

GRADING

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Evaluating Online Postings

Many instructors require students to submit brief online postings prior to class discussions. How can you convey a sense of your expectations and evaluate these postings fairly?

Step 1: Specify what you want.

Few students know what you mean when you ask for a response to the session’s reading. Be precise. The students might:

- situate the reading in its historical and cultural context
- relate the reading to a theoretic or conceptual issue
- identify an aspect of the reading that is confusing
- formulate a question based on the reading – and answer it
- find something in the reading that is provocative and comment on it

Step 2: Create a rubric.

A rubric specifies your grading criteria and levels of quality for each criterion. Here is a sample rubric for an online posting:

Exceptional:

- Offers evidence of serious reflection on the reading, going beyond what has been discussed in class previously
- Contributes meaningfully to an understanding of the text
- Includes specific references to the reading
- Demonstrates awareness of counterarguments and alternate perspectives
- Is written in a clear, concise manner

Satisfactory:

- Displays command of the reading and other course material
- Lacks depth and detail

-- Ideas are not fully developed

Underdeveloped:

-- Displays limited understanding of the reading

-- The posting consists largely of description or summary

-- Fails to provide specific textual references

Limited:

-- The posting is unfocused and undeveloped

How to Grade More Efficiently

Grading is tedious, time-consuming, and frustrating. Many of would teach for free, but we must be paid to grade! A grading rubric can help you grade more efficiently and fairly.

A rubric clearly defines what a student needs to do in order to receive a specific grade. A rubric will help you to grade more quickly and painlessly while providing students with useful feedback on their performance.

To create a rubric, you must first spell out an assignment's goals. Be explicit. For example, when you ask your students to write an essay, what skills do you want your students to be able to demonstrate? You might, for example, want them to:

1. Construct an argument that is novel, plausible, and sophisticated.
2. Support their argument with compelling lines of reasoning and persuasive examples.
3. Demonstrate an ability to analyze complex ideas and counter-arguments.
4. Structure a paper that is focused and logically organized.
5. Vary sentence structure and use words with precision.

Next, you need to spell out these goals in ways that you can readily assess.

1. Does the essay contain an easily identifiable, novel, plausible, and sophisticated thesis?
2. Does the essay support this thesis with compelling arguments and appropriate evidence?
3. Is the evidence sufficiently analyzed?
4. Does the author anticipate and address counter-arguments?
5. Has the author structured the paper logically and made us of effective transitions?

6. Has the author avoided mechanical mistakes in grammar, spelling, and punctuation?

Then, create a grid, identifying your objectives and the level of performance.

The performance levels might be numerical or consist of phrases such as "exceeds expectations," "meets expectations," or "needs work."

Sample Rubric Categories for a Research Paper

Clarity, Strength, and Development of the Essay's Argument

- Is the argument clearly and compellingly stated?
- Is the argument original and sophisticated?
- Is the argument well-developed?
- Are counterarguments acknowledged and addressed?

Use and Interpretation of Evidence

- How accurate and thorough is the student's research?
- Is the evidence sufficient to support the essay's argument?
- Is the evidence accurately and thoroughly interpreted or does the essay simply let the evidence "speak for itself"?
- Are scholarly ideas properly cited?

Application of Course Lectures and Readings

- Does the essay demonstrate a solid command of the course's themes and readings?
- Does the essay accurately define and use key course concepts?
- Does the essay situate its argument within a broader academic context?

Quality of the Writing

- Does the introduction grab the reader's attention and effectively draw the reader into your topic and argument--or is it trite?
- Does the essay's conclusion highlight the importance and implications of your analysis and lead the writer to a fresh perspective on your subject?
- Is the expression of ideas clear and succinct?

- Is the essay's structure clear and logical?
- Is the writing engaging?
- Does the essay effectively use transitions to connect major ideas and arguments?

Organization and Mechanics

- Is the essay clearly and logically organized?
- Does the essay exhibit proper grammar and punctuation, accurate word choice, and correct spelling?
- Does the author vary sentence structure and use words with precision?

Instituting a “Grading Contract”

Looking for an innovative way to promote student success? Consider a grading contract.

A grading contract spells out what it takes to earn a particular grade. A grading contract can:

- remove some of the subjectivity from the grading process.
- give students a better sense of your expectations and standards.
- tell those students who are motivated by grades precisely what they need to do.

Here are some elements of a grading contract.

To receive a “B” a student must:

1. ***Attend class regularly***—not missing more than a week's worth of classes;
2. ***Meet due dates*** and writing criteria for all major assignments;
3. ***Participate*** in all in-class exercises and activities;
4. ***Complete all informal, low stakes writing assignments*** (e.g. journal writing or discussion-board writing);
5. ***Give thoughtful peer feedback*** during class workshops and work faithfully with your group on other collaborative tasks (e.g., sharing papers, commenting on drafts, peer editing, on-line discussion boards, answering peer questions);
6. ***Make substantive revisions when the assignment is to revise***—extending or changing the thinking or organization—not just editing or touching up.

To receive an “A,” a student must do all the things mentioned above, AND:

-- contribute exceptional ideas to discussion, and

-- write essays in which the argument clearly and compellingly stated, the analysis is original, sophisticated, well substantiated, and well developed?

Navigating Successfully Through Grading Hell

Assessing student work is an integral part of academic life, but it is also exceedingly stressful. It isn't easy to grade fairly and objectively or to provide substantial, meaningful feedback promptly.

Indeed, we often we feel forced to make comments defensively, identifying deficits in student work to prevent haggling over grades. And it is troubling to recognize that poor student performance is in part a commentary on our own performance as an instructor.

How, then, can you grade without tears?

1. Clearly communicate the rationale for grading.

Many students take grades extremely personally, so it is important to remind them that a grade is not a measure of their intelligence. It is, to the best of our ability, an assessment of the quality of a student's performance on a particular assignment. It is intended to help students identify high quality work and enhance their ability to judge the quality of their own work. Grades also communicate your evaluation of a student's progress and let you know what your students have and haven't mastered.

2. Devise detailed grading rubrics.

A rubric lists the specific criteria you are assessing.

For an essay, you might focus on the following issues:

- a. Does the paper have a significant problem to explore?
- b. Does the paper have a thoughtful, provocative thesis clearly expressed near the beginning?
- c. Does the paper deal adequately with the full complexity of the subject?
- d. Is there enough evidence to make the paper more than a series of assertions?
- e. Is the evidence analyzed sufficiently?
- f. Are opposing arguments or conflicting evidence addressed?
- g. Is the paper clearly written and logically organized, with enough transitional sentences to keep you on track as a reader?
- h. Is the paper free of mechanical, grammatical, and syntactical errors?

For participation, you might ask:

- a. Did the student demonstrate adequate or excellent preparation?
- b. Did the student contribute to the class in an ongoing way?
- c. Did the student contribute to the discussion in an excellent way: by responding thoughtfully to classmates' comments, contributing alternate ways of approaching the material, analyzing the course material exceptionally well, and drawing connections between readings?

3. *Provide rubrics ahead of time*

It is also helpful to share and discuss examples of strong and weak work in class prior to an assignment or exam.

4. *Restrict your grading to student performance.*

Do not grade on the basis of classroom behavior, effort, attitude, personality traits, or student interest in the course material.

5. *When assigning an overall course grade:*

You might let your students know that you think about a course grade holistically, in terms of a variety of dimensions of learning:

- content knowledge
- skills mastery
- metacognition (the student's ability to reflect critically and thoughtfully about the course material)
- the student's development
- the quality of the student's work

6. *When you meet with a student to discuss a grade, be professional.*

Ask the student to explain why a grade change is appropriate. Calmly explain why you assigned the grade you did. Help the student develop an action plan to do better in the future.