**Grading Student Work**

**What Purposes Do Grades Serve?**

Barbara Walvoord and Virginia Anderson identify the multiple roles that grades serve:

* as an **evaluation** of student work;
* as a **means of communicating** to students, parents, graduate schools, professional schools, and future employers about a student’s **performance in college** and **potential for further success;**
* as a **source of motivation** to students for continued learning and improvement;
* as a **means of organizing** a lesson, a unit, or a semester in that grades mark transitions in a course and bring closure to it.

Additionally, grading provides students with **feedback on their own learning**, clarifying for them what they understand, what they don’t understand, and where they can improve. Grading also provides **feedback to instructors on their students’ learning**, information that can inform future teaching decisions.

**Why is grading often a challenge?** Because grades are used as evaluations of student work, it’s important that grades accurately reflect the quality of student work and that student work is graded fairly. Grading with accuracy and fairness can take a lot of time, which is often in short supply for college instructors. Students who aren’t satisfied with their grades can sometimes protest their grades in ways that cause headaches for instructors. Also, some instructors find that their students’ focus or even their own focus on assigning numbers to student work gets in the way of promoting actual learning.

Given all that grades do and represent, it’s no surprise that they are a source of anxiety for students and that grading is often a stressful process for instructors.

Incorporating the strategies below will not eliminate the stress of grading for instructors, but it will decrease that stress and make the process of grading seem less arbitrary — to instructors and students alike.

Source: Walvoord, B. & V. Anderson (1998). *Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment* . San Francisco : Jossey-Bass.

**Developing Grading Criteria**

* Consider the different kinds of work you’ll ask students to do for your course.  This work might include: quizzes, examinations, lab reports, essays, class participation, and oral presentations.
* For the work that’s most significant to you and/or will carry the most weight, identify what’s most important to you.  Is it clarity? Creativity? Rigor? Thoroughness? Precision? Demonstration of knowledge? Critical inquiry?
* Transform the characteristics you’ve identified into grading criteria for the work most significant to you, distinguishing excellent work (A-level) from very good (B-level), fair to good (C-level), poor (D-level), and unacceptable work.

**Developing criteria may seem like a lot of work, but having clear criteria can**

* save time in the grading process
* make that process more consistent and fair
* communicate your expectations to students
* help you to decide what and how to teach
* help students understand how their work is graded

**Sample criteria are available via the following links.**

* [Sample Rubrics Range of Disciplines and Assignment Types](http://course1.winona.edu/shatfield/air/rubrics.htm)
* [Analytic Rubrics from the CFT’s September 2010 Virtual Brownbag](http://wp0.vanderbilt.edu/cft/2010/09/tools-for-grading-sample-rubrics-and-spreadsheets/)

**Making Grading More Efficient**

* Create assignments that have clear goals and criteria for assessment.  The better students understand what you’re asking them to do the more likely they’ll do it!
* Use different grading scales for different assignments.  Grading scales include:
  + letter grades with pluses and minuses (for papers, essays, essay exams, etc.)
  + 100-point numerical scale (for exams, certain types of projects, etc.)
  + check +, check, check- (for quizzes, homework, response papers, quick reports or presentations, etc.)
  + pass-fail or credit-no-credit (for preparatory work)
* Limit your comments or notations to those your students can use for further learning or improvement.
* Spend more time on guiding students in the process of doing work than on grading it.
* For each significant assignment, establish a grading schedule and stick to it.

**Light Grading –** Bear in mind that not every piece of student work may need your full attention. Sometimes it’s sufficient to grade student work on a simplified scale (minus / check / check-plus or even zero points / one point) to motivate them to engage in the work you want them to do. In particular, if you have students do some small assignment before class, you might not need to give them much feedback on that assignment if you’re going to discuss it in class.

**Multiple-Choice Questions** – These are easy to grade but can be challenging to write. Look for common student misconceptions and misunderstandings you can use to construct answer choices for your multiple-choice questions, perhaps by looking for patterns in student responses to past open-ended questions. And while multiple-choice questions are great for assessing recall of factual information, they can also work well to assess conceptual understanding and applications.

**Test Corrections** – Giving students points back for test corrections motivates them to learn from their mistakes, which can be critical in a course in which the material on one test is important for understanding material later in the term. Moreover, test corrections can actually save time grading, since grading the test the first time requires less feedback to students and grading the corrections often goes quickly because the student responses are mostly correct.

**Spreadsheets** – Many instructors use spreadsheets (e.g. Excel) to keep track of student grades. A spreadsheet program can automate most or all of the calculations you might need to perform to compute student grades. A grading spreadsheet can also reveal informative patterns in student grades. To learn a few tips and tricks for using Excel as a gradebook take a look at [this sample Excel gradebook](https://wp0.vanderbilt.edu/cft/wp-content/uploads/sites/59/Sample-Gradebook-Final.xls).

**Providing Meaningful Feedback to Students**

* Use your comments to teach rather than to justify your grade, focusing on what you’d most like students to address in future work.
* Link your comments and feedback to the goals for an assignment.
* Comment primarily on patterns — representative strengths and weaknesses.
* Avoid over-commenting or “picking apart” students’ work.
* In your final comments, ask questions that will guide further inquiry by students rather than provide answers for them.
* [Suggestions About Making Marginal and End Comments on Student Writing](https://carmenwiki.osu.edu/display/osuwacresources/Techniques+for+Responding)

**Maintaining Grading Consistency in Multi-sectioned Courses (for course heads)**

* Communicate your grading policies, standards, and criteria to teaching assistants, graders, and students in your course.
* Discuss your expectations about all facets of grading (criteria, timeliness, consistency, grade disputes, etc) with your teaching assistants and graders.
* Encourage teaching assistants and graders to share grading concerns and questions with you.
* Use an appropriate group grading strategy:
  + have teaching assistants grade assignments for students not in their section or lab to curb favoritism (N.B. this strategy puts the emphasis on the evaluative, rather than the teaching, function of grading);
  + have each section of an exam graded by only one teaching assistant or grader to ensure consistency across the board;
  + have teaching assistants and graders grade student work at the same time in the same place so they can compare their grades on certain sections and arrive at consensus.

**Minimizing Student Complaints about Grading**

* Include your grading policies, procedures, and standards in your syllabus.
* Avoid modifying your policies, including those on late work, once you’ve communicated them to students.
* Distribute your grading criteria to students at the beginning of the term and remind them of the relevant criteria when assigning and returning work.
* Keep in-class discussion of grades to a minimum, focusing rather on course learning goals.

For a comprehensive look at grading, see the chapter “Grading Practices” from Barbara Gross Davis’s *Tools for Teaching.*

[Creative Commons License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)  
This teaching guide is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).