

# Guide to Effective Grading

How to minimize grading time but maximize learning!

## 1. Before Grading

- Finding answers to the following questions will make your grading process easier.
  - ✓ How much responsibility do I have for assigning particular or overall grades?
  - ✓ Am I following my supervising faculty member's instructions on grading, adhering to the grading schedule?
  - ✓ Does my department have a grading curve that I am supposed to use in the course?
  - ✓ Does my department or the course instructor employ a rubric for grading particular assignments or exams? If so, when will I provide it to my students?
  - ✓ Will other TAs and the course instructor discuss standards and expectations for grading? Will TAs calibrate their grades?
- Set your expectations. Before an assignment, make sure to explain clearly what you expect from your students. Show them the grading rubric you will use, a checklist of things you would like them to do before giving the assignment back. You may wish to require them to print out and include any grading rubrics/checklists with their papers so you do not have to print multiple copies. It is also a good idea to discourage the use of paper clips. They tend to get attached to other papers and can lead to missing papers!

## 2. Grading Process

- Get an overall sense of how students did on average. This will give you an idea of the range of quality. *Always* use a pencil on your first run through as you will probably go back and fine-tune the papers you graded first!
- Be consistent.
  - ✓ Be consistent with other graders. Spend a few minutes "calibrating" with your professor and/or your fellow graders. Exchange a few copies and compare grades. Try to set clear criteria to ensure fair and consistent grading (use grading scales or assignment specific descriptions).
  - ✓ Be consistent within your own grading. You are more likely to be stringent with the first few essays you read than with the rest and you are less likely to be careful about comments when you are tired. Stop grading when you get too tired or bored. When you start again, read over the last couple of essays you graded to make sure you were fair. When you are done with grading, go back to the first several papers to make sure you were fair.

- Give the graded paper/exam back in a timely manner so that students can correct their misconceptions, or use the feedback in their subsequent learning.
- Provide a grade distribution to students. It can help them make sense of their numeric or letter grade. Do not post students' grades publicly. They are legally entitled to confidentiality in this matter.
- Have an official "regrade" policy. Give students a limited time (say, one week) to review their exam/paper, request a grade adjustment, and justify their request with a full written explanation.

### 3. Comments/ grades

- Write comments to accompany grades only if learning results. Not all work needs a grade or comment (e.g. simple test, a piece of work from a larger project, portfolio...etc.). Comments on drafts, work in progress or work that could be revised and improved is useful if it gives guided feedback to your students. You might want to involve your students in the grading process to help you transform comments into teachable moments: are they useful, in what way? In the end, make sure their work remains theirs, not yours.
- Comments might also be a way to communicate with your students and to establish a mentor relationship with each one of them. (You might, for example, save the comments you write for each student to personalize your grading.)
- Local and global issues. Make sure comments and corrections on local issues (e.g. spelling, grammar, writing style, etc.) are not overwhelming and do not become students' main focus!
- For comments on writing, be specific. Do *not* write "awkward" or "awk". It does not provide students with a sense of what the issue is.
- Include positive feedback, no matter how flawed the paper. Students not only need feedback on what you don't understand. They also require feedback on what you *do* understand. If the thesis statement was clear but the support argument was weak, describe this. If the thesis statement was unclear, try to describe what you think the student is trying to say. This will help the student in revising the paper.
- Do not use comments to vent frustration at students. Evaluating papers that are particularly unclear and/or disorganized can be frustrating. You may come across papers that are extremely informal and/or do not follow basic principles of grammar and sentence structure. In these instances, avoid negative global comments (i.e. *This paper was unintelligible* or *You will not pass the course writing at this level*). Rather, you should invite the student to your office hour. Encourage such students to visit the Penn State writing center (<http://www.psu.edu/dept/cew/writingcenter/UWC/index2.htm>) for

help with grammar and sentence structure, and provide guidance on the paper's ideas/content. The goal is not to admonish students for poor writing but to help them improve.

#### 4. Tips to maximize your time

- Have students organize their work to save you some time putting everything in order, retrieving lost pages, etc. Have them staple the different pages in the right order. If needed you might want to have them complete a checklist on the first page and return their work only if they have checked all the boxes (e.g. things you may want on your checklist: name on paper, paper stapled on the left hand corner, pages numbered, all drafts attached, etc.).
- Make a list of the most common problems and go over them with the students/ start a discussion about it. You might want to think about reusing the test or assignment as an in-class activity.
- Simplify the grading scale if you find the thirteen-level system too complex for your grading purposes ( $\sqrt{+/-}$ ).
- Use ANGEL: set up activities and grading options. Have students post their work; it will be easier to grade them directly online and keep track of who posted work and when it was posted.
- Do not correct every grammatical error. Rather, edit one or two paragraphs and highlight the type of errors made and instruct the writer to revise the paper throughout.
- For some assignments you might want your students to self-evaluate their work or review each other's.
- Provide external resources to help them improve.

## Resources

1. On-line resources for faculty and TAs (Accessed December 2, 2008)
  - General resources on grading

A Guide for Grading:

<http://tep.uoregon.edu/resources/faqs/grading/grading.html>

Characteristics of a Good Grading System:

<http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/teachlearn/resources/guides/grading/index.html>

Ten top grading errors:

<http://ae3.cen.uiuc.edu/faststart/ory.htm>

Strategies for effective grading:

<http://ae3.cen.uiuc.edu/faststart/Grading.htm>

Testing center at Penn State:

<http://www.testing.psu.edu/>

Rubrics:

<http://www.schreyerinstitutione.psu.edu/Tools/Rubric/>

<http://www.wooster.edu/teagle/scoring%20rubrics.html>

Writing effective test questions:

<http://tlt.its.psu.edu/suggestions/questionwriting/index.shtml>

Test planning:

<http://www.schreyerinstitutione.psu.edu/Tools/TestPlanning/>

Using tests creatively in course design:

<http://www.schreyerinstitutione.psu.edu/Tools/CreativeTests/>

Writing effective cases:

<http://www.schreyerinstitutione.psu.edu/Tools/Cases/>

Angel course management system:

<http://ais.its.psu.edu/angel/>

Using item analysis to improve testing

<http://www.schreyerinstitutione.psu.edu/Tools/ItemAnalysis/>

- Specific resources on grading student writing

Ten Simple Strategies for Grading Writing

[http://www.crlt.umich.edu/gsis/P7\\_1.php](http://www.crlt.umich.edu/gsis/P7_1.php)

Ten Tips for Evaluating Student Writing:

[http://www.manhattan.edu/services/wac/pages/responding\\_to\\_writing/tips\\_for\\_evaluating.html](http://www.manhattan.edu/services/wac/pages/responding_to_writing/tips_for_evaluating.html)

Resources for teaching writing:

<http://www.schreyerinstitute.psu.edu/Tools/TeachingWriting/>

## 2. On-line resources for students (Accessed December 2, 2008)

Learning Center at Penn State. *Tips on test preparation, test taking and how to deal with Anxiety.*

[http://www.ulc.psu.edu/studyskills/test\\_taking.html](http://www.ulc.psu.edu/studyskills/test_taking.html)

Writing Center at Penn State:

<http://www.psu.edu/dept/cew/>

Tips on improving learning skills:

<http://www.coping.org/adultlink/study.htm#Test>

Effective reading:

<http://studytips.admsrv.ohio.edu/studytips/?Function=Reading>

Learning tips on memorization:

<http://studytips.admsrv.ohio.edu/studytips/?Function=Memory>

Tips on taking notes:

<http://studytips.admsrv.ohio.edu/studytips/?Function=Lecture>

## 3. Books

- Frisbee, D. A & Waltman, K.K (1992). *Developing a Personal Grading Plan*. NCME Instructional Module for Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice. Available on-line at <http://depts.washington.edu/grading/plan/frisbie1.htm#foot1#foot1>
- Huba, M.E. & Freed, J.E. (2000). *Learner-Centered Assessment on College Campuses*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.
- Stevens, D.D. & Levi, A. (2005) *Introduction to Rubrics: An Assessment Tool to Save Grading Time, Convey Effective Feedback, and Promote Student Learning*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.
- Walvoord, B.E. & Anderson, V.I. (1998). *Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.