



Teaching with Writing (TWW) Tip

Grading Writing: Six Suggestions

You've developed meaningful writing assignments, and now it's time to grade them. This tip offers six suggestions for grading student writing with links to additional resources. But, first, let's acknowledge that grading writing is hard work, challenging for faculty and students alike.

Grading Dilemmas

For many instructors, grading papers is one of the most challenging aspects of teaching. Cognitively demanding and time-consuming, grading papers requires a number of complicated considerations. *What should be valued in the final product? How much weight should be given to the elements of a paper? What is the most effective way to communicate an evaluation to a student writer? How much time should be spent on each paper? How will graded papers affect student motivation?*

Adding to the challenge of grading papers is the pressure to differentiate student performance and justify evaluations. Such pressures can often lead to an over-emphasis on quantifiable features of writing (number of grammar errors, number of sources, formatting technicalities, etc.) at the expense of the relative quality of thinking and development evident in students' work.

For students, graded papers can be stressful and disappointing learning experiences, fueled by the perception that instructors grade idiosyncratically and inconsistently across the curriculum (Diederich, French & Carleton, 1961; Thaiss & Zawacki, 2006). Writing under such conditions can lead to risk-averse thinking, generic "all-about" papers, and increased plagiarism. As James Lang points out in *Cheating Lessons: Learning from Academic Dishonesty* (2013), high-stakes, end-of-the-term writing assignments with an uncertain expectation of success are especially prone to plagiarism.

What to do?

To provide more consistency, transparency, efficiency, and perhaps even enjoyment to the grading process, consider the following strategies for grading student writing.

(1) Offer an evaluation *after* you have responded first as a reader.

Treating student writing first and foremost as a form of communication rather than an object of evaluation shifts the focus away from grade justification. Research on undergraduate writing indicates that what students most value is that their "papers have been read, as pieces of communication, by a real human being, who then responds as a reader" (Gottschalk & Hjortshoj, 2003, p. 53).

Read more about [responding to student writing](#).

(2) Provide grading criteria in advance and use the criteria to teach and support writing.

When introduced early in the assignment cycle, grading criteria can serve as valuable guidelines for students. By the time a student receives a mark for their work, it should be clear

how the criteria are rooted in values introduced and taught earlier. One of the most common forms that grading criteria take are rubrics.

Read more about [developing grading rubrics](#).

(3) When possible, consider the entire writing process (outlines, drafts, peer feedback, etc.) as part of the final evaluation.

If students receive credit for completing various stages of composition and revision, then the summative assessment that comes on the final essay will be viewed in context and as part of a broader process. Valuing the entire writing process can also result in better papers and reduce instances of plagiarism.

Read more about [portfolio grading](#).

(4) Include student perspective in the final grade.

Having students submit brief cover letters reflecting on their papers' strengths and weaknesses enables a dialogical approach to evaluation. The instructor's final comments can often extend insights that the student has already articulated about their essay.

Read more about [student reflection](#) and [cover letters](#).

(5) Provide substantive feedback earlier in the writing process, not on the final paper.

Studies routinely show that instructor feedback is better given when it can lead to revision and when it is not obscured by an accompanying grade.

Read more about [using fewer comments](#) and [minimal marking strategies](#).

(6) Separate the comments from the grade.

To ensure that students have read your comments, return the writing first and then follow up (via email or Moodle) with the evaluation score.

Sources

Diederich, P.B., French, J.W., & Carlton, S.T. (1961). Factors in judgments of writing ability. *ETS Bulletins Research Series*, 1961(2), i-93.

Gottschalk, K., & Hjortshoj, K. (2003). *The elements of teaching writing: A resource for instructors in all disciplines*. New York: Bedford/ St. Martin's.

Lang, J. (2013). *Cheating lessons: Learning from academic dishonesty*. Boston: Harvard University Press.

Thaiss, C., & Zawacki, T. (2006). *Engaged writers and dynamic disciplines: Research on the academic writing life*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook.

Further Support

See the [Teaching with Writing pages](#) on the Center for Writing website for additional resources. As many of you know, our WAC program also hosts the popular [Teaching with Writing event series](#). Each semester, this series offers free workshops and discussions. Visit us [online](#). To schedule a phone, email, or face-to-face teaching consultation, [click here](#).