

GRADING STRATEGIES

Making Grades More Than Just Letters

Although we usually assume that grading is grading, there are a variety of roles we commonly play as an evaluator and which indicate our philosophy of grading. Of course, which role we typically take on depends upon how we have envisioned the purpose of grading. Go to [Roles We Play as Graders](#) for some metaphors Erika Lindemann describes in *A Rhetoric for Writing Teachers* for some of the possible roles we play as graders.

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Roles We Play as Graders

Physician:

- Not interested in specific performance, only in general level of functioning
- Assumes perfect health (i.e. everyone has the same ability) and grades down from normal
- Never uncovers a weakness or failure without prescribing a remedy
- Evaluation is non-threatening: a judgment of the person's "organs" is not a judgment of the person

Judge:

- Interested in specific actions, not overall health or character.
- Strives toward simplified decisions: up/down, in/out.
- No effort to correct, only to judge performance.
- Evaluation is threatening: a person's career, grade, admission, etc. is on the line.

Coach:

- Primary goal is improvement, regardless of the student's or

- patient's level
- Every performance is preparation for the next. Seldom grades, but offers constant feedback.
- Assumes the same goal as the student.

An evaluator might embody characteristics of more than one of these metaphors; generally, however, research in composition has demonstrated that the characteristics of the Coach as Evaluator have the most productive long-term effects. The Coach is a preferred model because grading ideally serves not only as an evaluation, but also a learning tool. As Peter Elbow puts it, evaluation has two purposes:

- To "communicate an accurate estimate of the student's performance to the readers of the evaluation"
- To enable students to learn to evaluate their own work

Elbow points out that dependence on teacher grades is dangerous for a couple of reasons. If a student can't evaluate herself, she's really not learning how to complete a task adequately. If a student relies on grades for psychological reasons, that student may not be able to learn for learning's sake; instead, she expects a kind of affirmation that a simple grade cannot give. So evaluation itself can serve as a learning process on a variety of levels.

For further information, please see other resources under Grading Strategies, including "The Grading Process", "How to Reduce Grading Stress", "Holistic Grading", and "Portfolio Grading".

Grading as Teaching

Experienced teachers have found that the following suggestions have helped to make evaluation a more interactive learning experience, as well as aided them in remaining as objective as possible during grading.

Tips for Making Evaluation Also a Learning Process:

1. Establish grading criteria before you begin. As you read and respond to the papers, modify these criteria as necessary.
2. Divide papers into piles according to "high, medium, and low" or even an A-F scale after the first reading and before you write any comments.
3. As you begin your response, do not assign a grade, but you might want to either shift piles as your judgment is changing, or pencil in a possible grade.
4. Review all of your comments before assessing a grade. This will help you to ensure that your grade reflects the same priorities that you used when commenting. It will also help to prevent the tendency to use terminal comments only to justify a grade.
5. Double check to be sure your priorities in the terminal comments reflect those in your grading criteria.
6. Make the grading criteria explicit to your students when you hand back the papers. Explain your pedagogical rationale behind the criteria so that your students will see the connection between the grade and what you want them to learn.
7. Offer conferences to discuss responses with students after they have read and considered your comments.
8. In addition to optional conferences, you might require students to write a response to your comments at least two days after the papers were handed back. This ensures that students understood your comments as you intended, that they have a forum to respond to these comments, and that they can integrate them into their own assessment of the learning process and into the next assignment. Overall, this exercise necessitates that students take an active role in their own assessment and encourages them to see even grading as an interaction.
9. Devise a rewrite policy. This is an important way to alleviate students' stress about grades and to send the message that you are more interested in their improvement than their performance. There are several ways of designing rewrite policies; the most popular is to allow students to rewrite at least one paper for a new grade after it is graded. Some people assign a totally new

grade to the second paper while others average the original grade with the new one. The grade is usually only changed if the revision is "substantive" (i.e., does more than just clean up some errors). A rewrite policy, however, need not be limited to one assignment or even one rewrite of an assignment. Some teachers allow students to rewrite as many assignments as many times as they wish.

10. Have students write evaluations of their own texts for each assignment. Collect these with the papers and respond to them. This will provide you with a starting point for your comments and a way to juxtapose your grade or evaluation of their work with their own.

Final Note: While all these suggestions, we hope, provide ways to make grading more consistent and an integral part of the learning process, several other grading models have been developed that might make these qualities of grading even more explicit than the traditional model.