

Tips for Grading

Before Grading

1. Announce grading policies before hand, and be sympathetic but firm. Decide with your teaching team how firm to be and on what constitutes an exception to the rules. As often as possible, try to get these grading guidelines in writing, for each assignment if necessary.
2. Be aware that there are many different kinds of assignments: some are purely objective and have an answer key, and some are much more subjective or argument-based and require very different modes of response. Grading a short essay or paper will require very different skills and comments.
3. For exams: be aware that some professors don't provide answer keys beforehand, so be sure to have one even if you and/or the other TAs have to make it yourselves! And for papers be sure to have a conversation with the professor and/or the other TAs about reasonable expectations for the kinds of arguments and use of evidence that you will be grading.
4. Read a few assignments before you begin grading just to get a sense of the range and the ways students are responding to the assignment—if a substantial number of students are answering questions or presenting arguments differently than expected, your expectations or the answer key (in the case of an exam or problem set) may need to be re-worked.
5. Survival Skill Tip: if you have a big stack of papers to grade (more than 30), pace yourself! Try to read no more than five papers a day so that you stay fresh and positive while grading.
6. Consider which order to grade your papers...alphabetically? Randomly? With names covered to avoid bias? Average to good? Save the worst for last? The best for last? Problem students first? This may change over the quarter but be conscious of your methods and experiment to find out what works best for you.
7. Grade when you're in a good mood with energy and in a supportive environment. Even in Spring quarter when grades have to be turned around faster than usual due to graduation deadlines! If necessary, when in a rush, sacrifice detailed comments rather than overall quality of grading.

While Grading Papers and Exams

1. Make comments in pencil
2. With papers, if you have time, read each paper the first time for content
3. Read the paper through a second time for:
 - analytical substance
 - argument structure
 - use of supporting material
 - quality of writing
 - persuasiveness
 - overall clarity
 - internal consistency
 - discerning between assumptions and value judgments vs. analysis and argument
4. Make comments on both papers and exams in the margin that:

- are encouraging and affirming of good ideas
- are constructively critical of problem areas
- are in the form of questions so that you are in dialogue with the student's ideas:

ex: "How does this quote support your claim?" instead of, "Irrelevant example"

ex: "How does this connect to the theme of _____?" instead of, "Unclear"

- challenge the students to push their ideas further
- raise issues of concern to the course that are relevant to the student's argument

5. Comment on or copyedit student writing issues only to the degree that:

- your role as TA includes writing instruction
- you have made a clear connection between writing skills and grading
- you have clearly outlined your expectations for their writing abilities
- your comments are constructive and instructional, not merely corrective
- you will work with them in office hours on the issues you have highlighted, or that you give them the opportunity to revise their papers afterwards

6. Reserve your final grade until you have read through all the assignments from the section (write in a temporary grade in pencil); this is so that you can evaluate the students according to their own personal progress as well as their standing in relation to the rest of the class. Note: for the sake of privacy, be sure to write the final grade inside or on the back of the assignment and not on the front page at the top, as is often done.

7. Decide with your teaching team whether to use numbers or letters when grading. Since you will probably be using a grading formula to tabulate final grades, you will be using numbers to some extent already...it is up to your team to decide the pros and cons of converting back and forth from letters to numbers or the other way around.

8. Type up a list of common mistakes made to be distributed in section, rather than writing them out on each paper.

9. In a course with a series of assignments, it is worth giving your students detailed commentary on the first few assignments in particular so that they can work on developing skills, but it is common to write less, if not very little on the final exam or paper of the course.

Larger Issues

1. If students misunderstand the assignment or a question, yet their answer is still consistent within the framework of the topic, is thoughtful, substantially engaged with the material, and displays understanding, then it is perfectly all right to give them credit, even full credit, as long as you have negotiated this issue beforehand with your teaching team (however, beware of clever manipulative students!).

2. Acknowledge and reward originality and innovation, as long as the fundamental parameters of the assignment are fulfilled and that the creativity is supportive of the paper's argument, not a distraction or diversion.

3. Avoid letting the easy lure of the "negative grading" method (grading by just taking off points, rather than giving credit for good answers) become a negative attitude: be sure to make positive comments on student work even when grading against a point structure.

4. Try to bring a little humor and useful enthusiasm into your grading to show that you're human and that you appreciate their effort and interests too.