Many employers use GPA to decide who does and doesn't get a job interview. Grades matter, and only naive faculty make proclamations to the contrary. But learning matters more, especially in the long run. How long has it been since someone asked about your GPA?

Without question, grades are important, but it's still difficult to justify the level of importance ascribed to them, and for several different reasons. They don't measure all kinds of learning equally well. They do accurately document whether a student knows a set of facts at a certain time, not whether the student can remember or apply those facts outside the classroom. They can measure critical thinking, problem solving, logical reasoning' and the ability to synthesize and evaluate. Unfortunately, the questions included on most tests don't measure these higher-order thinking skills. Rarely do grades give an indication of how well students can work together or how committed they are to high ethical standards, or whether they see the value of civic engagement.

Sound Grading

by Linda Nilson, *Teaching at its Best*

A sound grading scheme is accurate, consistent, and valuable to learning.

Accuracy

- A final course grade based on many and varied assignments and tests
- Well-constructed quizzes and tests reflecting your student learning outcomes.

- Point values on tests that reflect the relative importance of the concepts, principles, and relationships
- Clear and unambiguous written instructions for tests and assignments
- Grading keys and rubrics that, where appropriate, allow the possibility of more than one correct answer
- Validity across items, which means discarding an objective test item that practically all the students missed.
- Grading standards appropriate for the level of your students

Consistency

- Clearly written grading keys and rubrics for assessing responses, particularly if multiple graders are involved
- Consensus among multiple graders, which will require discussion of problematic answers
- Maintenance of student anonymity to avoid grading biases

Learning Value

- Sharing studying, writing, problem-solving, and test-taking techniques with your class
- Providing a grading rubric (defined in the next section) before an essay test or the due date of a writing assignment or a detailed grading key when returning tests
- Going over your rubric with students to ensure they understand it
- Supplying samples of exemplary work and helping students understand what makes them excellent, preferably before the essay test or due date
- For writing assignments, allowing students to make revisions after providing formative assessments on first drafts
- Commenting as generously as your time allows, including on what the student did right (Too many negatives are overwhelming and counterproductive.)
- Making specific comments, not a cryptic “What?” or “?”
- Identifying a few key areas for improvement, especially those emphasized in your grading rubric, and specific remediation methods
- Directing comments to the performance, not the student
- Reviewing exams when you return them so that students understand what you wanted and how they can improve their performance, with a focus on frequently made errors
- Referring some students to your institution’s academic assistance center for special help

In the best of all possible worlds, we would not give grades at all. Rather we would furnish our students with individual feedback on how to improve their work. So we should keep grades in perspective and see them for what they are: an institutionally mandated shorthand used to screen, sanction, motivate, and reward—with mixed results. What grades cannot do is to inspire students to want to learn. That admirable task is ours, and our success depends on our teaching methods and moves, our motivational strategies, our enthusiasm, our rapport with students, and other qualities and behaviors

Grade Confidentiality

Owing to federal law, we must respect the privacy of student records. "Student records, including test results and graded papers, are confidential. You may find it convenient to post test scores or other grades to inform students of their progress, but you must make sure that the information is presented in a way that does not reveal the name or entire student identification number of any specific student. No social security numbers may be used in any way. Check on your department’s policy as well

before posting any student grades. Similarly, graded papers may not be left in a box in a public place, no matter how convenient such a pickup system may seem. Grades should not be given out over the phone because you have no way of ensuring you are speaking with your student on the phone." (Iowa State U.) Check with the History Dept. DGP on NCSU confidentiality requirements. See also http://www.ncsu.edu/general_counsel/legal_topics/student_privacy.php

Commenting on Papers and Presentations

1. Focus on higher-order concepts.
2. Begin with a positive statement.
3. Organize your comments.
4. Be specific.
5. Be honest but tactful.
6. Personalize your comments.
7. Reinforce the positive.
8. Problem-solve the negative.
9. Give recommendations for improvement.
10. Avoid over-commenting.
11. Try to make your comments as legible and straightforward as possible.
12. Your end comment should summarize your assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the paper/presentation.

Adapted from Bean, John, C. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco:

Jossey-Bass, 1996 and Grice, George L., & Skinner, J. F. *Mastering Public Speaking*, 3rd ed. Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1998.

Tips to Help You Grade Efficiently

1. Use a scoring rubric.
2. Meet with other graders to determine grading criteria.
3. Use "range finder" papers.
4. Read the paper before you begin marking.
5. Use pencil for comments. Crossing out your own mistakes or changing your response halfway through can be messy.
6. Choose the appropriate level of feedback for the assignment.
7. Use short comments in the margins, and elaborate comments at the end.
8. Use marking symbols, but make sure students have a key for these symbols.
9. Keep your allotted time per paper.
10. Take breaks! You will be more efficient if you give your mind a rest at regular intervals.

Source: Univ. of Florida https://teachingcenter.ufl.edu/files/TA_Handbook_2015-161.pdf

More Tips for Efficient and Effective Grading

Many instructors dread grading, not just because grading takes up a sizable amount of time and can prove itself a tedious task, but also because instructors struggle with grading effectively and efficiently. However, effective grading does not have to take inordinate amounts of time, nor does one need to sacrifice quality for speed. The following tips can help instructors grade more effectively while enhancing student learning.

1. One and Done: Mention the error and explain how to correct it once. If the error occurs subsequent times, highlight the word(s) or sentence and/or use the comment balloon in Microsoft Word's Track Changes to draw attention to the error succinctly. For example, if a student uses second person in an essay, the instructor might compose the following comment the first time the error appears:

- Avoid addressing the audience directly as it can come off as accusatory. Use words like "one," "individual," etc.
- If the student repeats the error in the assignment, highlight the second-person usage (the word "you," for example) and add a comment bubble stating "Avoid second person." This method not only saves time, but it also explains and reinforces the concept to the student.

2. Bank Comments: Keep a bank of comments about frequent errors students make and organize them in groups for easy access. Consider grouping comments according to module, assignment, and chapter, or grammar, content, and organization. For example, if an instructor sees frequent errors regarding point of view, keep related comments grouped in the same area to access them easily.

3. Frontload Feedback: D. Royce Sadler (2010) argues that feedback, though often retrospective, also has a prospective element or "feedforward" (p. 539), meaning, instructors need to write comments students can apply to future assignments. If teaching a class in which students submit both a first draft and a final draft of an essay, focus on providing more detailed feedback on the first draft. This method should help save time later and will hold the student accountable for reading and applying their first draft feedback. Also, in the final draft one can point out errors rather than explaining them again in-depth to the student. If it is evident the student has not revised his/her final draft according to first draft comments, refer students to the first draft.

4. Global Comments vs. Local Corrections: If a student has written the paper in the incorrect genre in his/her first draft, comment minimally on local-level issues—grammar, format, etc.—and instead focus comments on global issues. For example, if the student writes a summary of a work, and the assignment asks for an analysis instead, then it is best to comment globally. If the student needs to rewrite the entire essay, it is fruitless to provide copious commentary regarding grammar and mechanics.

5. KISS (Keep It Simple for Students): When making grading a teachable moment, be sure comments do not become so convoluted and esoteric so as to impair learning. Keep the language academic, yet accessible to the student.

6. Attitude and Approach: Make student learning the primary goal. According to Getzlaf, et al (2009) effective feedback is a mutual process involving both student and instructor. The students' involvement in learning is at least partially dependent on their perception of their instructor's interest and friendliness, as well as their instructor's engagement and communication about their performance and their grades.

7. Conscious Use of Comments: According to Getzlaf et al (2009), effective feedback is applicable to future situations. Comment only when there is still something the student can do to improve the grade on a live assignment, unless they can use the comment on a final product to enhance learning and the quality of a subsequent assignment. [See also below.]

8. Avoid Surprises: Publish or distribute rubrics well in advance of assignment due dates so that students know how their papers will be evaluated.

9. Less is More: Instructors should avoid the temptation to respond to everything that calls for adjustments or changes. Brookhart (2011) reports, many struggling students need to focus on just a few areas or even one item at a time. If a student backs off from his or her paper because he or she is

intimidated by the number of instructor comments, then all is lost. It is better to target two or three areas that need to be addressed for the student's success on future papers.

10. Questions for Reflection: Consider inviting reflective, critical thinking and further conversation in a productive, scholarly exchange with the student. Instead of telling students what they did "wrong," ask them to rethink their approach. For example, consider using a phrase such as "What is the most interesting aspect of your essay?" Or "What would draw your attention to this topic, as a reader?" This way, the student is not only prompted to make more thoughtful revisions, but also is given tools to use when considering how to write a hook for future essays.

By: Victoria Smith & Stephanie Maher Palenque FEB 2, 2015 See more at:

<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/educational-assessment/ten-tips-efficient-effective-grading/#sthash.7gQTemq8.dpuf>

Successful Commenting on Student Writing

Commenting allows the account owner and their viewers to have a two way conversation concerning a piece of content. Here are some tips to keep in mind when commenting.

1. Stay on the topic.

Keep the discussion focused on the topic at hand and don't change the subject.

2. Contribute new information.

Before you comment, read the entire thread and make sure your comment offers something new to the conversation.

3. Don't comment just for the sake of commenting.

Only comment when you have something to contribute to the conversation. See #1 and #2 above.

4. Know when you should comment and when you should send an email.

Commenting is a public forum for discussion. If you have a private matter to discuss, use email.

5. Nobody likes a know-it-all.

The best comments are thoughtful, knowledgeable, and insightful. People who flame others, call names, and have a condescending tone will not be welcome contributors to any discussion.

6. Make the tone of the comment clear.

No one can hear the tone of your voice or see your facial expression online. To avoid offenses, use emoticons or additional information to communicate the spirit of your message.

7. Own your comment.

Anonymous comments, even if valid, can oftentimes be overlooked or even ignored.

8. Be direct and succinct.

Keep comments short and to the point. Nobody likes to read rambling comments.

9. Be nice and courteous.

Please, no personal attacks or name calling - ever. There will be times when you read a comment that you do not agree with. Resist the urge to retaliate. Once a comment is posted, you cannot undo the damage.

10. Don't post when you're angry, upset, etc.

If you find yourself angrily typing a reply message – stop typing. Once a comment is posted, you cannot undo the damage. Revisit the comment when you can think about it without getting angry or emotional.

Efficient Commenting on Student Papers

Numerous researchers have identified the correlation between writing and thinking. Others have explored the complexities involved in the writing process. Despite the volumes of research that document the multiple benefits that accrue from writing, many faculty are reluctant to assign much, because if assigned it must be graded. Getting out from under the piles of research papers, reflective essays, reaction papers, and journals can be daunting. Electronic media expedites student writing, but what appears in blogs, wikis, and Web discussions needs a response. In the past 20 years as a writing teacher, I have found several techniques that can help faculty in any discipline use writing to achieve its many benefits and still manage the paper load.

1. Grade with a timer. Set it for 10–15 minutes. When the bell goes off, write final comments and then move on. This activity can help train you to be more mindful of your time and keep you focused. In most instances, after spending 15 minutes with an essay, you already have a grade in mind.

2. Read the whole paper, but correct and line edit only a few paragraphs. Leave the rest unmarked—read, but unmarked. Add a final comment. Correcting every grammar, content, and punctuation error is you doing the student's work for him or her. Correct a short section of the paper. Ask the student to do the rest and come to your office with the revisions.

3. Use minimal marking. Minimal marking is a system for grading that puts a great deal of the responsibility for corrections and revisions on the student. Instead of putting in commas, fixing sentence errors, or addressing other mechanical problems, put a check on the line to indicate that a problem exists there. Save your comments for matters of substance.

4. Make and use a rubric. Providing a rubric for the writing assignment benefits you and your students. Creating it forces you to think of the major and minor elements of the assignment, and to clarify any hidden expectations you have. You can assign points to criteria, use a scale of poor to excellent, or just use check minus, check, and check plus. In addition to saving time, a rubric makes your grading more effective and focused. Rubrics also benefit students: knowing what's expected helps them to prepare the assignment.

5. Write a letter or memo to the class about the strengths and weaknesses of the papers. Often many students experience the same problem with an assignment. In report writing, the formats may be incorrect. Documentation may be a problem. On the other hand, maybe everyone wrote a particularly good thesis statement. Effective feedback addresses both strengths and weaknesses. Take all those comments you would normally write 20 or so times and put them in a letter addressed to the whole class.

6. Make positive comments on one side of the paper and negative comments on the other. Ample research documents that instructors make many more negative comments than positive ones. Not only that, but the negative comments are much longer, while positive comments are brief ("good job"). If you write negative comments on one side of the paper and positive comments on the other, you will become conscious of how your comments are proportioned and make adjustments.

7. Scan the papers and sort into three stacks: very good, average, poor. A quick read can tell you a great deal. This fast review of writing with no marking is called holistic reading. It helps you make an early evaluation of the paper's overall quality.

8. Select one to three major problems to comment on. Many teachers think they need to point out every flaw and problem with an assignment. This is not only unnecessary, it frustrates students. They become confused and don't know what to fix first. Comment on the major issues in a paper or report. Give clear instructions for revision. Leave the rest alone.

9. Reduce your comment wording. Try learning to write shorter phrases like “Needs development,” “Needs a clear focus,” “Needs a ‘so what,’” or “Lacks required sources.” This strategy has the added bonus of adding a level of consistency to your grading.

10. “See me briefly.” Many times it is more efficient to explain something verbally than it is to write it down. It may take me a long time to explain that I assigned an argument and received a report, or that the experiments in the lab report were incorrectly performed. Telling the student that not only saves you time, but also it allows the student to ask you questions. Students grasp the problem better after even a short conversation

By Frances S. Johnson, Rowan University, The Teaching Professor, 20: 6 June/July 2006

Using Grading Policies to Promote Learning

By: Maryellen Weimer, PhD AUG 26, 2015

- When students talk about the grades we’ve “given” them, we are quick to point out that we don’t “give” grades, students “earn” them. And that’s correct. It’s what the student does that determines the grade. But that statement sort of implies that we don’t have much of a role in the process—that we’re simply executing what the grading policy prescribes. We shouldn’t let that response cloud our thinking. Who sets up the course grading policy? Who controls it? Who has the power to change it or to refuse to change it? It’s these policies that involve us up to our eyeballs.
- Humphreys and Pollio write of grading, “Nowhere is the power that resides in the hands of faculty so apparent, or so open to abuse.” (p. 96) We all aspire to be fair and objective in our assessment of student work, but there’s so much to grade. We grade when we’re tired and when we know whose work we’re evaluating, and we don’t stop being human when we’re grading. Good grading policies have features that promote fair and objective assessment of student learning. The criteria that differentiate the grade levels should be clear and relevant to the goals we have set for that test or assignment. Whether it is checklists or rubrics, we need to use them religiously in the grading process, and I think they’re rightfully and profitably shared with students, ideally before they start work on an assignment rather than once their work has been graded.
- I also hadn’t thought very thoroughly about how grading policies affect learning. What counts (papers, quizzes, tests, projects, participation, attendance, etc.) and how much it counts directs what students do in a course. The more an assignment counts, the harder students work on it. Yes, I know, we all have students who don’t work on the tests and assignments worth the most, but for those students who are trying to succeed in the course, what counts and how much it counts directs where they focus their efforts, and
- Can grading policies motivate learning? Too often they motivate getting the grade, not the learning. Diane Pike, a sociology professor, objects to our overly detailed point systems that place a value on even the smallest activities. That ends up being a grading policy feature that reinforces the notion that unless there are points in play, the activity isn’t worth doing. Overly detailed point systems also encourage grade grubbing—students in relentless pursuit of every possible point.
- We have professional responsibilities to certify the extent to which students have mastered content, but we also have students do assignments and take tests because those activities promote learning. Students work with the content to complete an assignment. They study the material to prepare for exams. And our grading policies set the parameters within which that learning occurs.
- Are there grading policy features that promote learning? What about the chance to use teacher, maybe peer, feedback to improve an assignment before it gets a final grade? Or extra credit possibilities that allow a student to dig deeper into an aspect of course content that seems interesting? Or credit for

course engagement, as in regularly attending class and being there prepared, actively participating in group activities, meeting deadlines, and listening attentively to others?

<http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-professor-blog/using-grading-policies-to-promote-learning/>

Turning Student Failures into Opportunities

Use the following quotations on failure and failing to help students see things differently.

- ✓ Failure is the condiment that gives success its flavor." Truman Capote, Author
- ✓ "I am not judged by the number of times I fail, but by the number of times I succeed. And the number of times I succeed is in direct proportion to the number of times I can fail and keep trying." Tom Hopkins, Sales Trainer and Author
- ✓ "Failure is instructive. The person who really thinks learns quite as much from his failures as from his successes." John Dewey
- ✓ "Every failure teaches a man something, to wit, that he will probably fail again next time." H.L. Mencken
- ✓ "I think success has no rules, but you can learn a lot from failure." Jean Kerr, American Author and Playwright
- ✓ A failure is a man who has blundered, but is not able to cash in on the experience." Elbert Hubbard
- ✓ "There is nothing final about a mistake, except its being taken as final." Phyllis Bottome
- ✓ "I don't divide the world into the weak and the strong, or the successes and the failures, those who make it or those who don't. I divide the world into learners and non-learners." Benjamin Barber
- ✓ "Good people are good because they've come to wisdom through failure." William Saroyan
- ✓ There are no secrets to success. It is the result of preparation, hard work, learning from failure." Colin Powell
- ✓ "Notice the difference between what happens when a man says to himself, 'I have failed three times,' and what happens when he says, 'I'm a failure.'" S. I. Hayakawa
- ✓ ". . . this thing we call 'failure' is not falling down, but the staying down." Mary Pickford
- ✓ "I think there are two keys to being creatively productive. One is not being daunted by one's fear of failure. The second is sheer perseverance." Mary-Claire King
- ✓ "Fall seven times, stand up eight." Japanese Proverb
- ✓ Failures are but mileposts on the road to success." Italian Proverb