

Evaluating Student Writing

Chapter 7



I don't really have a clue how to write a good paper. All I really know is what good writing sounds like to me. I don't really know what teachers are looking for.

Bill, senior in Geology

One can find out what teachers expect by trial and error. Through error, you ask questions. The trick is to ask the right questions. Some teachers make you dig. You will never know what they expect until you get feedback.

Shaneeva, junior in Pre-Med

Teachers should be clear in what they want. Teachers shouldn't be ambiguous in their question in an effort to make students think for themselves and then punish them if they don't meet all the teacher's expectations. Students listen to the teacher and try to answer the question according to what they think the teacher is looking for.

Mark, senior in Political Science

This chapter has two goals. The first is to dispel the myth that the difference between good and bad writing will be obvious to us and our students. The second is to provide tools for articulating your own grading strategy. This chapter will raise more questions than it will answer, but we hope they will stimulate your thinking on evaluating student writing. There is certainly no need to answer all of these questions all at once. As with other skills, grading gets easier with time.

Formulating a grading strategy involves thinking about a cluster of issues. You'll want to consider how writing fits into your course, course grade, and class assignments as well as the sorts of skills you hope students will learn. You'll also want to consider how much you value features of good writing such as coherence, originality, persuasive argumentation and complete sentences. Because student writing rarely exemplifies all these, you'll want to consider the relative weight of each. You might, for example, ask whether cleanly depicting course material is worth more than an inchoate attempt at formulating an original idea.

What do you value most in student writing?

How would you rank the following scenarios in which a student . . . ?

- Correctly represents the issues, has something to say, and says it well.
- Correctly represents the issues, has something to say, but doesn't say it well.
- Correctly represents the issues, has nothing to say, but says it well.
- Correctly represents the issues, has nothing to say, and doesn't say it well.
- Misrepresents the issues, has something to say and says it well.
- Misrepresents the issues, has something to say, but doesn't say it well.
- Misrepresents the issues, has nothing to say, but says it well.
- Misrepresents the issues, has nothing to say, and doesn't say it well.



Writing and the Course as a Whole

Evaluating others begins with a look within. We can't expect students to live up to standards if we haven't clearly formulated them ourselves. *How does writing fit into your course as a whole? Will students be asked to write papers, lab reports, or weekly journals? Will all of their written assignments be graded? How much of the total course grade will each assignment be worth?* If you are not the lead instructor for the course, you may not have much choice in the matter. However, it is still important that you understand how writing fits into the larger course objectives as well as how student grades will be determined.

Writing and Other Course-Related Skills

Depending on your course objectives, you might ask students to summarize large research trends or analyze a particular passage from an assigned text. Writing allows students the opportunity to practice these skills and gives us an opportunity evaluate their progress. Using a variety of assignments can often be an effective way of testing different skills. Short assignments might be used to evaluate a student's ability to illustrate a particular concept, while longer assignments might be used to evaluate a student's ability to provide a sustained argument supported by several kinds of evidence. Whatever the course objective, it is important that students understand which skills they are being asked to exercise. What we find valuable in student writing will depend on our answers to questions like those posed below.



What skill are we asking students to utilize?

Are students being asked to DEMONSTRATE their knowledge of course materials?
Are students being asked to SUMMARIZE research or an assigned text?
Are students being asked to ANALYZE a particular argument, research study or point of view?
Are students being asked to ARGUE for their own conclusions?
Are students being asked to EXPLORE the abstract connections among seemingly unrelated ideas?
Are students being asked to ILLUSTRATE abstract concepts with their own concrete examples?

Re-visiting the Importance of Clear Assignments

While none of us wants to admit it, we sometimes receive sloppy essays because we asked sloppy questions. If a question is vague, student responses will follow suit. It is important that we ask the exact question we expect students to answer. If we want to invite students to do some creative research, we might ask them to write a paper on advances in communication technology. If we want students to consider a particular aspect of the topic, we might ask them to discuss the role of fiber optics in the late twentieth century communications revolution. Asking broad a question allows students explore topics of interest. Focused questions can prevent students from lapsing into a series of unrelated ramblings. Whatever your course objective, if you want a focused essay, then you should ask a focused question. In any case, it is important that you let students in on what you would consider satisfactory completion of the assignment.

In formulating paper assignments, you might try outlining the ways you would answer the question. This often helps weed out ambiguities. Unfortunately, you may also need to consider how you'd grade an essay written on a poorly asked question. You might, for example, choose to grade the student's answer in relation to the question they took themselves to be answering.

Revising Our Expectations

Depending on the sort of assignment involved, you may want to modulate your grading expectations. Spelling mistakes and incomplete sentences may be acceptable in a weekly journal, but unacceptable in a long term paper. Good short papers may be the ones that synthesize course material or raise a thought provoking question. Given the nature of the assignment, it would be unreasonable to expect sustained analysis or argumentation. On the other hand, a long paper may be woefully inadequate if it rehashes course material or simply raises a number of questions. Because what counts as *good writing* will depend on the nature and purpose of the assignment, you will want this to be reflected in your grading strategy.

Allowing students to re-write papers can be beneficial to those willing to put forth the effort. If you allow students the opportunity to re-write some or all of their papers, you will want to decide how these will be graded. *Can the new essay replace the previous grade? Will they be averaged? Are there upper limits to the grade a re-write can receive (e.g., no re-write can receive an A)? Should you penalize students who do not make a serious attempt at revision (e.g., does no more than check the spelling and re-submits the paper)?*

See Chapter 4 for ideas on drafting and revising.

Priming the evaluative pump.

- *How important is the timely completion of the assignment?*
- *How important are the margins, spacing, fonts, and color of the paper?*
- *Must the paper have a clear introduction, body and conclusion?*
- *How important is correct punctuation, spelling, and proper sentence structure?*
- *How important is ease of expression, word economy, and clever phrasing?*
- *How important is correctly representing course materials?*
- *How important is it that the writing demonstrate good research techniques?*
- *How important is it that the writing demonstrate original thinking?*





Teaching Ideas: Sample Evaluation Form

Name:

Criteria	Possible Points	Your Score
<p>Focuses on the topic at hand</p> <p>Comments:</p>		
<p>Provides supporting adequate evidence and examples</p> <p>Comments:</p>		
<p>Exercises relevant skills (e.g., summary, analysis, research, or original thinking)</p> <p>Comments:</p>		
<p>Demonstrates effective use of correct grammar, spelling, sentence structure, and paragraph organization.</p> <p>Comments:</p>		
<p>Final Score</p>		

Developing Criteria for Evaluation

We are often called on to evaluate problematic bits of writing. We must decide how to respond to obvious factual inaccuracies like “Hitler caused WWI by killing Poland’s King Ferdinand” or awkward attempts at clever phrasing like “George Washington took to the reigns of power like a little girl to a tricycle.” Identifying these as problematic is one thing; deciding what to do about them is another. Your response will depend upon what you consider good writing.

There are no clear and easy answers to these questions, but reflecting on them can help you balance these different concerns. You might even assign numerical values to various aspects of good writing. Charts like the one on the facing page can be especially useful in conveying your grading expectations to your students. If teaching assistants are grading student work, these charts can help insure consistent grading across the course as a whole. Even if you believe grading to be a more holistic assessment of a student’s written work, it is still a good idea to ask yourself what you take good writing to be.

See Chapter 2 for strategies on exploring good writing.

Grading: The Act Itself

I don't know how to define it, but I know it when I see it.
Justice Potter Stewart

Insuring Fairness

Because there are so many demands placed on our time, we cannot put off grading until a day we feel like reading student work. Sometimes we have to grade when we are tired or in a foul mood. And despite our best efforts, some students will rub us the wrong way. While we might not be able to change these realities, we can be aware of their effects. When grading the work of a student we don’t like, it is important that we be aware of the ways such feelings might influence our judgment.

We should also avoid the temptation to overvalue the work of students we like or the ones making helpful contributions in class. As a general rule, it is important to give equal amounts of time to each paper. After you’ve finished grading all the papers, you might consider sorting them into piles according to the grades they received and then scan each one insure that your evaluation is fair and consistent.

If you are working with other teaching assistants, you might try exchanging one paper from each of your sections (delete students' names), grading the sample papers, and comparing grades and responses before you begin to evaluate the other papers from your sections.



Time Saving Strategies for Evaluating Papers

- Comment on errors only on the first few times they occur. Filling the paper with red ink can also make students reluctant to read the comments at all.
- Reserve critical comments on grammar and structure for the first page and comment on content thereafter.
- Distribute a list of errors common to papers in the class and refer students to this sheet. If paper comments are typed, feedback can be cut and pasted from a master list.
- Use abbreviations: AWK – awkward, FRAG – fragment, W/C – word choice.
- Read papers through once to assign a grade and through a second time to make comments (the time expended on the second reading is more than made up for in the effectiveness of comments).
- Skim through papers prior to grading and sort into piles of 'strong,' 'adequate,' 'weak.' This can help insure consistency, but also can highlight common mistakes and make more efficient use of your efforts. (Of course, these papers need not stay in these piles).

Grade Distribution

Some instructors know how grades will be distributed before they even look at student papers, while others prefer to let grades fall where they may. You might consider whether you are striving for a particular grade distribution. *Do you plan to end up with a Bell curve? Are you willing to allow everyone in class to fail? Does the best paper in class automatically receive an A? Are you willing to allow everyone to receive an A, provided you believe they deserve it?* Typical debates over grade inflation focus on the number of As received. According to some, the number of Bs received can be quite large so long as the number of As is kept to a respectable minimum. Others feel that Cs should be given to average work. You should be aware of any department policies concerning grade distribution or even an informal push to deflate grades. If you are a teaching assistant, you may want to ask the lead instructor whether any overall grade distribution is expected.

Two Vices: Grade Inflation and Unrealistic Expectations

Being an easy grader may seem like a ticket to popularity. There is, however, little evidence to suggest that giving out high marks actually generates better teacher evaluations. Many students lose respect for teachers who give them higher grades than they believe they deserve. Some even appreciate challenging teachers (even if they never admit it). Furthermore, because many of us cannot imagine receiving anything less than an A, we naturally assume that students have these expectations as well. In reality, many are satisfied with a C. As one student put it, “A ‘C’ is still passing, isn’t it?” Whatever the temptation to inflate grades, we are charged with being fair and judicious.

See Chapter 6 for tips on responding to student writing.

There is also the opposite sort of error teachers should try to avoid. Many of us are used to applying harsh academic standards to our own work. However, we should not lose sight of the fact that students have not benefited from our years of training. We should modulate our expectations accordingly. Even if a freshman essay could not make it through the rigors of a peer-edited academic journal, it could still be a good freshman essay. The dangers of grade inflation have received the press they deserve. It is wrong to expect too little of students. However, it would also be wrong to expect too much of them. This is yet another invitation to consider what counts as good writing as well as what we can legitimately expect of our students.

Evaluating Effort versus Evaluating Results

Some students will struggle to produce effective writing no matter how much effort they expend. Others are capable of excellent writing but will fail to live up to their potentials. *Should the former group be rewarded for their efforts and the latter group penalized for an opportunity lost? Are we evaluating results or their effort? Should all students be judged by similar standards? If a freshman and a senior produce an essay of similar quality, should they be judged similarly? Should the fact that English is not a student’s native language figure into an assessment of that student’s work?* While there are no easy answers to these questions, you might want to think about how these issues might influence your grading practices.

Evaluating the Unpopular

We often encourage our students to think for themselves. This can result in them defending extremely unpopular views. *How should we respond to a student who argues that women are inferior or that the Holocaust never happened?* If a paper does not satisfy the written requirements, then it can be faulted for failing to meet the letter of the assignment. This is another reason to make sure writing assignments give students no more discretion than we intend. *However, what if a student thoughtfully and eloquently defends a controversial (or even reprehensible) position? Do they get credit for being thoughtful and eloquent? If they lose points, is it for being unpopular or wrong? Contrast this case with a student who tows the politically correct line without a second thought. Do they get credit for being politically correct or for being right?*

If the aim of an assignment is to engage the issues thoughtfully, then it should not matter which side of an issue a student takes. After all, we are evaluating the adequacy of their reasoning and not the individual positions they choose to defend (or this is what we tell ourselves). Unfortunately, evaluating the quality of their arguments and thus the adequacy of their reasoning is bound up with the sorts of reasons we find credible. In the same way the *National Inquirer* is unlikely to count as a good research resource, unpopular arguments may strike us as being implausible. While this may be unavoidable, it is important that we be aware of the sorts of assumptions that we are making and the ways our own scholarly commitments influence our judgment.

Criticizing, encouraging, and empowering

As many of us are painfully aware, writing isn't easy, and each of us has room to improve. Teachers should temper their criticism with constructive feedback. When students receive low marks, it is important to diagnose the problem. Students may be struggling with the writing process itself. Or they may be struggling with how to manage their time (e.g., they threw the paper together the night before). You might also consider allowing students to re-write papers and thus reward those willing to work on improving their written work. In any case, teachers must strike a delicate balance between being critical of a student's work and encouraging improvement. We should also remember that using writing to teach can empower students in the classroom and beyond. Other teachers are a great resource—ranging from informal discussions about what you do in the classroom to formal mentoring.

