GRADING STRATEGIES

The Grading Process

Here are some strategies that can greatly facilitate the grading process. While these will take more time at first, they help solidify your ideas about grading particular assignments and about your general expectations; thus, they may prevent the agonizing over each essay that many of us associate with grading. Some experimentation with these strategies will help you find what works and what doesn't work for you.

Establish grading criteria before you begin. As you read the papers, modify these criteria if necessary. If you'd like assistance with this, contact the Writing Program. Read through all the papers without marking at all. As you read, sort them into piles of "strong," "fair," and "weak," or even "A," "B," "C," "D," and "F." Then, go back and begin commenting and grading each pile, possibly from strong to weak or vice-versa (there are pros and cons to both methods).

Write your marginal comments first. Tracing your reactions in the marginal comments will not only help you to write an end comment, but also to determine a grade in reference to your criteria. Take time to organize your end comments to help prevent knee-jerk reactions. Some people find it helpful to jot down ideas on a separate sheet of paper before committing themselves to marking on the student's paper. Others prefer the flexibility involved in drafting brief comments on the computer. Review all your comments on a paper before assessing a grade. This will help to prevent you from using your end comments only to justify a grade. Double check to be sure your priorities in the terminal comments reflect those in your grading criteria.

Alternative Grading Models and Helpful Hints

Buddy System:
Having a colleague read a paper and explain his or her response to it can help you check your own grading process. Or, getting together with an instructor who is concurrently teaching the same course and (ideally) grading the same assignment can give you a venue to discuss individual papers and criteria.

Portfolio Grading:
In this strategy, students work on many assignments simultaneously throughout the semester, receiving feedback from either you, their peers, or both on their drafts. At the end of the semester, the student submits an entire portfolio and designates which of the papers in the portfolio he or she wants to be assessed a letter grade. You designate the number of papers the student should pick; the rest of the portfolio is simply graded "complete" or "incomplete" to ensure that the students write all the papers.

Holistic Grading:
In this strategy, a group of people interested in grading or teaching the same assignment joins together to grade. Criteria are developed collaboratively among this group, usually with a number assigned to each group of criteria (1 - 8; be sure to pick an even number to prevent centralizing tendencies). The group then reads through a group of sample papers, assigning numbers according to this scale to see if they are in agreement. If not, the differences should be discussed at this time. Once the group of papers is "normed" (i.e., a general consensus has been reached), the grading begins. Each member of the group reads through one set of papers (usually 5 or 6) and marks his or her scores on a cover sheet. No comments are written on the texts. He or she then passes this group to another reader who follows the same process on a separate cover sheet. Once two people have read a set of papers, they are given to the arbitrator. If the two readers differ by more than one point in their scoring, the paper is given to a third reader; if not, the paper receives the average

of the two scores. This may sound complicated, but the norming process allows the reading to go much more quickly than conventional grading.

Rewrite Policies:
One way to alleviate students' stress about grades and to send the message that you are more interested in their improvement than performance is to devise a rewrite policy for the class. There are several ways of doing this, the most popular of which is to allow students to rewrite at least one paper after it is graded. Be careful; an extensive rewrite policy can mean a lot of work for you. Many instructors average the grade of the due date paper with the revised paper to assure high-quality due date papers (e.g., a student earning a C on the due date paper and an A on the revised paper earns a final paper grade of B.) If the two grades are not averaged and the student receives an A as a final grade in this scenario, over time students may turn in sloppy work on due date papers since they know they will receive "no-risk" feedback from the instructor and an opportunity to revise.) Note: If you have the time to do that—to give feedback prior to the due date—students' papers will improve; it is, however, time consuming and recommended only on larger papers with small class sizes. Alternatively or additionally, you might try peer review sessions; contact the Writing Program Faculty for more information.

Students Develop Criteria:
In order to give students more power over their assessment process, some teachers allow the students to collaboratively develop the criteria they will be graded by during class time. This is a bit scary to do at first, but you may be surprised at how close their criteria come to your own. This strategy not only cuts down on complaints about grades, but also lets the students inductively discover the purposes and strategies required by an assignment.

Peer Pre-Grading:
Other teachers train their students to apply the criteria they developed in the strategy above and pre-grade each other by exchanging papers,

giving marginal and end comments (as in standard peer review), and then indicate the grade they would give if the current draft
were a final one. Many have found success with this method, but it does require some training, modeling and norming to institute. You may want to place a grade on how effectively students critique their peers' reviews to ensure quality.