

Writing in the Disciplines

Techniques for Grading Papers

1. Writing to Expectations.

Hand out a grading rubric or set of precise expectations—we want students writing to our expectations. The rubric focuses the grading task and thus makes it easier. In addition, when students have the expectations in hand, they will tend to write more carefully. Careful writing means faster grading.

Note: Since purpose and audience drive writing, be sure to clarify the purpose of any writing assignment on your expectations sheet.

2. Less is more.

When grading a first set of papers, focus on the one or two most important issues only. *Students cannot correct everything at once.* They will be more productive if they are working at mastering the most important first. On the second set of papers, add another level of expectations, and so on.

You can ask students to focus on a specific argumentation skill and on one or two technique or grammar issues. With each successive paper, add a set of expectations. The order I often use is as follows:

Argumentation Skill	Writing Technique /Grammar
Thesis statement	Clarity and concision; complete sentences
Major arguments to prove thesis	Clear logic; agreement (noun-pronoun, subject-verb)
Support of ideas by logic and evidence	Introducing textual evidence effectively; concision
Consideration of objections	Logical connection words
Embedding personal ideas into critical context	Work on strengthening prose through omission of “to be”

As the semester progresses, I expect students to integrate new skills into earlier ones. This progressive approach allows me to grade more quickly and keep students progressing without their feeling overwhelmed.

3. Time-limit technique.

When correcting the grammar and mechanics of an essay, Larry Finger used to allot 15 minutes per paper. After 15 minutes he drew a red line to mark how far he had gotten in the paper. The worse the paper, the less he was able to read in 15 minutes. Since grammatical errors tended to repeat, he felt justified in stopping. The distance traveled through the paper gave the student a very visible indication of the quality of his work and prevented Larry from spending more time grading the worst papers than the students had spent writing them.

4. Layered technique.

When grading papers, you may want to read once just for ideas and another time for grammar. You read faster and better when looking for only one element. Even though you may read through the same paper three or four times, you will still move faster through the paper than reading once looking for three or four widely disparate elements.

5. Partial Grading.

For a set of short written work, you may want to share the grading load with a student assistant, especially if you are working with a large class. If you do this, you may want to safeguard the quality of feed back through measures such as the following:

- Provide your TA with a clear grading rubric and discuss the standards you want him/her to apply.
- Ask your TA to show you any papers that appear particularly bad or problematic.
- Over a set of different assignments, make sure that you see the work of every student in the class.

6. Trust yourself.

Good writing makes good reading. If you are struggling to understand what the student says about material you know well, then you can rest assured that the student's writing lacks clarity. Don't battle every sentence looking for meaning. Handle one or two representative ones so you can show the student how to improve and then mark appropriate passages as unclear without correcting them. You can ask students to correct their own errors and resubmit for a few extra points.

It is the writer's, not the reader's, responsibility to make the meaning of a paper apparent. Your responsibility is to let the student know where he is unclear and to point him towards one or two precise things he can do to develop as a writer.

7. Group Correction and Feedback.

Put class into groups of 2-4 and have students critique each other's papers. Each student should receive a group critique and the critique should be on a rubric that you provide. Insist that students look for the two major improvements in idea development and the two major improvements in grammar that need to be made. Also insist that they note the strongest qualities of the paper.

You can either view the original paper and the student comments yourself or have these given back directly to the student writer. If you decide to look at both, be sure to have a space for the student graders to sign. Do a quick read of the original paper and check the accuracy of the student comments. You can assign a grade to the original paper and another grade to the student grader.

By grading the student grader(s), you are encouraging students to develop skills in critical evaluation of written material—a crucial part of the writing process.

8. Return without grade.

When a large number of students turn in work that I consider substandard, I often hand it back un-graded with a comment like, "I refuse to grade these papers until they are of better quality. I expect at least B (or C or ...) work from everyone in this class." I then give them a new due date for the assignment and explain how they need to improve their work.

This technique communicates confidence in student potential and refusal to compromise on standards for work. It demands quality and offers grace. It also saves you from spending large amounts of time on poor quality work.

If some students provided good initial papers, I will often add points to their score in recognition of the fact that they were able to do adequate work within the original time frame.