

Efficiency in Grading

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Grading papers is one of the tasks that most instructors really dread, and yet it's one of the most important vehicles for communicating with students. Each instructor must find ways in which he or she can be most efficient in grading; we might characterize efficiency as providing the most useful information with the shortest amount of grading time. This handout provides some suggestions for ways to speed up the grading task.

Make the assignment clear

- A great deal of grading time would be saved if the students followed the assignment instructions closely. Students are willing to do this provided it is clear what the instructions are, so you can save yourself some headaches later by spending some time up front making the assignment requirements clear. Keep the following things in mind:
 - Put the assignment in writing. Not only will this force you to be clearer about what you want from the assignment, but it serves as a constant reminder to the students about what is expected. When the requirements are in writing, you are on firm ground in refusing to accept an assignment which doesn't conform to the instructions. You'll also save time spent in answering questions from students who weren't in class or didn't get all of the assignment down when you gave it out orally.
 - Give the students an idea about the reason for the assignment, and how it fits into the "big picture" of the class. Understanding an assignment's context often helps students follow it more closely.
 - Provide a list of the criteria for evaluation. This can serve as a self-checklist for the students to use prior to submitting the assignment, and it will help them ensure that all the parts are there and in the correct format and order.

Choose a level of feedback appropriate to the task

- The amount of feedback on a graded paper should match purpose and timing of the assignment. Don't spend time dividing detailed information that won't be used. Keep the following in mind:
 - There are different levels of "completeness" which can be used in marking papers. You can make general comments only; you can make specific comments about the assignment as a whole; you can highlight good and bad examples of work, you can mark all errors or you can correct all errors. Each successive level of marking requires more time and effort. Be sure to pick the level that will be the most helpful for the students. For example, correcting all the errors is not helpful because students need to learn to correct their own errors. Correcting one and then marking the others on a short assignment is sufficient. On long assignments, highlighting some good and bad examples

of work might be more efficient. If necessary, you can select one page of a paper and mark all the errors on it to show the student the types of errors he or she is making, but marking all pages is not efficient.

- Other factors to consider in choosing the level at which to mark:
 - What are the priorities of the class and the purposes of this assignment? If this is a thought paper, not intended to teach writing, then general comments directed at the thinking are in order. If this is a paper for learning to write, then more detailed feedback on writing is important.
 - What is the level of the students at this point? Are they just learning procedures to follow? If so, pointing out the most problematic errors rather than all the errors is more logical since they won't be able to process every mark you make.
 - Where in the course does this assignment fall? If it is a homework assignment, then detailed marking will be most helpful for students when they go to prepare for an exam. If it's the exam, detailed marking will not be as useful.

Give yourself sufficient time to grade

- Grading takes time and attention and can't be done on the fly. Plan your schedule to have sufficient time for major grading tasks you know you'll have to complete.
- Limit distractions and have everything you need to grade
- Gather up the assignment sheet, the text, notes, lab manuals or anything else you may need to refer to and go to a quiet and distraction-free zone, just as you would if you were preparing to study yourself.
- Set a reasonable limit on grading time for each paper
- Too often we get wrapped up in grading the initial papers in a stack so that we run out of time. To avoid this, divide the time you have available by the number of papers you have to grade and set a timer to let you know when you've spent the allocated time on a single paper. You'll probably have to make some adjustments at the beginning and revise your estimated grading time, but this will make it possible to give each paper equal attention if necessary.

Use timesaving devices

- There are several ways of making the actual grading easier.
 - Some instructors use a tape recorder while they are reading a student's paper and record their comments rather than writing them out on the paper. The student is then given the tape and the paper with guide marks to indicate what comments belong where. It's a lot faster to dictate than to write and the students get a more personal feeling from the tape.
 - Other instructors have a computer database of comments they typically make on papers. As they read a student's paper, they note which comments would be appropriate. When they've finished, they create a new document by cutting and pasting the appropriate comments together and print out a sheet for return to the students.

This also allows the instructor to provide longer comments than if they were written out.

- A version of the previous example is a numbered-comment sheet containing the types of comments the instructor usually makes about good and poor work. On the student's paper the instructor indicates the number of the comment that applies at each point. The student receives the comment sheet plus the marked paper and can refer to the comment sheet for ideas about how to improve or what he or she did correctly.
- If you are actually going to mark on the papers, a felt tip pen is less fatiguing than a ballpoint or pencil.