GRADING STRATEGIES

How To Reduce Grading Time and Stress

These tips are designed to save your sanity and possibly your marriage. On a more serious note, it is important to find the point of diminishing returns—the point at which your time spent commenting on student writing has been useful but any more time would yield little real benefit to students. Also, it is important to find a commenting approach that is effective and relatively rapid. Here are some pre- and post-due date suggestions.

Before the Due Date

Assessment Criteria:
Outline what you expect from students, find the balance between constraining students and giving them too many options.
options.

Assignment Sheet:
Often a well-designed assignment will give students just enough clarity of purpose and information to write effective papers (For more information go to Faculty Resources on Effective Writing Assignments.

Sample Writing Assignments:
Furnish high, middle, and lower-range sample writing and ask students to describe the quality of the writing and content. From these, have them construct the criteria for an "A," "C," and "F" essay. They often follow the criteria more closely when they are involved in the process of constructing them.

Conferencing:
Schedule 5-15 minute appointments in your office in which each student is required to bring a draft of the assignment and 1-3 related specific questions. (not "How can I get an A?" but "How much evidence would convince a group of opposing readers?" etc.)

Interviewing:
Have students interview one another with a focused series of questions to ask; sometimes students are relatively more fluent orally than they are in writing and can explain—and see the weaknesses in—their own ideas via dialogue.

Peer Review Workshops:
Have students read and respond to each other's drafts, in or out of class, and with or without prepared, focused questions.

Group Brainstorming:
Have small groups or the entire class brainstorm ideas at "sticking points." All writers get stuck in the process, and having them describe these sticking points often yields insights from more objective sources.

Class Debate:
When the writers are exploring similar topics, a class debate can make students marshal what they know to defend their viewpoints. Besides pooling collective knowledge, a debate accentuates ambiguities and key counter-arguments.

Learning Community:
The class acts as a community of learners in which those learners can help one another become better readers, writers, and thinkers.

After the Due Date

Survey, Read:
With a new assignment, read the entire batch quickly and separate essays into high, middle, and low categories. Then go back and comment on each, reading from high to low or vice-versa.

Focus:
Comment on no more than two major weaknesses and two major strengths. Writers are more likely to transfer their learning to future writing situations when they are given a few, well-chosen comments. Be careful not to overload them.

Foster Independence:
The least useful commenting approach is to mark everything in a paper; as long as we "fix" their writing, they are going to be dependent on us.

Reader Response:
Personalize the positive and depersonalize the negative comments. It might be more effective to tell the writer, "you've done an excellent job of marshaling specific supporting evidence" than "The paper has specific supporting evidence." Conversely, it is less effective to say, "I don't like the organization here," than "Readers will need more clearly outlined headings and transitions to see the connections in the paper."

Four Grading Approaches

1. The first grading approach involves a combination of marginal comments and an end comment. The instructor points out errors in the text by directing students to the appropriate pages in the course handbook where discussion on the error can be found. The instructor focuses on only one or two serious errors and does not mark everything. At the end of the student writing, the instructor comments on the paper's most notable strengths and weaknesses, again focusing only on one or two of the most significant ones.

    Example:
    "Student, among the strengths of this paper are your use of transitions between sentences and paragraphs, as well as your use of varied sentence structure. Overall,these aspects of your writing are strong.   Remember, readers will need definitions of some of the terms you use and explanations of why they are important. With respect to reader distractions (i.e., grammar), focus on apostrophe use and word choice as you edit."

2. The second grading approach involves the uses of an end comment only with no marks on the paper itself.   Again the instructor uses page references to the course handbook to assist the student, and comments only on notable strengths and weaknesses.

Example:
"Student, your writing succeeds in conveying several of the authors' points in this chapter. Structurally the abstract holds together well with your use of transitions and varied sentence structure. It is imperative for readers that you define the terms used as well as explain their significance. With respect to reader distractions, two areas to look at are apostrophe use and word choice. Review the following pages in your text, pages 210-212 and 310."

3. The third grading approach involves use of a rubric (see sample below) provided to students. The instructor attaches a copy of the rubric to the student's paper with relevant strengths and weaknesses circled or highlighted. This feedback is accompanied by brief comments, and there are few if any marks on the paper itself.

4. The fourth grading approach also involves use of a rubric. In this strategy the instructor provides the student with a copy of the rubric with the boxes left blank. The instructor then uses checkmarks or pluses and minuses to indicate areas in which the student excelled or didn't meet expectations. Specific comments are written in the blank boxes under the categories "Audience, Purpose, Focus, Development, Coherence." Occasionally the rubric is accompanied by an end comment as well.

	Below Standard	Meets Standard	Exceeds Standard
AUDIENCE/PURPOSE	Does not meet one or more of the standards, for example, it may be overly colloquial, or contain an excessive use of quotes, clearly biased statements, or inaccuracies.	Writer shows how the main reasons support the author's main claim; writer remains as objective as possible; the abstract is generally accurate, contains appropriate word choice, and paraphrases (rather than quotes) most of the ideas.	The writer captures the spirit of the author's main claim: accurately portrays the main reasons: uses no (or almost no) quotes but many clear paraphrases: remains as objective as possible: and chooses words that are crafted to appeal to readers.
FOCUS	Identifies ideas that are not central to an understanding of the article (i.e. evidence or sub-points rather than main reasons); strays in focus by devoting words to minutia or irrelevant points.	Identifies and stays focused on the main claim and main supporting reasons; may briefly mention sub-points or evidence.	Identifies and stays focused almost exclusively on the main claim and main supporting reasons; evidence is used only when necessary to explain a main claim or reason.
DEVELOPMENT	Develops ideas that are sub-points rather than main reasons and generally spends too many words on these sub-points.	Develops the main claim and main reasons with approximately the same proportion* and/or weight** as the author. Author generally gives the same weight to each point as the author.	Develops the main claim and mains reasons with the same weight** as the author.
COHERENCE	Produces a laundry list of mainreasons and/or an unclear sense of the relationship between the main claimand the main reasons; contains distracting errors.	Uses effective transitionsto show some of the links between the main claim and the main reasons;if errors occur,they are not distracting.	Shows the link between the main claim and the main reasons via effective transitions and organizational strategies; virtually free of errors.