Chapter 8
Grading

Grading is one of the most difficult and perhaps least enjoyable parts of teaching. Teaching assistants often spend too much time grading their students’ work and worrying about it afterward. This chapter is designed to help you make the grading process more efficient, less stressful, and more fair to you and your students.

Grade Calculations

At the beginning of the term, you will want to determine the point values of all assignments and decide how those point totals will convert into a final grade. If you prefer to give letter grades rather than point grades on assignments, be sure to determine a point value for each letter grade (e.g., A+ = 100, A = 95, A− = 90, etc.) so that you have a basis for calculating final grades at the end of the term. At the beginning of the semester, let your students know how their final grade will be calculated; having a transparent grading system gives students a clear sense of where they stand in your course and helps you to be fair and accurate when assigning final grades.

If you plan to use a check/check plus/check minus system for more informal work, think ahead about how these scores will translate into a final grade for that part of the course. The same holds true if you are grading participation.

See appendix A for a detailed example of point values for assignments and how those points convert to a final grade.

Grade Books

When to Make a Grade Book

Wait about two weeks after classes begin before you create your permanent grade book; by then, most students have finished dropping and adding courses from their schedules. For the first two weeks, keep track of absences (and early grades, if applicable) on the attendance sheets.
provided by the department, in a temporary grade book, or by passing around an attendance sheet at the beginning of each class. You can usually acquire a grade book from your department or from a local bookstore.

**How to Organize a Grade Book**

Leave yourself plenty of space in the grade book in case you need to add revised grades, notes, or grade subtotals. It is easiest and clearest if you record absences and grades in different places. If the grade book has internal flaps, you can record grades on one flap and absences on another while using the same list of student names. Alphabetical order for students’ names is a sure bet.

In recording absences, be sure to mark the date of absences in case students question their attendance or the participation part of the final grade. Also record late arrivals if a certain number of these is equivalent to an absence.

In recording graded material, set up columns for different kinds of assignments: papers, lab reports, problem sets, daily homework assignments, exams. Within each larger column, label individual columns for each assignment or exam. By grouping similar assignments in the grade book, you can more easily tally subtotals of the final grade and calculate their percentage of the final grade. In later sections of the grade book, you can reduplicate the class list and keep notes about students’ progress, difficulties, successes, participation, and so on. These notes can be helpful at the end of the term in grading participation and in writing letters of recommendation.

**Using Electronic Grade Books**

Spreadsheet computer programs such as Excel or Claris make computing final grades a snap. The initial programming (e.g., creating the percentage values of each column) can take time, but at the end of the term, once all the grades are entered, the computer does all the math and does it accurately. If you use such a program, set up your columns exactly as you would in a traditional grade book.

Do not necessarily abandon the traditional grade book if you choose to use a computer program. Computers crash; programs (or you!) delete data. In addition, you can carry your grade book with you to record absences during class or assignment grades if you are grading somewhere other than next to your computer.
Preserving Your Records

Your grade book is a critical item, and its loss would be unpleasant for you and your students. To protect yourself and the grades, make photocopies of the grade book every couple of weeks so that you have backup records. If you’re using a computer program, regularly back up and print out the records.

Once the term is over, keep the grade book at least two terms, if not longer. You will need these records if a student questions a grade. And these records can prove invaluable if a student later asks for a letter of recommendation.

Grading Exams

Exams can be some of the easiest material to grade because you (should) have a clear idea of your expectations and because all of your students are answering the same questions. When you sit down to grade a stack of exams, you should have a key to the exam that details the correct (or acceptable) answers and point values for each question. Ideally, you (or your professor) should write this key when you design the exam—this will help ensure that you have a good exam and that your questions have clear right answers (and no typos!).

Grading Logistics

Here are some hints that will save you time and answer many of your students’ postexam questions.

- Every time you subtract points for an answer, write the number of points you are taking off next to the answer.
- Total the number of points taken off in each section or page and circle that total in the margin.
- Then, when you are calculating the final score, you can simply add the negative subtotals (which will be circled) for each section.
- Write, in brief, the correct answer next to the question when you take off points. You do not need to do this if you will review the exam in detail during class, if you will put an answer key on the course web site, or if the student made no attempt to answer the question.
- If you find yourself writing more on the student’s exam than the student did, stop! Determine their final score, put the score at the top
of the exam, and write next to it, “Come see me,” or the equivalent. Then arrange a meeting with this student to find out what happened on the exam.

**Grading Right/Wrong Questions**

Questions that have right or wrong answers (multiple choice, fill in the blank, matching, etc.) are a cinch to grade as long as you know the point value for each question. If you are not going to go over these in class, you should write the correct answer next to each missed question, hand out a copy of the key, or post a copy of the key on the course web site.

**Grading Short Answer Questions**

Most short answer sections involve partial credit. You need to break down the answer and decide how much each part is worth. When you are grading, you can then subtract the given number of points for each part of the answer that is not included. Next to the subtraction, write (in a word or two) the idea that the student missed.

**Grading Essay Questions on Exams**

Grading essay questions on an exam can be a longer version of grading short answer questions. There are, however, some differences. First, decide what major points a student needs to include, how much each point is worth, and how much development of the idea you expect. Next, for each major point, decide how much credit you will give for partially developed answers and vague allusions to the idea in question. You may want to put a check mark next to each significant essay point as you grade.

If you let them, some students will write everything they know that might have anything to do with the correct answer to the question. To avoid this, when you hand out the exam, tell your students that you are aware of this exam-taking strategy. You may even confess to having used this technique yourself. Tell them that such answers are not suitable and that they should be sure to answer the exam question as it is posed to them. Tell students how short their answers can be; if you know that the correct answer only requires a couple of informed paragraphs, tell them so. Having said all this, you are not obligated to give full credit for run-on, buckshot essays.
Adjusting Class Scores

When you grade an exam, be attentive to questions that a great majority of students miss. If you come across one of these, look at the question again to be sure that it is fair. If it is not a fair question, consider dropping it from the exam or lowering its weight in the exam grade.

If all of the scores on an exam are low, the first thing to ask yourself is whether the problem is with the exam or with the students. If it is a problem with the exam, you may need to drop problematic sections from the total score or curve the overall score.

If the problem is with the students (you can usually tell that this is the case if a few students do well on the exam), do not feel you need to adjust the scores. Remember that low scores on tests before the final exam can provide motivation for students to work harder. What you do need to do is speak frankly with your students about their performance.

See “Handing Back Graded Material” in this chapter for more information on what to say when handing back exams with many low scores.

Grading Papers

Some students will complain that paper grades are subjective, and of course, they are to some extent right. But there are some objective standards of good writing. The clearer you can make these standards to yourself and to your students, the easier your grading will be. At the beginning of the term, give students a handout with summaries of your criteria for paper grades (you can attach this to the syllabus). Think about and write these criteria carefully because they are part of the course contract between you and your students.

An A Paper: A paper that is exceptional. It is interesting or unusual and demonstrates sophistication of thought. The main argument and supporting points are clear, complex, and well developed. The structure of the paper follows a clear, logical organization, and all sources are critically examined. It is free of grammatical and spelling errors.

A B Paper: A paper that is solid and fulfills the assignment. It has a clear argument but minor lapses in development. It touches on the complexity of the argument and shows careful reading of the sources. The structure follows a logical progression of ideas, but not all evidence is clearly related to the main ideas. It may contain a few grammatical usage problems but not enough to make reading difficult.

A C Paper: A paper that is adequate but less effective in responding to the assignment. It presents the central idea in general terms and demonstrates
basic comprehension of the sources. It is difficult to find a logical structure to the argument, and the paper often relies on generalizations or unrelated examples. Sentences may be awkward or confusing enough to make reading difficult.

**A D Paper:** A paper that does not have a clear argument or does not respond to the assignment. The argument may be too vague or obvious to be developed, and there is little complexity in the ideas. The organization can be difficult to follow, and the paper offers insufficient evidence.

**An F Paper:** A paper that does not respond to the assignment, has no central argument, and uses no sources. There is little apparent organization. There is no supporting evidence, or it is irrelevant.

**Giving the Assignment**

Tell your students as specifically as you can what you expect, both in terms of content and form, when you hand out or go over the paper assignment. It will not hurt to remind them of these criteria again closer to the due date.

**Content**

If you expect students to use outside sources, tell them; if you do not, tell them. If you expect to see a coherent argument/thesis, remind them (students sometimes believe that factual papers do not need an argument). If you want to encourage them to be creative, tell them. And whenever you can, provide examples. You can, for instance, describe to them the paper you might write if given this assignment and how you might organize it. In addition, be specific about page requirements (e.g., “approximately 5 pages does not mean 3 1/2 pages”) or tell them the word length you have in mind.

**Format**

Give them strict guidelines about font and font size, about spacing, and about margin width—both at the sides and at the top and bottom. Tell them what personal information you need at the top: name, section number, date, assignment number, and so forth. And if you want the paper to have a title (other than, of course, “Assignment 2”), be sure to tell them.
Keeping Control of Grading Time

Grading papers can suck up as much time as you let it. You should not spend more than twenty to thirty minutes grading the standard undergraduate paper (four to seven pages). You are not doing yourself or the student any favors if you take more time than this. Keep a watch nearby and force yourself to check how long each paper is taking you. Make yourself speed up if you are taking more than half an hour per paper.

Taking less time will mean making fewer comments, but students cannot necessarily distinguish between the important and less important points in an extended barrage of comments. Concisely point out the next step the student should take in the improvement of their writing, leaving later steps for your comments on the next assignment.

For example, if a paper is riddled with spelling and usage errors, the main argument is unclear, and the student misunderstood some of the sources, do not aim to comment on all of these problems. Begin by addressing the most fundamental problems—perhaps in this case the coherence of the argument. Then you can point out one major usage problem and tell the student you expect them to use the spell checker. In your comments on the next paper, you can then address the student’s progress with these aspects of the paper and move on to the next step in improving the writing, perhaps the use of secondary material. It will help you to keep a summary of these comments in your grade book so that you can remember from paper to paper where students have been having difficulties. Alternately, you can ask students to attach previous papers and/or drafts (with your comments) when handing in their most recent assignment.

Choosing a Writing Implement

Unless you have a fetish for red, you may want to avoid red pens for grading. Red ink carries a lot of baggage for most students, and they will be more receptive to your comments if they are not red. Purple and green pens work nicely because the colors are dark enough to keep the writing legible; blue pens also can work if you are writing on typewritten essays. Using a pencil is problematic because the lead smears over time and students can, if they are so inspired, change the grade or erase your comments. You do not want to run the risk of having a student
alter a grade written in pencil and then approach you at the end of the
term about a “miscalculation” in their grade.

Moving out of Problem Solving Mode

Problem solving is one of the biggest temptations and biggest traps in
paper grading. When you read an essay that has, for example, serious
organizational problems, your first reaction may be to figure out how to
reorganize the essay so that it makes sense. This is not your job; it is the
student’s job. You can waste an enormous amount of time doing their
work. Instead, you should tell them that the organization is weak and
point out where and why. Ask questions; let them figure out the
answers and how to fix the essay.

DON’T  “The organization of the argument is hard to follow. You talk
first about X and then about Y. You then jump to Z. But X
and Z are related, so why not talk about them together? It
might work well to start with Y because it could tie in with
your introduction. Z is clearly your strongest point, so per-
haps you want to lead up to that. Then you could use the con-
clusion to tie back to the introduction. . . .”

DO    “The organization of the argument is hard to follow. You talk
first about X and then about Y. You then jump to Z. Is there
a logic to this ordering? Which ideas are related, and which
are most important?”

DON’T  “In your argument for legalizing marijuana, you do not
address the arguments against legalization. Many people
would argue that legalizing marijuana will lead to greater use
and to less concern about possible health risks. People may
also stop making a distinction between cigarettes and
pot. . . .”

DO    “In your argument for legalizing marijuana, you need to
address the arguments on the other side of the issue. What
points do people make in favor of keeping the present laws?
How can you counter these? And what is the most effective
way to organize these points and counterpoints when you
revise this paper?”
Giving Feedback throughout the Paper

Begin by skimming through the paper to see the argument and get a sense of the organization (or lack thereof). Next, read the paper carefully with your pen in hand, commenting on ideas and marking specifically targeted areas of the writing. If you are going to grade several papers over the course of the term and you like to use abbreviated editing marks when you grade, provide students with a key at the beginning of the term so that they can understand what you have written on their papers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mark</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>e</em></td>
<td>This word, space, or letter should be deleted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>¶</td>
<td>A new paragraph should begin here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>awk</td>
<td>This construction sounds awkward.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>frag</td>
<td>This is a sentence fragment (i.e., it does not have a subject and a verb!).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sp</td>
<td>Spelling: this word is misspelled.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>Capitalize this letter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>#</td>
<td>You need a space here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(quo status)</td>
<td>These two words should be in the reverse order.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>some one</td>
<td>This is one word.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments on Ideas

The margins are the ideal place to comment on smaller ideas within a paper because you will not have the time or space to mention them in the final comments. If a student makes a particularly good or specious argument, write a note there. If the student makes a confusing point, ask a question there.

Comments on Usage and Style

You cannot comment on everything, so try to be thematic. If the student is having problems with sentence fragments, mark those and do not try to mark all the sections that are consequently choppy. Focus on fixing one significant problem at a time.

If you are factoring grammar into the paper grade, seriously consider
how much weight it should carry compared to the content of the work. Be especially careful about grading students harshly for usage “problems” that are debatable (e.g., split infinitives, ending a sentence with a preposition, singular generic they). And remember that a student’s style and/or dialect may be very different from your own. At the same time, it is true that students’ awkward written grammar can undermine the quality of their writing; use your comments to show them how they might construct sentences more effectively. Along these lines, consider substituting words like “effective” and “ineffective” for “right” and “wrong” in many circumstances.

Comments on Spelling and Typographical Errors

Do not waste time correcting spelling errors and typos. You can circle them as you see them, but you do not have to fix them. If these kinds of mistakes are particularly pervasive in a given essay, make a general comment on the need to proofread and, if appropriate, dock the grade for these mistakes. Students may not see the importance of ridding their papers of “little” mistakes unless they are penalized for them. You can explain to them that their readers may have trouble taking their argument seriously if it is presented sloppily.

Positive Comments

Do not write only negative comments or questions in the margins. If a sentence or paragraph is particularly well written, say so. If an argument is strong or well presented, say so. Students can learn as much from what they do successfully as from what they do unsuccessfully.

Feedback on the Whole Paper

The final comments are the time to address the “bigger picture” of the paper. Tackle the big things like the essay’s argument, the organization, the major supporting arguments or facts, and the overall writing style. Leave the smaller points for the marginal notes. And remember that you do not have to solve the problems—your job is to point them out.

Scope

The key to writing good comments on students’ work is striking the balance between too little and too much. Bear in mind how frustrated you
have been over the years when you have put time into an assignment only to get it back with a grade on the last page. As importantly, remember that students can absorb only so much constructive criticism in one shot. Focus your comments on one or two major issues and perhaps one minor one (e.g., the style of the conclusion) and accept the fact that you cannot cover all the bases in your response to one assignment.

Form

For shorter assignments, writing your comments in the margins and on the last page often works well. For extended essays, teaching assistants generally opt to write a longer set of comments either on the last page or on a separate page stapled to the essay. For these longer sets of comments, it is helpful and kind (if a bit clichéd) to follow the “(Positive comment) but (Negative—yet constructive—comment)” formula.

Example  “You set up the essay beautifully with the story in the beginning, and the conclusion nicely circles back to that story. But the organization of the paragraphs in between is not always clear. . . .”

Or you can use the first sentence to summarize the student’s argument before you discuss its strengths and weaknesses. We recommend starting the comments by addressing the student directly and ending them by signing your name.

Example  “Sarah,

You have chosen a provocative topic, and you clearly recognize the importance of including both sides of the issue. The next step is to think about how you want to organize these ideas. . . . I look forward to reading the next draft.

Jackie”

Legibility

In your comments, legibility is critical. It is incredibly frustrating for students if they cannot read your writing; if you do not write legibly, you might as well not write the comments at all.

If you choose to type your comments, be careful: some teaching assistants have found that their comments sound or become harsher
when they type them, perhaps because they adopt the critical mind-set of their own academic work in front of the computer or, perhaps, simply because typewritten comments look and feel more impersonal. The advantage of typed comments is that you automatically have a record of your comments on all students’ work.

**Monitoring Student Progress**

You may want to keep notes on your own comments so that you can cover different issues on each assignment. You can use pages in the back of your grade book for notes about each student, or you can keep them in a running computer file. You can also ask students to keep their papers and hand in all of the work they have done in your class with each new paper or at the end of the semester. Some teaching assistants warn students about their impending doom if they force the teaching assistant to comment on the same problem twice, but you should remember that the “same” problem can be difficult to define and a student’s concerted effort to work on a problem may not be entirely successful.

**Finding Your Grading Curve**

You have to find the “zone” of grades that makes you feel comfortable and that is acceptable at your university. You want to be sure that you feel comfortable with the grades you give so that you can justify them to your students if you have to. That does not mean giving higher grades; it means understanding what you are conveying through each grade and what the student needs to do to get a higher grade.

Grading gets easier over time as you read more and more undergraduate papers. You acquire a better sense of the range of undergraduate writing and where a given paper falls in that range. And as you get more comfortable with grading, you will feel more confident about the grades that you assign.

Until you gain that confidence, there are strategies you can use to reassure yourself that each student receives the grade they have earned. It is usually easy to know how the papers in a class compare to each other, from the best to the worst. The hard part is knowing what grade that means each paper should get. Grading criteria can provide you with the guidelines and justifications for assigning particular grades. Obviously, if you feel comfortable assigning grades on papers as you
go, this is an efficient and usually effectively accurate way to grade. If you are not yet at that point, you can try one of these strategies.

**Strategy 1**

Comment on the papers completely but do not put a grade on them. As you finish each paper, arrange it in the stack of graded papers from best to worst. When you finish all the papers, decide which papers (if any) deserve an A, which (if any) deserve an F, and where the rest fall in between. You will find that these decisions correspond to your criteria and that your grades are consistent.

**Strategy 2**

Comment on the papers completely and write the grade for each on a separate sheet of paper. You then have the flexibility to change a grade or the overall curve if you realize that you started out too low or too high. Once you are finished grading, go back and write each grade on the corresponding paper.

**Allowing Revision**

Students can learn a great deal from revising their papers, and it can provide your comments on a paper with a direct and immediate purpose. But grading all the revised versions can take a huge amount of your time. Here are a few suggestions.

- Set a limit on the number of papers a student can revise during the term.
- Set a time limit (e.g., two weeks) after you return a set of papers for accepting revised versions. This way, students must be organized and motivated to rewrite the paper; they cannot revise all their papers at the end of the term in a last-ditch effort to raise their grade.
- Warn students that their grades can go down as well as up on a revised paper.
- Establish guidelines for what constitutes “revision”; otherwise students may simply correct the punctuation and turn the paper back in.
• Ask students to turn in the original paper with the revision so that you can compare the two.

**Grading Problem Sets**

The first key to facilitating problem set grading is designing the assignment to be easy to grade. The goal of the entire assignment and of its parts should be clear enough that students know what is expected and you know what you are expecting.

**Setting Guidelines for Students**

Tell students explicitly how you want the problem sets formatted. You may want to provide examples on the board or on a handout. Some features to specify:

• whether the assignment should be typed or neatly written (in pen or in pencil);
• how big/small students can write and how much space they should leave;
• how they should identify the answer (circling it, etc.);
• how much explanation they should provide for steps within the problem (e.g., identify the theorem by name or spell it out);
• your policy on legibility (e.g., if you cannot read it, you will not grade it), decimal places expected, format, and level of detail.

**Setting Point Values**

Decide how many points each assignment is worth and how those points are broken down between the problems. Then determine how you will grade each problem by assigning the amount of credit students will receive for

• the right answer;
• the correct stages/methodology to move toward the answer;
• legibility.
Effort is clearly a subjective basis for grading, and if problem sets are not a major grade, you may choose not to use this as a criterion, or you may incorporate it as part of having the correct stages laid out in a problem. Explain to students how you assign point values at the beginning of the term or before a given assignment if the system changes for various assignments.

**Logistics of Grading Problem Sets**

Subtract points for each problem as you go. For obvious errors, circle the problem and write the point subtraction next to it. If you are taking off additional subjective points, write a short one-sentence or one-phrase comment to explain the error.

*See “Grading Group Work” in this chapter for more information on grading problem sets completed by groups of students.*

**Grading Lab Reports**

**Setting Guidelines for Students**

Lab reports will be easier for you to grade if your students understand your expectations for the content and format of the report.

*See chapter 5, “Lab Reports,” for more information on introducing lab reports.*

**Setting Point Values**

Subdivide the points for each lab report as much as possible; this way, you can give credit for each part of the report the student completes correctly. Obviously, you will want to weight point values toward the interpretive sections of the lab report.

**Logistics of Grading Lab Reports**

Briefly read through all or at least several of the lab reports to determine how students did overall and where you may encounter problems. Once you begin grading, score each section of the lab report separately so that students see their strengths and weaknesses in the presentation of the
results. Write the score for each section in the margin; you can then quickly calculate the overall grade at the end. In the following you will find advice for grading the different parts of lab reports.

**Grading Descriptive Sections**

For sections that address equipment, methods, and other standardized aspects of the lab, you can easily subtract points for missing information. Unless you will review the lab reports in class, briefly note what the students missed.

**Grading Results**

You need to decide how much it matters in the final lab report that the students achieve the results expected from the experiment. Remember, students with little understanding may get perfect results, while students with near-complete understanding may come up with the wrong results.

**Grading Interpretive Sections**

Interpretive sections (e.g., discussion of results, conclusions) require a combination of objective and subjective grading. Determine how much credit you will give for the correct answer(s). Then give yourself a range of points to award for the degree to which a student communicates their understanding of how the results relate to the broader goals of the experiment (this is where students can get credit for “effort”). If you subtract points for lack of understanding, do not feel compelled to explain the problem in depth in the margins; instead, write a question in the margin that directs the student toward the information they missed.

**Grading Troublesome Sections**

Occasionally the whole class will struggle in the write-up of one section of the experiment. When grading these sections, you may want to lower your expectations and grade more leniently. Then, if possible, review this section in class with all the students.

**Grading Group Work**

There are two general philosophies about grading group work: one grade for the entire group or different grades for each group member
based on effort. Some instructors love group work. Other instructors feel that group work allows lazy students to ride on the coattails of their hard-working peers.

1. Each student in the group receives the same grade.

**Pros**
- It is the easiest way to assign grades for group work.
- It can encourage students to make the most of working as a group.
- A combined grade reflects the “real world” consequences of a group effort: it is the final product, not the contributions of each group member, that counts.

**Cons**
- Some students will put in more work than others, but they all will receive the same grade.

2. Each student’s grade is based on their individual contribution to the group project.

**Pros**
- Some students will put in more work than others, and their grades will be higher.
- It can encourage students to work equally hard.

**Cons**
- It can foster tension between group members because they are asked to judge each other’s effort.
- It is a more time-consuming way of assigning grades (see the directions that follow).

**How to Assign Grades Based on Individual Effort**

1. Determine an overall grade for the project.

2. Ask each student to turn in a list of the group members and their perception of the percentage of effort put into the project by each member. Remind students that the percentages should add up to 100 percent.

3. Average the percentages for each student.

4. Adjust each student’s grade according to the percentage they contributed to the project. To do this, multiply the final grade (give it a
number value) by the number of students working on the project. Then for each student, multiply that number by the percentage of effort they contributed. Convert these numbers back to letter grades if necessary.

**Example**  
Overall project grade = B (3.0)

\[ 3.0 \times 4 \text{ students} = 12 \]

All students about Student 1: 25 percent, 25 percent, 30 percent, 20 percent = 25 percent (make this calculation for each student)

Student 1: 25 percent \( \times 12 = 3.0 \) (B)
Student 2: 25 percent \( \times 12 = 3.0 \) (B)
Student 3: 35 percent \( \times 12 = 4.2 \) (A or A+)
Student 4: 15 percent \( \times 12 = 1.8 \) (C–)

**Handing Back Graded Material**

Each student’s grades are between you and that student only. Never hand back graded material in a way that will compromise any student’s confidentiality with regard to their grade (e.g., if you have arranged papers in order by grade, do not hand them back that way). For longer papers, put the grade on the last page with your comments or staple your typed comments to the back of the paper; you then can have students pass the papers to each other. For one-page assignments or exams with a grade on the top, be prepared to walk around the classroom and hand back the material to students individually or put the grade on the back of the assignment.

**Handing Back Papers**

Unless you intend to spend class time making general comments about papers, hand them back at the end of class. If you start by giving students their papers, they will read through your comments instead of paying attention, and students who got low grades may choose not to participate in class because they feel disheartened or because they wish to express a form of protest. Tell students at the beginning of class that you will be handing back papers at the end so that they do not leave early.
Prepare students for the grades. If you know the grades are generally low, tell them so and explain why and where many students had trouble. Explain the weight of this paper and what students can do to improve their grades. If you were disappointed with the papers, tell them so. If you were pleased, tell them so. Positive reinforcement can do wonders for class morale, and it can motivate students who realize their grades are falling below the class standard.

Positive and negative feedback to the entire class can motivate both stronger and weaker students, and it gives them some sense of where their grade fits into the range of grades in the class. Students also find it helpful to have some class or section statistics (e.g., mean, standard deviation, etc.) if they can be made available. Always remind students how they can reach you if they want to talk about their papers more than is possible during class.

**Handing Back Exams**

As with papers, unless you intend to spend class time reviewing the exams, hand them back at the end of class. Tell students the class average or range of grades so they know where they stand. If you are not running a review, briefly explain how you graded the exam and how students can reach you if they have questions.

**Possible Climate Changes**

Returning the first graded assignment can be the “end of the romance.” Assigning grades can sometimes mark a shift in how your students perceive you and the class. Some of them may have seen you as a “friend” or “ally,” and it can be jolting for them to be reminded that you give the grades and they get them. If there is a mood swing in the class with the first set of grades, it is almost always temporary—students rebound and remember that there are many assignments over the term and that the grading criteria are objective standards, not personal ones. Remember that the students are not disappointed in or angry at you; they are more often disappointed in their own performance. Keeping this in mind, do not feel that you need to apologize or to cater to their wishes for high grades or for a “teacher friend”; but do make it clear how they can improve their performance and how you can facilitate that.

In preparing your lesson plans, you may want to make sure that your
classes that day and the next involve a high level of student participation so that students continue to feel invested in the success of the class.

“In trying to explain to students how grades measure mastery rather than simply reward effort, I talk about the football team. I remind them that lots of players go to practice every single day and often practice even harder than the starting players, but they understand that this does not necessarily mean that they will get to start.”

In-Class Review of Exams

There are times when you should devote part of a class period to reviewing exams because your feedback will apply to all the students. Reviewing an exam is a form of teaching; you will be reviewing or clarifying material that should be (but clearly isn’t!) familiar to your students. Also, reviewing an exam in class can ease the work of grading: you only need to subtract points and not provide reasons on the exam itself.

When to Begin the Review

Unless you intend to spend the whole class period on exam review, you should always do an exam review toward the end of class. Once you hand back exams, students will be distracted and unable to focus on any other agenda. Decide how much time you will need to address the biggest problem areas of the exam and set aside that much time at the end of class.

Ending the Review

Another benefit of reviewing the exam near the end of class is that you have a clear-cut end to the discussion. If the class period ends before you have had the chance to address important questions brought up by your students, you can take more time to go over the exam during the next class meeting. If you have a few students with very specific questions, invite them to your office hours for a more tailored exam review.

How to Run the Review

After grading the exams, you will have a sense of the areas where students had trouble. You may want to begin the review by identifying the sections where most students did not have problems. Tell your class
that you do not have time to review these sections but that, if they have questions, they should come talk to you after class or during office hours.

Take the section of the exam that gave students the most trouble and tell the students that many of them struggled with this section. You then can ask, “What do you think it is about this section that made it so hard for you?” This will get the discussion started.

Let the students help each other get the right answers. Moderate the discussion so that students listen to each other and do not get sidetracked.

Do not suggest to your students that they are dumb.

DON’T “Other students have not had trouble with this exam in the past—there is no good reason why you all should have performed so poorly.”

Do “I was surprised by the low scores. What do you think went wrong?”

“How did you study for this exam? What might change in your approach to studying next time?”

“Do you have thoughts about what we can do in class to make you feel more prepared for the next exam?”

Do more than just give out the answers.

DON’T “Number one. The right answer is X. Number two . . .”

Do “Number one was definitely hard. What are some good examples you could have used to demonstrate the concept?”

“For number three, most of you knew that X was wrong, but you couldn’t explain why. What thoughts do you have about it now?”

“For number five, many of you got the gist of the essay, but you were short on specifics. What important points belong in this essay?”

“For number seven, you had the facts for the essay but trouble organizing. Let’s get those facts up on the board and figure out how to get them in an order that makes sense.”
Make the review instructive, not humiliating.

**DON’T** Call on specific students for answers and force them to reveal their shortcomings to their classmates.

**Do** Let students volunteer to answer questions with which they are comfortable or to contribute to an ongoing discussion of the correct answers.

Help students get the information they may be reluctant to request.

**DON’T** Make students ask about questions that they got wrong.

**Do** Emphasize that certain questions were hard for everyone and initiate the discussion of these questions yourself. And always invite your students to ask about questions you have not addressed if time is still available.

### Late Work

Most teaching assistants penalize students for turning work in late. If you have a strict due date, it is only fair to the students who turn in their work on time to take points off for late assignments. You should decide at the beginning of the semester how you will deal with late assignments and make your policy clear in your syllabus. For example, many teaching assistants subtract part of a grade for every day that an assignment is overdue. By outlining your policy in advance and sticking to it, you (and your students) will not need to worry about whether you are being unfair by penalizing students for late work. When you grade an assignment that has been handed in late, be clear in your feedback about how the grade was influenced by lateness as opposed to the quality of the work (e.g., “B → B– (late)

Think carefully before adopting a “no late work accepted” policy. Imagine a scenario in which a good, conscientious student misses a deadline by an hour because the power went out and their final grade suddenly drops by a full letter because you must give them a zero for the assignment.

### Missed Exams

The policy on missed exams may be dictated and announced by the professor of the course. If not, tell students in advance what will happen if they miss an exam. Given that students know the dates of the exams
well in advance, it is not unreasonable to tell students that they should only miss an exam for illness or an emergency and that they should have proof of the reason for the absence. You can tell students that they will be allowed to make up an exam only if they bring you a note from a doctor or some proof of an emergency. If you are clear from the beginning of the semester that you have a strict policy about missed exams, you will be less likely to have students missing exams during the semester.

There are a few ways for a student to make up an exam.

- Write another exam that is sufficiently distinct from the one given in class and administer it to the student.
- Ask the student to write one or two short essays on topics that were covered by the exam.
- Consider the exam “missed” and double the weight of the following exam in the final grade.

What you do will depend on the nature and content of your course. What matters most is that you make your policy clear from the outset and that your policy does not unduly penalize students with a legitimate reason for missing the exam.

**Calculating Final Grades**

This often tedious process can be dramatically accelerated by using a computer program with mathematical capabilities. It can track scores throughout the semester, and it can quickly and accurately compute final grades once the last assignments are entered.

**Calculating Class Participation**

Regardless of how objective you make your grading over the course of the semester, calculating class participation is inherently subjective. The best approach is to grade students relative to each other on this dimension. However, consider all of the ways students can participate in the class and take these into account when calculating a participation grade. For example, a student may have said very little in class but may have been an active contributor to a class e-mail group. The grade should reflect the student’s overall involvement in the course, not just their participation in group discussions. Calculating participation throughout the term can make the process easier and result in a more
balanced assessment; two possible strategies are described in the following sections.

Grading Participation Weekly

One way to promote objectivity in grading participation is to make yourself grade each student’s participation at the end of every week. This way, you can credit students for a particularly strong or weak performance that you may later forget. Then, at the end of the semester, you can average these weekly grades for an overall participation grade.

Having Students Grade Their Own Participation

In courses in which class participation is a critical part of the grade (e.g., foreign language classes), you may want to open a dialogue with students about their level of participation. On a regular basis (weekly or biweekly), you can ask students to submit a piece of paper on which they grade their own participation for that period and provide an explanation of the grade. You can return this paper during the next class meeting with your grade for them and an explanation of it. This way, students can be clear about your expectations and what they need to do to maintain or improve their participation grade.

Grading Final Exams and Papers

As you grade final work, particularly exams, bear in mind that for many courses, a significant number of students will not pick up the work once the course is over and they have received their grade. This does not mean that you should grade any less carefully, but you can limit your written comments. If you know that a student plans to pick up the work or has asked you to send it to their home, you can focus your efforts accordingly.

Returning Final Exams and Papers

Before the term ends, tell students how they can pick up or receive their final work. There are a few options.

- If appropriate, leave exams and papers with the support staff in your departmental office. Tell students that they can pick up their work during regular business hours.
• Schedule an extra set of office hours at the end of the grading period so that students can stop by to pick up their work.

• Tell students to turn in a stamped, self-addressed envelope with the exam or the final paper and you will mail the work to them.

We do not encourage you to leave a box of final work in the hall outside your office. This violates students’ privacy and invites theft and destruction of property. Some universities even prohibit leaving student work in public areas like this. It is more difficult to schedule times and ways for students to pick up their work from you individually, but it is an important end to your contract with the students in the course.

**Posting Final Grades**

Now that final grades are often available to students on the Internet within days (or minutes) after you submit them, the need to post grades is becoming more obsolete. If you post grades outside your door, do so by student number (and make sure that the listing of numbers does not correspond to alphabetical order).

**Further Reading**


