

ing the current paper can help them complete upcoming assignments. In a well-planned writing course, students build their writing skills sequentially as they move from assignment to assignment. Your responses can help them see these connections and to think more consciously about their growth and development as writers.

GUIDELINES FOR WRITING EFFECTIVE RESPONSES

Regardless of their purpose, effective responses exhibit certain characteristics. In addition to being specific and clear, they guide the students' revision efforts and balance criticism with praise. Below are some guidelines you can follow to write more effective responses to your students' work.

Make Your Comments Specific and Clear

When conducting research for her influential essay, "Responding to Student Writing," Nancy Sommers analyzed the responses thirty-five college instructors wrote on their students' papers. Sommers reached several disturbing conclusions. First, she found that most of the teachers' comments were not clear and specific—they tended to use abstract generalizations that could be rubber-stamped on almost any paper. Consider, for example, the teacher who writes "Good" next to a paragraph in a student paper. When reviewing the teacher's comments, a student cannot know which aspect of her writing is being praised: her argument, her examples, her syntax, her word choice, or her punctuation. The same problem applies to comments such as "awk" placed next to an underlined word. What, exactly, is "awkward" about that word—is it a problem with diction, voice, style? The student likely will not be able to tell.

Does that mean that every response has to be fully explained, that you are obligated to offer extensive running commentary on every student paper? No. Sommers's work, however, points out the need for comments to be *more* clear and specific than teachers usually make them. Writing the marginal comment "Good use of quoted material" next to a paragraph is better than just writing "Good." "Awkward word—diction" is better than "awk." When possible, tie your responses to *specific* words, sentences, or paragraphs in the text; link your commentary to the text by circling words, bracketing sentences, drawing lines to paragraphs, whatever it takes. Also, provide enough explanation in your comment to make the intent of your response clear. Clear, specific commentary will best guide your students' efforts to improve their work.

Minimize Your Comments

Many writing teachers overwhelm their students' papers with commentary, often with the best of intentions: these teachers believe that if they do not mark every mistake, their students will not know what to correct when they

revise their work. However, such overwhelming commentary may cause more harm than the teacher thinks, and there are alternatives. Several studies have shown that most students find extensive commentary bewildering—it actually inhibits their ability to revise their writing because they often do not know where to start. Consider, for example, how you might react if you were a student getting back a paper with the amount and kind of commentary found in Figure 5.1 below.

When papers are marked this extensively, students usually do not know how to sort through and work with the teacher's comments when they revise. Not knowing where to start their revisions, they give up in frustration. Other students willingly accept every suggestion the teacher makes and revise their

FIGURE 5.1 Teacher Commentary on the Opening Paragraphs of a Student Paper

cliché spl too general an opening
 In society today, (their) are many problems people face. Some of (them) vague

choppy [involve jobs. Some involve family. Others involve politics.] One of the most
 important[?] is the environment. The enviromnet faces may problems today. Cars
 are the major source of air pollution. [Something has to be done about the problem
 with cars.] Experts say (we) can make cars less pollutig so they do not do so much
 damage to the environment. Yes, we need too have (cars, but) cars do not have to
 be so damaging to the environment. [In this paper I will] suggest ways that the
 problem with cars [can be addressed.]^{pv}

Cars hurt the enviromnet in many ways. But the major problem [involves -wordy
 air pollution from the exhaust pipes of cars.] (One expert) says, "Automobiles are
 the major source of air pollution in most U.S. cities today. They contibute more to
 pollution than do factories" Therefore, cars pollution is a major threat. A (Car)[?]
 exhaust fills the environment with deadly fumes such as carbon dioxide. (CO₂) is a
 known pollutant that causes health problems. [Including cancer and emphusema.]
 In major cities, cars contribute to smog. Smog kills kids and elderly people. If (we)[?]
 were able to cut back on the amout of exhause from cars we would be able to clean
 up the enviromnet. [Especially in our larger cities.] frag

paper accordingly, even if they do not understand why they are making the changes. In the end, they have learned little about improving their own writing, only how to make the revisions the teacher tells them to make.

If you adopt a strategy of marking most of the errors you find in a student's paper, you need to take several steps to ensure that your students get the greatest benefit from your hard work. First, try to praise as well as criticize—a little encouragement can sometimes be more productive than a lot of criticism. Notice how the teacher commentary in Figure 5.1 is all negative. Second, help the student make sense of your comments. For example, suppose a student turned in a paper that does not address the assignment, contains twenty-two spelling mistakes, and commits fourteen mechanical errors, all of which you dutifully mark before returning the essay to the student to revise. Without guidance, most students determine where to start their revisions by counting the errors their teacher marks. If you marked twenty-two spelling errors and fourteen mechanical mistakes, most inexperienced students will assume that they should start there: clean up the spelling and mechanical errors, and they are well on their way. Of course, the rewrite may be free of spelling or mechanical errors and still receive an "F" if it again fails to address the assignment—the *primary* problem with the draft. When you mark a lot of errors in a student's paper, your end comments should rank the mistakes in terms of their importance. Let the student know what steps to take in what order when revising. Such guidance can be invaluable.

An alternative to marking every error in a paper is to mark only a few—the most important, the most significant, or the most troublesome. Teachers employing this approach to response—termed "minimal marking" by Richard Haswell—read the paper without marking anything, decide on two or three changes the writer needs to make, then comment on these aspects of the text as they reread the paper. From paper to paper or draft to draft throughout the course, the teacher asks each student to address just one or two problems at a time until, by the end of the term, each student is producing relatively error-free prose.

Minimal marking makes some teachers nervous. They wonder how their students can improve as writers if they do not note every error in every draft of a paper. However, minimal marking encourages students to focus their attention on a few specific aspects of their writing at a time, correcting those weaknesses or building on those strengths.

In the end, though, whether you respond to every error you find in your students' papers or respond to a few patterns of errors in each essay, your goal is the same: to help your students learn how to compose more effective papers.

Do Not Take over the Student's Text

Another problem that Sommers noted in her study was the tendency of some teachers to "appropriate" their students' texts. Through their extensive comments, teachers essentially rewrite the student's paper—substituting their

thoughts and language for the student's. If a student incorporates all of these changes when revising, the final draft would be more the teacher's than the student's. To avoid this problem, you need to develop a sensitivity to student intent. As you respond to a paper, determine as clearly as you can what the student is trying to say and offer advice on how to say it more effectively. Your comments should help your students clarify their thinking and writing, to say in their papers what *they* want to say as effectively as possible. Sometimes this entails challenging what the student has written or offering alternative points of view to consider.

Leave Some Work for the Student To Do

You do not need to *correct* all the errors you note in a student's paper. In fact, correcting errors may be the wrong type of response if it does not promote learning. As mentioned above, students will incorporate teacher-suggested changes to their papers even if they do not understand why the changes are needed. When you correct errors, you may be doing work the student needs to do to learn.

Here are a few ways to avoid this problem. First, if you perceive a recurrent problem in a draft—a problem with possessive case, for example—mark the error the first few times it appears and show the student how to punctuate the passages correctly. From that point on, just circle and label the error without fixing it and require the student to submit a corrected copy. Alternatively, you might place an "X" at the end of a line that contains the error and then have the student find and correct the mistake. In either case, you avoid doing work students should do when they revise their papers.

Balance Criticism with Praise

Researcher Ernest Smith studied the way students react to the comments teachers write on their papers and found that the most helpful, productive responses were ones that mixed criticism and praise. In fact, students were much more willing to accept the criticism and heed the advice their teachers offered when it was balanced by praise. In their minds, such a balance suggested that the teacher was being fair and open-minded when responding to their work. Yet Sommers found that few teachers wrote positive comments on papers—most comments were negative, pointing out only weaknesses and errors.

As they revise their work, students need to build on their strengths, not just correct errors. I have found that students understand their weaknesses as writers more clearly than they do their strengths. They actually need less help from their teachers in finding out what is wrong with their writing than they do finding out what is right with it. Try this: ask your students to tell you their greatest weakness as a writer. In almost all cases, they will quickly offer you a specific list. After all, for years teachers have told them what they do wrong. Now, ask them to tell you what they do well as writers. Chances are, you will be met with silence or comments such as, "Getting my work in on time" or "Following directions." With such an attitude, students write defensively—keep the essay short to minimize the chances

for error, use only simple sentences (never even try to use a semicolon correctly!), take no risks. Yet students also have certain gifts as writers that they can develop, which is where your responses can help. Point out what the students do well, explain why it is good, and suggest how they might build on that success in other parts of their paper or in future assignments. You will find that even a little praise can go a long way to motivate your students and help them become better, more enthusiastic writers.

WHAT TO RESPOND TO IN STUDENT PAPERS: A HEURISTIC

What should you comment on when responding to student work? Unfortunately, the answer is, it depends. Several factors will influence which aspects of the text you respond to: the particular assignment the students are working on, which draft of the paper you are examining, when in the course you collect the work, what you have covered in class, who the student is, and what you have discussed with the student outside of class. Comments on papers tend to be context-specific: as a teacher, you decide on the most appropriate and instructive comments for this student and this draft of the paper at this point in the course.

To help you make these decisions, consider the questions provided below in Figure 5.2. As you respond to an individual paper, you will not comment on every aspect of writing listed below, but when responding to an entire set of papers, you may address each one at some point. Your guiding principle: comment on those elements of the paper that will help this student produce a better essay or improve as a writer.

FIGURE 5.2 What to Respond to in Student Papers: A Heuristic

Assignment

- Has the student adequately addressed the assignment?
- Are some aspects of the assignment more effectively addressed than others?
- What aspects of the assignment has the writer overlooked or oversimplified?
- How can the writer better address the assignment?
- How has the writer misinterpreted the assignment?

Content

- Is the content of the paper effective?
- Are the claims clearly stated and adequately qualified?
- Are the claims adequately supported by textual references?
- Are the claims adequately supported by facts, evidence, expert testimony, and so on?
- Has the writer adequately explained the link between his or her claims and support?
- Are some areas of the paper more effectively developed than others?
- Which is the most effective section of the paper in terms of content? Which is the weakest?

continued

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- Are the claims and support adequate and appropriate given the rhetorical context of the assignment?
- What changes in content would you suggest?

Organization

- Are there any problems with the organization of the essay?
- Is the structure of the essay clear?
- Is the structure of the essay effective?
- Is the thesis statement clear?
- Does the thesis statement guide the development of the essay?
- Do topic sentences help guide the reader through the essay?
- Is there a clear relationship among the essay's topic sentences and thesis?
- Are there adequate and appropriate transitional devices?
- Where, exactly, does the structure break down?
- Where are topic sentences or transitions especially effective?
- Do any sections of the essay seem out of place? Where might they be relocated?
- Does the essay have an effective opening and closing?
- Is the structure too mechanical and predictable? How might that be fixed?

Paragraphs

- Are the paragraph breaks appropriate and effective?
- Are the paragraphs developed well?
- Do all of the sentences in the paragraphs address or develop the same topic or idea?
- Are there clear links between the sentences in the paragraph?
- Do the paragraphs contain appropriate transitional devices?
- Is it clear how one paragraph leads into the next?
- Which paragraphs are especially effective?
- Which paragraphs need more revision?

Coherence

- Does the paper flow well? Does it read smoothly?
- What sections of the paper read especially well?
- Where does coherence break down? What sections of the paper are especially difficult to follow?
- Is the presentation of ideas or arguments logical?
- Is it clear how each section of the paper relates to the other sections?
- Is the opening and closing satisfying to readers?

Diction, Voice, and Point of View

- Is the diction appropriate for the assignment?
- Are there any lapses or inappropriate shifts in diction?
- Has the student developed an effective voice in the essay?
- What might be a more effective voice to assume?
- How effective is the point of view assumed in the essay?
- What might be a more effective point of view to employ?

Sentences

- Are the sentences grammatically correct?
- Are the sentences punctuated correctly?

- Are the sentences clear?
- Do the sentences vary in length?
- Do the sentences vary in grammatical type: simple, compound, complex, complex-compound?
- Are there too many short, choppy sentences?
- Where can sentences be combined effectively?
- Which sentences are wordy? How might they be made more concise and clear?
- Where are there lapses with parallel structure?
- Which are the most effective sentences?

Word Choice

- Is the student's language precise and clear?
- Where has the student used the wrong word in a sentence?
- Where has the student failed to choose the best word possible?
- Are there problems with jargon?
- Are there problems with euphemisms?
- Are there problems with slang?
- Are certain words too technical, given the assignment and audience?
- Where has the student found just the right word to use?

Mechanics, Grammar, and Punctuation

- Where does the student inappropriately or ineffectively violate the rules of standard written English?
- Where are there problems with mechanics, grammar, or punctuation?
- Which passages in the student's paper make the most effective use of mechanics, grammar, or punctuation?

Documentation

- Has the student documented all material that needs to be documented?
- Has the student successfully avoided plagiarism?
- Is the documentation formally correct?

Appearance

- Has the student followed the format guidelines you established?
- Is the essay presented in a way appropriate for the intended audience?
- Is the appearance of the writing neat and orderly?

Process

- Was the paper turned in on time?
- Were all required deadlines met as the student completed the essay?
- Were all required parts of the essay turned in for evaluation?
- Did the student make it to all required conferences or workshops?
- Did the student actively participate in required peer-writing or editing activities?

Rhetorical Situation

- Does the piece effectively meet the needs of the intended audience?
 - Does the piece accomplish its goal?
 - Does the piece adequately address the topic?
 - Is there a sense of the writer's presence or voice in the piece?
 - Is the language appropriate, given the writer's purpose, audience, and voice?
-

As you work your way through a set of essays, individualize your responses: if one student has a problem with content, focus on that; if another student has trouble with word choice and organization, respond to that. Over time you will also establish a systematic way of examining student papers. For example, you may start by checking whether the student answers the assignment and then comment on the paper's content, structure, style, or mechanics as needed. Establishing this routine helps you respond to papers quickly and comprehensively.

CHAPTER 6

Grading Student Writing

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

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PURPOSES OF GRADING

As pointed out in the previous chapter, when evaluating student work, you should draw a distinction between responding and grading. Responses generally point the way to future work, explaining how students can build on strengths and address problems. And while writing teachers stress the process of writing and the importance of revision, at some point, students have to turn in final drafts of their papers, drafts that represent the best work they can currently produce. The grade offers them a final, summative assessment of that work. A series of graded papers gives students a sense of trajectory in the course: is the quality of work getting better, remaining stable, or growing worse? Grades can also let students know how their work fares in comparison with work produced by other students in the class. Though some teachers and students reject the notion of grading papers (see "Arguments against Grading" below), many students want the final judgment that grades provide.

Assigning grades provides teachers with a way to communicate a comprehensive evaluation of a student's work. Although teachers can finesse the comments they write on papers, grades typically offer less ambiguous assess-

ments of the student's writing. Some teachers also use grades to motivate students, though this can be a tricky proposition: low grades challenge some students to try harder, but they cause others to give up. As students' grades rise, many react positively and try even harder to improve; others, however, see that they have reached the level of achievement they hoped to attain and stop trying. Teachers who hope to use grades to motivate students must never sacrifice the first goal of grading, though: to provide students an honest, qualitative assessment of their writing.

Institutionally, grades serve several purposes as well. Directors of composition or department chairs sometimes use course grades to help them evaluate a teacher's effectiveness or to assess how well the writing program is achieving its goals. Universities and departments may also use grades to determine which students get into certain programs, win certain awards, or earn certain scholarships or fellowships.

Understandably, few tasks challenge new TAs more than sitting down to grade that first set of papers. This chapter offers some advice on grading that might lessen some of your anxiety. Like every other aspect of teaching, grading becomes much easier with practice. With some thought and preparation, assigning grades to student work may go more smoothly than you think.

GRADING STANDARDS

Before grading a set of papers, you need to determine your grading criteria—the standards you will use to make qualitative judgments about your students' work. As a new TA, you will likely grade papers the way you think teachers in the past have graded your work. However, you need to give much thought to your goals and practices when grading student work and consider all available options.

In some programs, TAs are expected to develop their own grading standards; in others, TAs are expected to follow departmental or program grading guidelines. If you are expected to follow departmental grading criteria, you will likely be taught how to use them during preservice or in-service training sessions. In most cases, these guidelines describe "A" level papers, "B" level papers, and so on. Your job is to read a student's paper and determine whether it best matches the description of an "A" paper, a "B" paper, and so on. Sometimes additional guidelines are provided for determining pluses and minuses. These grading criteria are often produced by departmental committees and reflect standards the department wants student writers to achieve. If you have a question about any of the descriptions or how to apply them to any of your students' papers, talk with your teaching supervisor. Your supervisor may also arrange several "norming sessions" throughout the semester. During these workshops, you and other instructors will read through a set of student papers and discuss the grades you would give them according to the department rubric. You then discuss the grades you awarded each paper, explaining what aspects of the essay and the rubric led you to that

evaluation. These sessions give you the chance to practice applying the rubric and to gauge whether you tend to grade higher or lower than your colleagues. Once the term begins, be sure you have a copy of the department guidelines close at hand each time you grade a set of papers.

In other programs you will establish your own grading standards. Because these standards can vary widely from teacher to teacher, generalizing about them here is difficult. Instead, I will share with you the grading standards I use when I evaluate student work in my first-year writing classes. They may help you develop your own standards.

First, as I explain these standards to my students, I draw a distinction between high school and college writing expectations. Early in the semester and prior to handing back the first set of papers, I ask my students the following question:

Suppose as a writer in this class, you meet every demand spelled out on an assignment sheet. You've done everything the assignment asked you to do without making very many errors—maybe a misspelled word here or there or a missing comma. You've not gone much beyond what the assignment asked you to do, but you've completed the assignment competently. What grade do you think you should get on that paper?

Uniformly, my students will say that the paper should get an "A" or a "B." That is the grading standard most of them worked under in high school—work done competently got an "A" or a "B." I tell them that in my mind, that paper deserves a "C." At our institution, a "C" is given to "average" student work. *Every* student in class should be able to complete the assignment competently, given their level of ability and the instruction I offer in class. If *every* student should be able to meet that standard, work that does is, in my mind, *average*. "B" level work is "good" (it goes beyond minimum expectations in some way), and "A" level work is "excellent" (it goes well beyond minimum expectations for the assignment). In terms of its content, structure, mechanics, and style, an "A" paper is exceptional and noteworthy. Papers that have serious problems meeting the minimum requirements of the assignment are "poor" and get a "D." Ones that fail to meet those requirements receive an "F." This, then, is the grading standard I employ:

- A = exceptional writing that goes well beyond minimum expectations for the assignment
- B = good writing that exceeds minimum expectations for the assignment
- C = average writing that meets minimum expectations for the assignment
- D = poor writing that does not meet all of the minimum expectations for the assignment
- F = failing writing that does not meet the minimum expectations for the assignment

I can apply these standards to individual papers that I grade holistically or atomistically (options described below) or to portfolios of student work. If you want to develop a more detailed grading rubric, you can establish evaluative criteria for specific elements of the students' work, such as its organization, development, adherence to conventions, and style.

Whether you follow your department's grading standards or develop standards of your own, your goal is consistency: as you work through a set of papers, essays receiving the same grade ought to be comparable in quality. You also want to have clear reasons for the grades you assign. A grade ought to be based on the quality of a student's writing and reasoning. If a student questions a grade, you should be able to point to specific places in the text where the writing is strong or weak, and you should be able to explain how those passages helped you determine the essay's grade.

APPROACHES TO GRADING: HOLISTIC, ATOMISTIC, AND PORTFOLIO EVALUATION

Simply having grading standards, however, does not tell you how to apply them. Today most teachers employ one of three approaches to grading: holistic, atomistic, and portfolio evaluation. Placement and exit examinations are typically evaluated holistically—the procedure enables administrators to grade a large number of essays quickly and reliably. Teachers who grade papers holistically in their classes first develop a grading rubric, a description of an "A" paper, a "B" paper, and so on (see Figure 6.1 at the end of this chapter for a sample holistic evaluation guide). They then read through a student's essay, decide which description it best matches, and give the paper that grade. They do not comment on the student's paper; they just read it through once or twice, match it to a description, give it a grade, and move on. Holistic grading enables teachers to grade papers quickly, but it offers little instruction to students when they get the papers back, even if teachers distribute the grading rubric. Because each grade description addresses several elements of writing, a student getting a "C" on his essay may not know why it received that grade, only that, all things considered, the teacher thought his essay best matched the description of a "C" paper on the rubric.

Atomistic grading practices are much more common. Here teachers base their grade on separate evaluations of distinct elements in the essay. As they read an essay, they assess the quality of these elements and then combine or average these evaluations to determine the paper's grade. Teachers grading this way commonly write comments on the student's essay or employ a response sheet that lists the elements of the essay the teacher will evaluate when grading student work. Beside each element is an open space where the

teacher writes comments, awards points, or assigns a grade to each element (see Figure 6.2 at the end of this chapter for a sample response sheet and Chapter 5 for other examples).

Another option available to teachers involves moving the process of awarding grades to the end of the course through portfolio evaluation. Portfolio evaluation procedures can vary from teacher to teacher, but many follow the process described here. Throughout the course, as students complete their papers, the teacher collects and comments on the essays but does not grade them. The students get the papers back and have the opportunity to revise them in light of the teacher's comments. At the end of the term, the student submits clean, revised "final" copies of the papers for a grade. This collection of revised essays makes up their portfolio. Some teachers let students choose which papers to include in the portfolio, allowing them to drop their weakest work. Some require students to include particular papers in the portfolio (for example, a research paper or a literary analysis essay). Many teachers also like their students to include a reflective essay with their portfolio in which they comment on the work they have included in the collection and reflect on their experiences in the course.

When grading the portfolio, teachers again have several options. Some teachers give the portfolio a single, collective grade, in essence stating that, as a whole, the papers in the portfolio represent "A" level work or "B" level work, and so on. Other teachers prefer to grade each paper in the portfolio individually. Under either system, the papers are typically graded holistically or atomistically using a response sheet. Few teachers write comments on the papers in the portfolio because they have commented so extensively on the drafts.

Many teachers like portfolio evaluation because it encourages students to revise their work and deemphasizes grades early in the course when students should be focusing on skill development. Many students also like this approach to grading—they feel it gives them more time to revise their work, a better opportunity to produce higher quality essays, and more control over their grade. Students who do not like portfolio evaluation usually object to it because they want to know their paper grades as they complete assignments throughout the course. If students are adamant about wanting to know their grades, teachers can tell them what their grades would have been had the essays been graded. However, teachers using portfolio evaluation should deemphasize grades as much as they can during the term, focusing on revision instead.

As a TA, if you are interested in using portfolio evaluation in your courses, check with your teaching supervisor first. Some leading experts in portfolio evaluation disagree about whether it is appropriate for inexperienced TAs. Kathleen Yancey at Clemson University questions whether new TAs have sufficiently internalized grading standards to evaluate portfolios effectively. How can TAs award a portfolio an "A" or a "B," she wonders, if they have little experience determining whether individual papers merit an "A" or a "B"? Irwin Weiser at Purdue University claims that inexperienced TAs can be taught how to develop adequate grading standards for portfolios, even if they have not spent the term assigning grades to individual papers.

GRADING INDIVIDUAL PAPERS: SUGGESTED PROCEDURES

Here are some procedures that can help make grading more effective, efficient, and fair.

Review the Assignment Before You Grade any Papers

Even if you wrote the assignment yourself, read it again before you start grading. Remind yourself what you asked the students to do. You will then be in a better position to determine if the students have met or exceeded your expectations when you grade their work. If you are grading papers for a professor who wrote the assignment, be sure you understand what the professor intended the assignment to achieve before you **evaluate** any student work. If you have any questions about the assignment, ask the professor for clarifications.

Read a Few Papers Before You Start Assigning Grades

Read through a few papers quickly to get a sense of how well the students are answering the assignment. Your expectations might be too high or too low for those first few papers if you do not have a sense of how well the class did as a whole. In fact, some teachers like to read the entire set of papers quickly before they respond to or grade any essays. This way their comments and grades will be based on a fuller sense of how well all of the students handled the assignment.

Grade in Pencil

Even as an experienced grader, I find myself needing to change grades as I work my way through a set of papers. You may find yourself in the same position—when you first start grading a set of essays, what looks like an “A” paper at the top of the stack may not look like an “A” by the time you reach the bottom of the stack. Your standards become more clear and certain the more you read your students’ work. Grading in pencil makes it easier to change your grade if necessary.

Grade in Batches

If you have a lot of papers to evaluate, divide them into groups of five or six and grade them one batch at a time. After each batch, take a break and reward yourself—listen to some music, get something to eat, take a brief walk. Grading in batches gives you a sense of progress as you make your way through a set of papers. Sitting in front of a huge stack of papers can be intimidating—a small stack does not look so bad. This tip may sound silly, but it works—it does speed up grading for most teachers.

When in Doubt, Set the Paper Aside and Get Help

If you are not sure what grade to give a paper, set it aside and ask your officemate or teaching supervisor to read it and offer an opinion. Such uncertainty is common. You may have read so many papers that sound alike that you find it hard to draw distinctions. You may have had problems with a particular student in class and do not know if you are being fair with your grade. You may just be uncertain about a grade—some features make it a “C” paper, others make it a “B.” Whatever the reason for your doubts, ask for an outside opinion. Do not tell your officemate or teaching supervisor what grade you were thinking of giving the paper; just have the person read it and tell you what grade it deserves. Use the response to help you make up your own mind.

Review the Grades Before You Return the Papers

After you evaluate all the papers, if possible set them aside for a day or two and then sort them into piles by grade—all the “A” papers together, all the “B+” papers together, and so on. Then quickly review the papers, pile by pile. Are all the papers in each pile really comparable in quality? Do any of the papers belong in a different pile? If so, move the papers to that pile and adjust your grade. I find that this last review increases the confidence I have in the grades I give. It serves as a form of quality control, helping me be sure I applied the same set of standards throughout the grading process. This review also gives me one last chance to review the comments I wrote on the students’ papers and make sure they are clear and correct.

Do Not Delay

As a rule, try to have papers returned to students in a week. If that is not possible, get them back to the students as soon as you can and certainly before the next paper is due. For a graduate student, putting off work can cause problems. You may begin to feel enormous pressure if you have stacks of ungraded student papers. If the demands of your graduate course work cause you to fall behind in your grading, finish your course work first. Just tell your students when they can expect to get their papers back.

Explain Your Grading Procedures to Your Students

Always explain to your students the process you follow to grade their work—what you look for when you evaluate their papers, how often you read their essays when determining a grade, how much time you spend determining grades, and so on. Students have fewer questions about their grades when they understand your grading standards and procedures. They also more readily accept your judgment of their work when they understand how fair and thorough you are as a grader. In my own classes, I explain my grading procedures early in the semester and review them in class before I return each set of papers.

REWRITES OF GRADED WORK

Many TAs ask whether students should be able to rewrite papers that have been graded. Among experienced writing teachers, you will find a wide range of positions on this question. Some teachers say absolutely not: students are free to revise a paper as many times as they wish before turning it in for a grade, but when they turn it in, that is the final draft. These teachers will work with students as much as the students like as they draft each paper, but once the paper is graded, it is time to move on to the next assignment. Other teachers let students rewrite one or two graded papers a term, ones the students choose or ones the teacher chooses. Teachers who adopt this policy have to decide if the final grade for the paper is the rewrite grade or an average of the original grade and the rewrite grade. Other teachers allow students to rewrite as many graded papers as they like as often as they like. The teacher grades and comments on each revised draft and the student decides when to end the process. Again, though, the teacher has to determine how to calculate the ultimate grade for the paper.

As you decide whether to allow students to rewrite graded papers, talk to your teaching supervisor—your department may have a policy on this matter. Consider what is fair to your students and what is manageable for you. Letting students rewrite any paper they like sounds immanently fair, but can you grade all those papers? What happens at the end of the term when you have to complete your own seminar papers and a wave of rewrites comes in for you to read and grade? If you allow students to rewrite graded papers, you may need to set limits on how many they can rewrite, how often they can rewrite them, and when rewrites are due (stipulating, for example, that no rewrites are allowed after a certain date at the end of the term). Your rewrite policy needs to be fair to all of your students, educationally sound, and practical.

AN ARGUMENT AGAINST GRADING

Although grading student writing remains the norm in writing programs across the country, not everyone agrees that it is a good idea. Over the years, many educators have spoken against grading student work, but probably the most well-respected and effective advocate of this position is Peter Elbow. In several publications, Elbow has argued that grading student work does little to improve their writing skills and may, in fact, hamper their education. For example, in "Getting Along without Grades—and Getting Along with Them Too," Elbow outlines five arguments against awarding letter grades to student work:

- Grades are not trustworthy: grading is too subjective and too unreliable.
- Grades have no inherent meaning: students may not know what an "A" or a "B + " actually means.
- Grading contributes little to the students' growth as writers: a letter grade does not tell a student what he or she did well or badly or how to improve.

- Grading undermines the student–teacher relationship and poisons the classroom atmosphere: students work only for the grade, value only the grade, begin to see the teacher as an evaluator more than a coach, and assume an adversarial relationship with their teacher and classmates.
- Grading unnecessarily burdens instructors: determining grades can be difficult and stressful because fairness and consistency are so hard to achieve.

Elbow is not opposed to evaluating student work. In fact, he thinks eliminating grades will result in more evaluation, not less, moving teachers to adopt the kinds of evaluation that truly help students assess the quality of their work and teach them how to improve as writers: more teacher commentary on papers, more student-teacher discussions about writing, and more peer workshops in the classroom.

As an alternative to letter grades, Elbow suggests sorting papers into two categories (pass or fail) or three categories (exceptional, adequate, and inadequate). Under Elbow's plan, teachers respond to drafts of their students' papers until the student produces work at a passing level. Without grades, he argues, the students' attention is focused on continually improving their writing skills and revising their papers.

As a TA, if you choose not to grade your students' papers, clear the procedure with your teaching supervisor first. That option might not be open to you at your school. However, if you do adopt such a policy, explain it clearly to your students. Elbow notes that many students expect their work to be graded and will be upset with you if it is not. Let your students know why you have adopted this policy and how it will affect them and their writing in the course.

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