

Chapter 13 — Grading

This chapter discusses grading philosophies, presents suggestions that will help to maintain fairness and consistency in your grading, and discusses issues that should be addressed in course planning.

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Grading Philosophies

Grading is a major concern to both new and experienced instructors. Some are quite strict at the beginning to prove that they are not pushovers. Others, who may know their students personally, are quite lenient. Grades cause a lot of stress for undergraduates; this concern often seems to inhibit enthusiasm for learning for its own sake (“Do we have to know this for the exam?”), but grades are a fact of life. They need not be counterproductive educationally if students know what to expect.

Grades reflect personal philosophy and human psychology, as well as efforts to measure intellectual progress with objective criteria. Whatever your personal philosophy about grades, their importance to your students means that you must make a constant effort to be fair and reasonable and to maintain grading standards you can defend if challenged.

College courses are supposed to change students; that is, in some way the students should be different after taking your course. In the grading process you have to quantify what it is they learned, and give them feedback, according to some metric, to how much they learned.

The following four philosophies of grading are from instructors at FSU. Which is closest to your philosophy?

Philosophy 1 -- Grades are indicators of relative knowledge and skill; that is, a student's performance can and should be compared to the performance of other students in that course. The standard to be used for the grade is the mean or average score of the class on a test, paper, or project. The grade distribution can be objectively set by determining the percentage of A's, B's, C's, and D's that will be awarded. Outliers (really high or really low) can be awarded grades as seems fit.

Philosophy 2 -- Grades are based on preset expectations or criteria. In theory, every student in the course could get an A if each met the preset expectations. The grades are usually expressed as the percentage of success achieved (e.g., 90% and above is an A, 80-90% is a B, 70–80% is a C, 60 - 70 a D, and below 60 is an F). Pluses and minuses can be worked into this range.

Philosophy 3 -- Students come into the course with an A, and it is theirs to lose through poor performance or absence, late papers, etc. With this philosophy the teacher takes away points, rather than adding them.

Philosophy 4 -- Grades are subjective assessments of how a student is performing according to his or her potential. Students who plan to major in a subject should be graded harder than a student just taking a course out of general interest. Therefore, the standard set depends upon student variables and should not be set in stone.

Instructor's Personal Philosophy

Florida State University does not have a suggested grading philosophy. Such decisions remain with the instructors and their departments. However, the grading system employed ought to be defensible in terms of alignment with the course objectives, the teaching materials and methods, and departmental policies, if any.

The grading system as well as the actual evaluation are closely tied to an instructor's own personal philosophy regarding teaching. Consistent with this, it may be useful in advance, to consider factors that will influence instructors' evaluation of students.

- Some instructors make use of the threat of unannounced quizzes to motivate students, while others do not.
- Some instructors weigh content more heavily than style. It has been suggested that lower (or higher) evaluations should be used as a tool to motivate students.
- Other instructors may use tests diagnostically, administering them during the semester without grades and using them to plan future class activities. Extra credit options are sometimes offered when requested by students.

- Some instructors negotiate with students about the method(s) of evaluation, while others do not. Class participation may be valued more highly in some classes than in others.

These and other issues directly effect the instructor's evaluation of students' performance.

As personal preference is so much a part of the grading and evaluating of students, a thoughtful examination of one's own personal philosophy concerning these issues will be very useful.

Purposes Served by Grades

Grades can serve many purposes. The purpose you are serving and the appropriate type of grading system should be clear both to you and to your students.

Purpose 1 -- **Help students improve their performance.** Grades are a way of telling students how they are doing with regard to understanding course content and developing skills. If grades are to be effective communication for this purpose, they must be combined with feedback to the student about what is wrong, and how the student can do better.

In this sense, an **A** means: "You are doing very good or excellent work; you demonstrate an ability to converse and apply the major and minor concepts of the course and a willingness to put in the effort necessary to become proficient in continuing to study it in the future. Keep up the good work."

A **B** might be interpreted as: "You are doing a good job in this course; you demonstrate understanding of the major concepts; and your work reflects an ability to apply these concepts and rules in a reasonable manner. With more time and effort you might expect to do better."

A **C** might mean: "You exhibit satisfactory work in the course on the major concepts, but do not seem to have a good grasp of the detail and or subtleties of the content or skills. It is recommended that you seriously consider whether you should continue to take courses in this area. With more time and effort you might be able to perform at a B level."

A **D** means: "You are barely able to apply the concepts and knowledge in the course; you are doing the assignments or exercises, but they do not show much ability to continue in this area."

An **F** means: "You are not performing well in this course; assignments are weak or missing. You might want to consider your preparation and/or dedication for courses such as this."

Purpose 2 -- **Provide information to the student, and others, regarding your professional opinion of the potential of this student as to the content and skills being studied.** In this sense, you are communicating to other faculty, potential

employees, and even the student's family about the effort and skill the student is exhibiting in your class.

Here, an **A** might mean: "This is a very good student, with good learning skills for this subject, who should be encouraged to pursue study in this area."

A **B** might be interpreted as: "A good student with potential for the area if he or she applies him or herself."

A **C** means: "This student passed the course at a satisfactory level, but does not demonstrate real strength in the area."

A **D** means: "This student shows minimal skills in this area, and should not be encouraged to pursue this field."

An **F** shows: "Unsatisfactory performance."

Types of Grading

The two basic types of grading are normative (comparative) and criterion (mastery).

Normative

Philosophy 1, stated above, leads to normative grading. In normative grading one assumes that the students in the class represent a distribution of intelligence that will result in a similar distribution of learning. Descriptive statistics are often associated with normative grading, and often the terms "curving the scores" or "grading on a curve" are used. This curve is often called a "bell" curve. The curve is centered on the mean score, and the distribution is often indexed by the standard deviation of the scores.

While the measurement of many physical and psychological phenomenon fit into bell-shaped distributions, it is unreasonable to think that one would see this type of distribution over course content after instruction. After all, the purpose of instruction is to develop among the students a common set of understandings and skills. Obviously, not all students will be equally successful, but the hope is that the curve would be highly biased in a positive direction. Why would an instructor want to assume that the distribution would be normal? A better question is, "Why would an instructor want to normalize the distribution with statistics so that certain percentages of students would fall into each of the categories?"

Wilbert McKeachie (1986), in his book *Teaching Tips for College Teachers*, notes:

Grading on a curve stacks the cards against cooperative learning, because helping classmates may lower one's own grade. The problem of grading on a curve seems to arouse the most heated discussion for assigning failing grades. Logically, it would seem that an instructor should be able to

designate some minimal essentials, mastery of which would be necessary for passing. (pp. 105-106)

Criterion

Criterion-referenced grading is more in line with McKeachie's suggestion. The criterion is preset, as a percentage or number of points, or standards that represent performance at an A, B, C, D, or F level. For instance, 90% or better = A, 80-89% = B, 70 – 79% = C, 65% - 69%= D, <64% = F.

Or, a course might have five quizzes each worth 10 points; a paper or project worth 25 points; and a final exam worth 25 points. Since altogether these equal 100 points, the same scale as above could be easily applied.

Comparison of Norm- and Criterion-Referenced Grading	
<u>Norm-Referenced</u>	<u>Criterion-Referenced</u>
Compares the performance of individuals against one another.	Compares the performance of individuals against preset criteria.
Spreads out a grade distribution.	Grades may be clustered at the high or low ends.
Hooked to content.	Hooked to course objectives.
Encourages competition.	Encourages collaboration.
Grades affected by outliers.	Grades not affected by how other individuals perform.
Does not help the student in knowing how to improve.	Can be used diagnostically to indicate strengths and weaknesses.

Rubric

A more generic type of indicator could be in the form of a rubric, which is a descriptive scale with values attached, as shown in the following table.

A (95 pts)	All major and minor goals achieved Pluses for work submitted on time, and carefully proofread Minuses for work submitted late or resubmitted
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B (85 pts)	All major and most minor goals achieved Pluses for work submitted on time, and carefully proofread Minuses for work submitted late or resubmitted
C (75 pts)	Most major goals and minor goals achieved Pluses for <u>all</u> work carefully proofread Minuses for work sometimes late or redone
D (65 pts)	Sufficient goals achieved to warrant a passing effort
F (0 pts)	Few goals achieved

The above rubric would be accompanied with a list of the major and minor goals for the course, or assignments to which the rubric was applied, and, of course, the criteria or points awarded would be changed to meet the needs of the particular course or assignment. Rubrics are very popular for grading essay exams. Rubrics also can be used for other types of authentic assessments such as projects, portfolios, presentations, and discussion board posts.

Attributes of Grading Methods


Many different types of evaluations may be effective depending upon the design of specific course materials and goals. However, good grading methods are characterized by the following attributes.

Validity

- **Face Validity** -- It is of paramount importance that whatever method of evaluation is employed you must accurately measure the skill or knowledge that the method seeks to measure. It also is important that evaluations exhibit face validity, which refers to the degree to which elements of the evaluation appear to be related to course objectives. Students often complain that they saw no connection between the evaluation and course objectives. It is therefore necessary not only that the instructor make a connection between the evaluation and the course but also that the student is able to do so.
- **Content Validity** -- Evaluations also must have content validity. Regardless of the format of the evaluation, it must conform closely to course objectives. If a course objective states that students will be able to apply theories of practice to case studies, then an evaluation should provide them with appropriate cases to analyze. Finally, effective methods of evaluation have certain predictive characteristics. A student who performs well on an evaluation concerning a certain skill might be expected to perform well on similar evaluations on related skills. Additionally, that student would be expected to score consistently when evaluated in the future.

Reliability

The concept of reliability is closely related to, and often confused with, validity. A reliable method of evaluation will produce the same results (within certain limitations) for the same student across time and circumstances. While it is understood that performances will vary, the goal is to eliminate as many sources of error as possible. It has been noted that the three most common sources of error in reliably evaluating students are:

- **Poor communication of expectations** -- It is imperative that the student understands the question or the task assigned. Poor student performance can be the result of a failure to provide clear instructions.
 **Example** -- Assignments should always be written to avoid any verbal misunderstanding. The results of a failure to communicate are often a poor grade given to a student who may actually have mastered the subject matter.
- **Lack of consistent criteria for judgment** exists where the basis for making the judgment is not clear. When consistent criteria are absent, the same grader can evaluate identical tasks differently at a later date or by a different grader concurrently. However, if a specific set of criteria is established prior to the evaluation, error in this area can be diminished.
- **Lack of sufficient information about performance** -- A third source of error in evaluating students occurs when the instructor does not have a sufficient amount of information. It is important that this information reflect a student's performance in a variety of formats. Clearly, using a single paper submitted at the end of the semester to determine the entire course grade would violate this principle.

Remember – “The faculty member has the responsibility to explain to students in his/her classes at the beginning of each term the specified grading standards to be used along with a statement of the goals and objectives of the course to be taught.”

(Grades and Grading Practice, *Faculty Handbook*)

Realistic Expectations

Consideration must be given to the fact that students are also enrolled in several other courses that demand their time and attention. Instructors also are limited in the number and types of evaluations they can develop and administer in any individual course, while still grading and returning work in a timely fashion. Ideally, these constraints can be recognized and the best possible system of evaluation can be generated within these parameters.

Evaluating Performance

Performance vs. the Recall of Knowledge

In some fields, such as dance and art, students are evaluated on their performance, rather than on predictors of their performance. This evaluation generally involves individual observations of performances and performance evaluation reports. Also, this method is characteristic of academic courses that result in a final project, such as computer programming courses.

Guidelines for Evaluating Performance, as identified by Stritter, Hain, and Grimes (1975):

- The most effective evaluations are descriptive. You should describe the behavior in clear terms rather than in interpretive terms. Attempts to report what is observed rather than making assumptions about students' intent are most valuable.
- Specific descriptions are preferable to generalizations. Students need to know as precisely as possible exactly which parts of their performance need to be improved.
- Evaluation is most effective when it is timely. Provide feedback as soon as possible after the performance of the tasks. If the behavior is distant in time to the performance, the student is more likely to discount it as inaccurate.
- Evaluations should contain information about changeable behaviors that will be beneficial to the student. Feedback concerning students' personalities is inappropriate and unlikely to produce results. However, evaluations of behavior that can be altered can result in improved student performance.
- Evaluation is most useful when the students and the instructor clearly understand precisely what skills or tasks are expected to be mastered and exactly how those skills will be reflected or graded in the performance.

Other Grading Considerations

You should specify in advance if you will be considering attendance, attitude or effort, and participation in the final grade. It is essential to make it clear which behaviors are being targeted and what the expectations of the instructor are.

- **Attendance** (or the lack of it) in undergraduate (and sometimes graduate) classes can be a problem. Many professors tie attendance to grades in that unexcused absences incur a penalty, which is factored in at grade time. Some examples we have seen include:
 - o Each unexcused absence reduces the total number of points earned in the course by X.
 - o Three unexcused absences will result in a grade of F.

- o Tests missed because of unexcused absences will be graded as 0 points.

If you are grading attendance, be sure your class time is meaningfully used, or students will be resentful. Also, if you are grading attendance, do it in a systematic, regular manner. Students are very clever about ways to get on the attendance list without being in class.

- **Attitude or Effort** -- Instructors who choose to grade on attitude or effort will be pressed to justify decisions, so it might help to have specific criteria or tasks that will be related to the grade. Pop quizzes or assignments based on required readings may be used to motivate and document student preparation and attendance.

Students also interpret grades as a measure of their self worth. They often relate how long and hard they worked at something that only demonstrates a modest understanding. Student effort must be recognized but should not be a consideration in assigning a grade. Statements such as -- "I can see how much effort you put into this to attempt to understand it. I am happy to be able to give you a B on the skills you have demonstrated. Keep up the good work" -- might help students understand that you recognize the subject is difficult for them, but because of their effort, they are performing at a good level.

- **Participation** -- Some instructors keep a running record of contributions during discussion sections or ask a student to do so. To avoid putting shy or inarticulate students at a disadvantage, an instructor might ask for written comments or questions to be submitted, or offer to be available for personal talks at other times.

Fairness in Grading

Grade Inflation

When all the students in a class get A's, or a high percentage of A's and B's, other professionals can interpret the distribution differently. Are these students so different from the general mix of students that they perform that much better in your classes? Are you such a good teacher that all your students are performing at "very good" and "excellent" levels? If true, then by all means give the grades with confidence. However, giving good grades to students who do not earn them is not helpful either to the student or to your department. Sure, all students would like an A, but those who spend the time and effort to earn an A do not enjoy seeing those who merely slid by be given similar grades.

The only way to avoid this situation is to have definite goals and standards for performance. A senior professor once advised, "You only get what you ask for and what you will accept." Therefore, if

you expect a lot, then ask for a lot, and assign grades with regard to performance.

Above all else, students get upset when they think that they have been graded unfairly. The most common complaint is a lack of alignment between what was taught and what was tested. This is the reason why we so strongly stress the alignment of objectives, learning activities, and assessments.

There is no perfect test. Any assessment will have errors in it because of insufficient sampling, ambiguity, misconceptions, fatigue, multiple interpretations, new knowledge, etc. With this in mind, remember that a test score is an approximation of actual performance or skill. Instructors must be flexible about grading and be ready to remove a question from a test if the question is a poor one (not necessarily because no one answered it correctly; rather, because the good students missed it and the poorer students answered it correctly). One way to avoid poor questions is to link them to the lesson or course objectives.

Grading Principles

- Tell students how you are going to grade them. Let them ask questions to clarify anything they are uncertain about.
- Ask students if they have any concerns about your grading system, and consider the rationale for their concerns.
- Let them know how attendance and missed exams will impact their grades.
- Give them multiple opportunities to show what they have learned. A few short tests generally give better information than a single long one.
- Provide corrective or informative feedback that will help them improve as the course progresses.
- Grades linked to course learning outcomes stated or printed in the syllabus are more defensible than those that are not.
- Grades are important to students, and it is important to be fair.
- Do not get into an argument about how something was graded. Have the students present their case; listen to what they are saying; determine how you would feel if you were in their position; and, finally, explain your grade and why you think it was fair, or change it based on the new information.

Rights of Student and Instructor

Privacy of Student Grades and Records

Posting of Grades

The Family Educational and Privacy Act and federal regulations are interpreted to require the student's consent to release non-directory information. When posting grades of

students who have given their consent for the posting of grades by social security number, the faculty member should not arrange the list in alphabetical order.

(Faculty Handbook, Chapter 8)

All students in the university have a basic right to privacy, and it is the responsibility of the instructor to respect and safeguard that privacy. The Family Educational and Privacy Act, commonly known as the Buckley Amendment, dictates that information about students cannot be released without their express permission. Although this ruling most directly concerns staff members who work with academic, disciplinary, psychological, and placement records, instructors must take care that student grades and records are handled in a confidential manner.

- **Never discuss one student's grades with another student** or with any other person. Of course, you may discuss a student's performance with those who have a professional "need to know" such as other faculty members involved with that student.
- **Never allow students to pick up papers for absent friends.** Return written work only to the student concerned.


Instructors' Legal Considerations

To avoid legal complications, document your decisions as carefully as possible and be consistent. Keep grade books secure. Some departments also require retaining them for some time after the course is over. Instructors are advised to check with their departments for specific schedules concerning the maintenance of these records. Some instructors also protect themselves by keeping lines of communication open and taking the opportunity to prevent cheating when possible by making it hard to copy answers during exams, making it difficult to change corrections of returned papers, being careful to check-off completed assignments, and the like.

Possible Cheating by Students

If you do not have any definite proof of plagiarism or ghostwriting, you are quite limited. To determine if your suspicions are warranted, you might talk with the students in question and ask them how they decided on the topic or found the references, but, unless this talk provokes a confession, it is hard to take further action.

Be certain to include in your syllabus the definition and description of plagiarism. Students are not always aware of the issues. Simply letting the student know that you pay close attention, however, may encourage the submission of original work in the future. Some instructors attempt to avoid this situation by giving assignments that will not welcome cheating.

 **Example** -- If the same term paper has been assigned in

Psychology 101 for five years in a row, some “oldies” with new names are likely to surface. Also, if a topic is very broad -- a paper on anything in history -- it is easy to find something to submit that may not be original or intended for that course.

Plagiarism Detection Website

FSU instructors have access to the plagiarism detection site **Turnitin.com**. This text-matching service provides resources on developing topics and assignments that encourage and guide students in producing papers that are intellectually honest, original in thought, and clear in expression. Turnitin helps instructors create a culture of adherence to the University’s standards for intellectual honesty. It also reviews students’ papers for matches with Internet materials and with thousands of student papers in its database, and returns an Originality Report to instructors.

You will need to inform students that you will be using such a service. Include a statement on your course site/syllabus, such as, “In this course, students will submit papers through the Blackboard website to the instructor. Student papers will then be submitted to Turnitin.com for an Originality Report. Papers with low originality scores will receive further investigation according to departmental procedures.”

Questions to consider when using a plagiarism detection tool:

- What will be your syllabus/course website statement informing students about your use of Turnitin.com?
- Will you permit students to see their Originality Reports?
- Will students submit hard copies as well?
- What will be your threshold for incorrect citations?
- What procedures will be followed if you determine that a paper has been plagiarized?
- How will you use Turnitin to educate students about plagiarism?



Related Chapter – See [Chapter 3 – Creating a Syllabus](#).

Writing Assignments and Their Evaluation

Why add writing assignments?

Your students will learn far more if you add a writing requirement to your course. Writing is a form of thinking, whatever the subject to be learned, because writing is actually reasoning our way to what it means. Writing across curriculum is a method of getting students to learn a discipline that appears alien and forbidding (e.g., science

courses for art majors). No subject is too hard if students take the time to read, think, and write clearly.

Teaching Writing


If you *do* include writing assignments in your course, you will be teaching writing. Instructors tend to assume that their students have learned to write somewhere else, but often they have not. You may feel inadequate to teach writing, but, in fact, you are a more experienced writer than your students and you know more about the goals for your writing assignments than your students.

Two Types of Writing Assignments

It is important to take time during class to discuss writing strategies and the thinking skills behind the writing.

- **Writing Exercises** -- Explanatory writing transmits existing information or ideas. The central point of students' writing exercises is to find out what they know and how they want to say it. The writing is linear and sequential. Students can make clear to themselves a subject that they have previously known nothing about by just putting one sentence after another, by reasoning their way in sequential steps to its meaning -- if sentence B logically follows sentence A, and if sentence C logically follows sentence B, eventually the student will get to sentence Z.


Writing, thinking, and learning are the same process. Students must first learn to reason well. Writing organizes and clarifies thought -- how we think our way into a subject and make it our own. Students do not know how to be precise, and are generally guilty of fuzzy thinking.

 **Suggestion** -- Assign a one-page paper on your subject that will show students' critical thinking skills. These writing exercises should be graded on clarity, common sense, logic, plausibility, and precision, not for the content of their views. Your subject is important but not as important as clear reasoning, for without it, students will not learn your subject. An idea can have value in itself, but its usefulness diminishes to the extent that a student cannot articulate it to someone else.

- **Practice Writing About Your Discipline** -- With this type of writing assignment, students are entering the ongoing discussion in your discipline. A piece of writing should be viewed as a constantly evolving organism. Most students have been taught to visualize a composition as a finished product, with topic sentences in place, etc. Here, the shift is to process -- putting the emphasis on rewriting and rethinking that mold a piece of writing into its best form. One of the underestimated tasks in nonfiction writing is to impose narrative shape on an unwieldy mass of material. Students must do more than write with clarity; they must organize their sentences into a coherent shape, taking readers

on a complicated journey without losing or boring them with too many details.

Writing is learned mainly by imitation. If you have previously taught a course that required a Practice Writing assignment, present the best papers from the students in those classes as a model for your current students. Also, every discipline has a body of good writing that can be used as a model (e.g., Stephen Jay Gould for paleontology, Lewis Thomas for biology, and Robert Coles for child psychiatry). But it is advisable to use such superior examples with discretion, as they can be intimidating to some students, particularly in the lower-level courses.

 **Suggestions** -- Bring articles to class that you consider to be well written and explain why you think so. Students will be forced to think about elements that go into good writing, and the articles will show that there are many different kinds of good writing. Or, have students select magazines or other publications in which they would want to be published. Then, have them write an article for the publication.

[Adapted from *Writing to learn* by William Zinsser (1993). New York: HarperCollins.]

Assignment Suggestions

- Write your course goals, and then write your assignments to fit your goals. Devise a writing assignment you want to read; that is, 40-50 versions of the assignment.
- Break longer assignments into parts, but be certain the parts are not too small (e.g., progress reports rather than outlines). And if you require a certain process, then reward students by grading the process as well as the product.
- Complete the writing exercises assignment yourself before you assign it to students. You will have a sample to show students.
- If you are a Teaching Assistant, you may find that some students will dispute your competence to evaluate them and their grades -- no matter how well you write the assignment or how clear your grading criteria are. Do not allow a few students to persuade you that you need to be more detailed in your assignments. After a certain point, more information is not helping them; they simply ask more questions. If you are discussing the writing assignment in class, a one-page handout describing a writing assignment and grading criteria should be sufficient.
- Assign drafts of students' papers, and ask them to hand them in. Drafts should be part of their final grade. If you point out problems on students' drafts, they can correct them before the final paper is due. Also, a class activity where students read each

other's rough drafts may be more important than some other activity.

- If you mark all the mechanical errors on students' papers, wanting them not to repeat the mistakes, you must explain each error and why it was wrong. If a student has logic problems, problems with English as a Second Language (ESL), or just too many mechanical errors to make herself understood, the student needs the help of a tutor in the English Department's [Reading/Writing Center](#).
- Ask students for feedback about your writing assignments. Ask, when they turn in the final version of their paper, what they wish they had known before they started, what confused them the most, what they learned from the assignments, what they would have done differently, what problems they encountered, what they think about their own paper, etc.
- There is no fast way to grade papers, but you can save yourself time. When you return a set of papers to students, include a page-long report that explains the grades you gave in general. This report will save you from repeating a lot of the same comments on many papers.

[Excerpted from *Advice about Making Writing Assignments and Evaluating Them*. Assistant Professor Ruth Mirtz and Teaching Associate Genevieve West, Department of English. Fall Teaching Conference: 1996.]

Checklist for Designing Writing Assignments

___ Rationale or purpose for assignment

- Connect the assignment to the goals for the course.
- Connect the assignment to other reading and writing assignments.
- Include goals that include critical thinking and writing improvement.
- Place most important goals first, not last.

___ List of steps or tasks to be undertaken

- Break the assignment into a reasonable number of parts.
- Note how long each step might take and what problems might arise.
- Be specific about how many texts should be read, how many questions discussed.
- List questions to be answered.
- Indicate how much choice students have in the topic, process, and structure.
- Indicate whether there will be oral components (class presentation, conference).

___ Audience for the text and how much they know and what they need to know

- Peers with a similar level of knowledge
- Experts in the field
- Younger students with an interest in the material
- A hostile audience who needs persuading

___ Intermediate writing texts and activities, such as drafts and outlines

- Indicate on what kind of draft you will provide help.
- Indicate what you think a “working” draft is; that is, describe the level you want.
- Describe how to get feedback on a draft.

___ What the final product should do and not do

- Should it summarize, define, explain, describe, persuade, argue, support, or demonstrate?
- List structure desired -- introductions, bodies, conclusions, and internal organization options.
- Describe what the final product is NOT: not a book review, not a personal reaction paper, etc.
- Explain academic discourse conventions or disciplinary style you want in the Practice Writing for Your Discipline exercise. Are students aware of the level of formality needed (use first person or avoid passive-voice sentences)?

___ **Formatting instructions** (what the final product should look like)

- Length, margins, typing, cover page, page numbering
- Documentation style (give sample, if possible)
- Charts, graphics
- Level of correctness; suggest editing procedures; suggest a specific handbook for reference

___ **Grading criteria**

- Describe paper at each grade level: “The best papers will have...” (See [Sample Explanations of Grades Given for Writing Assignments](#).)
- List absolute criteria.
- Make sure most important criteria are listed first, not last.
- Make sure grading criteria correlate with the purpose of the assignment.

___ **Policies for written assignments, if necessary**

- Plagiarism policy
- Late paper policy
- Your availability to read drafts or have conferences
- [Reading/Writing Center](#), Phone: **644-6495**

___ **Sample paper or assignment**

- Annotate the sample to point out the important thinking operations it shows.
- Go over a sample in class with an overhead projector.

___ **Method of feedback (for yourself) during and after assignment sequence**

- Ask students to write a progress report a week or two before the final version is due.
- Ask students to write a five-minute report on what they learned from the assignment.
- Ask students to add a “memo” to you about what problems they encountered.
- Include questions about writing assignments on mid-term and final evaluations of the class.

[Adapted from Assistant Professor Ruth Mirtz and Teaching Associate Genevieve West, Department of English. Fall Teaching Conference: 1996.]

Sample Explanations of Grades Given for Writing Assignments

In the following sample explanations of grades given for writing assignments, students were to write a paper based on a specific text.

- **An “A” paper addresses the assignment carefully and thoughtfully, and then goes a little beyond it to say something original.** The paper identifies a clear and focused thesis about the text, following it in a well-organized manner, presenting a clear and persuasive argument to support the thesis and adequate evidence to back it up. The writer paid close attention to the text, citing specific passages and discussing them in relation to the thesis by carefully considering what they reveal about X’s project, his assumptions, and his conclusions.

Such a paper maintains a consistent style, presents quotations effectively, avoids repetition and digressions, and is proofread to catch all grammatical errors and create smooth and effective transitions. In addition to a clear introduction setting up the thesis, an A paper also has a thoughtful conclusion discussing the implications of the argument and encouraging the reader to consider the issue further.

- **A “B” paper addresses the assignment but does not go beyond it in any significant way.** It may also lack a clear structure. The paper identifies a thesis but does not fully explore the way the issue plays itself out in the text or considers its implications. The paper may make some intelligent connections but not explore them fully, or it may have a thoughtful thesis that is not fully developed.

Some B papers have the feeling of being unfinished, as if they could have been placed within a larger framework (such as U.S. society, world issues, or the overall socioeconomic system within which education occurs). Many B papers have the capacity to be A papers with one more draft. Perhaps the thesis needs to be more clearly articulated, or more textual evidence needs to be cited. Sometimes they need to be organized more effectively or more carefully proofread; indeed, sometimes working on the grammatical and organizational structure allows the writer to see how to strengthen the overall argument.

- **A “C” paper may somewhat address the assignment but seems to miss its essential point or go off on a tangent that never connects back to the thesis.** The paper often does articulate an interesting thesis but then either contradicts itself or simply moves off in another direction.

Some C papers are the result of the writer’s unfamiliarity with the text; however, more often they result from the writer having too much to say on an issue about which he has strong feelings. This excess of emotion gets in the way of a purely rational argument

and may produce strong but unsupported (or even insupportable) assertions. It frequently produces an excess of grammatical errors, as well.

Many C papers have the capacity to be A papers with one or more careful drafts. If they lack a clear thesis and thus do not present their arguments strongly, the writers can return to the introduction and carefully state what the paper will prove, then reorganize the paper around that. Papers that earn a C because of the strong emotions they aroused in the writer often become truly excellent papers because the writer's feelings provide incentive for the necessary revisions. On the other hand, papers that earn a C because the writer did not know the text well enough should generally be abandoned and started from the beginning after the writer has reread the text.

- **A “D” paper does not seriously address the assignment.** It may raise some issues that connect with the assignment, but for the most part reveals a lack of understanding of the assignment or, in some cases, a writer who was simply not yet ready to begin the paper and needed more time to consider the issues carefully. The paper may address a question outside of the text, using the text as a jumping-off point to discuss something raised in it, rather than analyzing the text itself. Or the paper may simply be an elaborate plot summary of the text that raises important issues and maybe makes relevant connections, but does not say anything about them.

These papers may have occurred because the writer was not sure how to write analytical papers or because the writer felt strongly about issues raised in the book and allowed those feelings to get in the way of the real assignment. In either case, the paper should be used as “research notes” toward another paper, rather than a first draft of a paper to be revised. Reading over the paper carefully often reveals an issue that could become the thesis of another paper, and much of the summary in the paper can be used to support the argument. The existence of strong feelings can lead to an exploration of why the text provoked such a strong reaction, and this, in turn, produces effective analysis.

- **+/-: The plus or minus part of the grade represents the top and the bottom range of the letter grade rather than a different set of concerns.** These grades often reflect grammar and style issues that mar an otherwise good paper or that raise the reader's appreciation of a paper whose content needs work. Stylistic and grammatical revisions rarely raise a paper grade more than one of these subdivisions (e.g., from a C to a C+).

[Excerpted from Howard, R. M., & Jamieson, S. (1995). Ethnicity and identity in the U.S. *The Bedford guide to teaching writing in the disciplines*. Bedford/St. Martin's: NY, NY.]

Analytic and Holistic Scoring on Writing Assignments

Two methods for evaluating student writing are analytic and holistic scoring. The **analytic** approach considers writing to be made up of various features such as creativity, grammar, succinct expression of concepts, and punctuation, each of which is scored separately. An analytic writing score is made up of a sum of the separate scores and is often a weighted sum developed after multiplying each score by numbers representing the relative importance of the features the instructor wishes to emphasize. **Holistic** scores are obtained by comparing individual student essays to model essays, representing good, fair, and poor responses to the assignment.

A third variation is **global** scoring, which assumes that writing is the sum of various features, but assigns the final score without the use of a scale. This method, which is used most frequently in casual approaches to grading writing, tends to result in less precise evaluation.

Analytic Scoring

Analytic scoring is the traditional approach to grading writing. Instructors who use analytic scoring view writing as a demonstration of many isolated skills that when graded separately and added together will result in an appropriate evaluation of the piece.

Strengths

- Helps instructors keep the full range of writing features in mind as they score. An essay that is poorly punctuated may present a good analysis of a problem and/or strongly state a position. The punctuation may overwhelm the instructor to the degree that she fails to notice the achievements in the essay and grades it too low.
- Allows students to see areas in their essays that need work when accompanied by written comments and a breakdown of the final score. Its diagnostic nature provides students with a road map for improvement.

Weaknesses

- Time consuming. Teachers are usually required to make as many as 11 separate judgments about one piece of writing. Furthermore, not all students actually make their way through the analytic comments so painstakingly written on their papers nor will all be able to make profitable use of those comments on succeeding writing assignments.
- Negative feedback can be pedagogically destructive. Teachers who combine analytic scoring with confrontational or unclear comments, especially about issues of grammar, may actually inhibit student growth.

To maximize the effectiveness of analytic scoring:

- A written analytic scale, such as the one that follows, helps to define grading criteria clearly and, if shared with students, can foster an understanding of what is expected and how their paper will be evaluated.
- Criteria are weighted according to their relative importance. For instance, if the goal of an assignment were the assimilation of course materials, then logic, ideas, arrangement, and resourcefulness would be rewarded more than grammar and mechanics.
- Feedback in the form of marginal and end comments is most effective when the comments balance challenge and support. Writing is tough to do, and most students, from having too little practice, feel inadequate about their writing.
- Instructors can down play the possible confrontational effect of grading by being sensitive to such issues as using sarcasm in their comments, obliterating a student's work with lines and the like.

Example of Analytic Scoring Scale					
Criteria Weight	4	3	2	1	0
1. Recognition of main points -- 30%	(accurate)			(inaccurate)	
2. Ability to summarize -- 10%	(succinct)			(too much/little)	
3. Ability to distinguish and analyze the differences between the two approaches/viewpoints/analyses -- 20%	(clear/insightful)			(vague)	
4. Ability to state a position -- 5%	(clear)			(confusing)	
5. Ability to support a position with information derived from the articles -- 15%	(adequate, logical, refers to articles)			(inadequate, illogical, no reference to articles)	
6. Organization -- 10%	(clear)			(confusing)	
7. Readability: Language use and mechanics -- 10%	(appropriate, correct, contributes to communication)			(inappropriate, incorrect, interferes with communication)	

Note: Scoring guide from Farris (1987).

Holistic Scoring

Writing experts have developed a special process for grading writing -- holistic scoring -- which is especially useful in grading large numbers of essays. Usually, more than one evaluator grades student essays. Using evaluative criteria developed from the learning objectives for a writing assignment, an instructor selects several student essays that exhibit high, average, or low achievement. These models then become the standards by which the instructor and one or more graders evaluate a group of essays. Each evaluator reads the student paper quickly and determines whether it is stronger or weaker than its closest equivalent among model essays.

In a typical English program, holistic scoring is done on a four-point scale. Three model essays are chosen: the 4/3 model is above average, the 3/2 model is average, the 2/1 model is below average. A student essay that is better than the 4/3 model receives a 4. A paper not as good as the 4/3 model, but better than the 3/2 model, receives a 3, and so on. Each rater makes only two decisions: 1) which model essay is most like the student's essay to be scored, and 2) whether it is better than, or worse than, its model counterpart.

When the grader has determined the score of a student essay, she marks the appropriate number in one corner of the front page of the essay, folds down the corner so as not to influence other graders, and passes the paper on to the next grader. When all the papers have been scored at least three times, the final scores are given a letter grade equivalent.



Example

Holistic ratings = Totals = Letter-grade equivalent

$$4 + 4 + 4 = 12 = A$$

$$4 + 4 + 3 = 11 = A-$$

$$4 + 3 + 3 = 10 = B+$$

$$3 + 3 + 3 = 9 = B$$

$$3 + 3 + 2 = 8 = B-$$

$$3 + 2 + 2 = 7 = C+$$

$$2 + 2 + 2 = 6 = C$$

$$2 + 2 + 1 = 5 = C-$$

$$2 + 1 + 1 = 4 = D$$

$$1 + 1 + 1 = 3 = E$$

The qualities each number stands for are as follows:

The **4 essay** will concretely state a thesis that is directly responsive to the assigned topic. The essay will focus on a central idea and show a sure grasp of logical progression. The

thesis will be substantiated with specific examples or details and will reveal the writer's ability to select effective, appropriate words and phrases, to construct and organize sentences, to make careful use of transitional devices and to maintain an appropriate tone throughout. The paper will be free of serious mechanical errors.

The **3 essay** will have a clearly stated thesis that is logically and adequately developed. This essay should contain most of the qualities of good writing itemized in the discussion of the "4" essay, but differs by lacking the real distinction of the latter, although it should show competence. It may contain a thesis that is rather awkward or tedious. Too many examples may be used or occasionally used inappropriately. Word choices and sentence structure should show competence, but may falter occasionally. There may be some mechanical errors, but these should not be numerous or reveal a lack of basic competence.

The **2 essay** will meet only the basic criteria, and those in a minimal way. The paper should present a central idea with sufficient clarity so that the reader is aware of the writer's purpose, but it may take some effort to isolate the writer's point. The organization must be clear enough so the reader can see how the writer means to achieve her purpose, but the organization may be weak. The essay should provide evidence, but it will probably be underdeveloped or poorly related to the central idea. The paper will give one the impression that the writer knows what sentences and paragraphs are, but little else. Mechanical errors will be more frequent with some more serious than in the "3" essay.

The **1 essay** will show very little competence. The thesis, if present, will be difficult to locate or incomprehensible. The paper will not focus on the assigned topic. Instead of a logical progression, there may be nothing more than listed, underdeveloped points, and the mechanical errors will be so substantial as to bring into question the writer's grasp of the most basic compositional and grammatical skills.

As with analytic scoring, it is important that students are made aware of the method of evaluation and criteria in advance of their writing.

Advantages

- **Inter-rater reliability.** Holistic scoring is considered by some to be the most consistent and reliable method of scoring writing available.
- **Efficiency.** Holistic scoring takes much less time to do. Each reader of a holistically scored essay reads the essay through quickly, matching its quality to that of one of the model essays. With the models firmly in mind, a holistic grader's first impressions of an essay are highly reliable.

Weaknesses

- **While the score given will be reliable, the student will not necessarily know the reason behind his grade.** Most instructors go back and make some kind of end comment on holistically scored essays to give the student some idea of why the essay was better or worse than the model essays. Formative comments with regard to specific areas in need of improvement are not available to the student. Model essays can be given to the students for comparison.
- **Holistic grading can be impractical for individual instructors.** While an individual instructor could go through a stack of papers looking for high, middle, and low models and grade the rest of the papers according to these models, the best situation for holistic grading occurs when two or more instructors work together. Holistic grading is ideal for large enrollment courses where two or more TAs are responsible for the grading.



Suggestions -- When Grading Writing

- Peers can provide useful suggestions on their classmates' papers before they turn in the final draft. To help students learn what to look for, examples of old essays (with authors' names deleted) that have been marked showing common problems can be provided.
- More than one draft of a single paper may be useful for learning. Requiring students to resubmit encourages them to work through problems before submitting the final draft.
- How instructors comment can be as important as what they comment on. Writing specialists prefer comments on content problems phrased as questions (e.g., rather than writing "Confusing" in the margins, one might say, "I was with you until you began discussing 'active learning.' What do you mean by 'active learning'? Why is 'active learning' an important point here?").
- Do not use editor's shorthand when commenting on student papers (e.g., "Awk" for "awkward"). While convenient for the instructor, this type of comment lacks explanatory power for the student. If a passage is awkward or a word choice is incorrect, it is more informative to let the student know why.
- Instructors need not feel as though they must find every error in a student paper. Writing specialists recommend putting a check mark in the margins next to a line containing a misspelling or other minor error. This places the burden back on the student to discover the error.
- Not all writing assignments need to be graded. For example, instructors who assign journals often evaluate only a small

percentage of the journal entries students have been assigned to write. The rest of the entries are simply counted to make sure that students are keeping up with their work.

- Occasionally, an instructor will have students who need additional help with their writing. In this case you may contact the Reading Writing Center in the English Department, 644-6495.

**Designing
Essay
Assignments
and Writing
Projects**

Sample Essay Grading Standards

Grading Standards for Written Assignments in AML 3680

Key Elements and Points

Inquiry (30 points)	
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>A</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Based on original, logical, and coherently organized set of ideas. • Presents a clear and persuasive argument; addresses relevant topics in the readings. • Demonstrates an understanding of the topic, the text(s), and the critical issues raised. • Shows a thoughtful understanding of the author's position(s). • Addresses significant points and events in the assigned reading. 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>B</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evidences a true inquiry. • Raises insightful questions occasioned by the text. • Undertakes some sustained inquiry into those questions. • Shows a good, close reading.
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>C</u></p> <p>Essay is marred by one of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of insight • Failure to raise substantive, interpretive questions • Careless reading 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>D</u></p> <p>Essay is marred by one of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of insight • Failure to raise substantive, interpretive questions • Careless reading • Argument is underdeveloped

Research (40 points)	
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>A</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Makes use of brief textual quotes that exemplify significant points in the reading. • Uses specific, relevant examples that back up assertions. • Uses two outside sources accurately and thoughtfully in conversation with the text. • Sources used put the writers and their works in a cultural, critical, geographical, folkloric, and/or historical context. • Sources are cited either in-text or with a "Works Cited" list. Articles are from academic sources and scholarly journals (online scholarly journals suffice). Web articles are used only as leads to track down information, not as sources. • Discusses how the research helps deepen student's understanding of the work. • Includes student's opinion and critical judgments of the material. • Avoids talking about whether student "liked" or "disliked" the reading(s). 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>B</u></p> <p>Paper has what is required for an "A," except one of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not include quotes from the reading(s). • One of the sources falls short. • Missing discussion of how the research helps deepen the understanding of the work. • Student's own opinions are missing. • Paper is what is expected from an adept college junior. • Writing is clear and grammatically correct. • Paper has few, if any, punctuation or spelling errors.
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>C</u></p> <p>Two of the following occurs:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paper has no quotes from reading(s). • Sources fall short (one or both). • Missing discussion of how the research helps deepen understanding of the work. • Student's own opinions are missing. 	<p style="text-align: center;"><u>D</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plot summary, no matter how elegantly written, will not receive a grade higher than a "D." • Some conspicuous flaw usually earns an essay a "D." • Paper contains only minimal textual support. • Paper shows poor or inadequate use of evidence.

Organization (20 points)	
<u>A</u>	<u>B</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assertions, at each turn, are clearly articulated. • Words carry precise meaning, and don't obscure it; sentences use only the words their ideas require, not any more. • Student's critical position vis-à-vis the topic, the major issues, and the author's positions are clearly identified. • Paragraphs have distinct though related roles in the essay's cohesion as a whole, each holding one thoroughly asserted idea (not two competing ideas, not one idea half-asserted). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paper is very good. The writing is clearly, thoughtfully, and effectively executed. • What sometimes prevents an "A" is a lack of one of the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Originality ○ Thorough thinking ○ Careful proofreading
<u>C</u>	<u>D</u>
<p>If two of the following virtues are absent and the other areas of the paper are strong, the essay will usually earn a "C":</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Originality ○ Thorough thinking ○ Careful proofreading 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Paper is weak, behind the curve, less than what is expected from an able college junior. • Paper has problems with: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Organization ○ Careless writing ○ Skimpiness

Grammar (10 points)	
<u>A</u>	
<p>Sentences are without grammatical, spelling, or typographical errors that exacting proofreading would catch.</p>	
<u>C</u>	<u>D</u>
<p>Grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors may exist, but not at severe levels.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problems with sentence clarity • Paper is in dire need of proofreading.



Resources on Student Assessment

Reference

- For FSU's grading system, see the [Florida State University General Bulletin](#).

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