

# Grading Practices

There are no hard-and-fast rules about the best ways to grade. In fact, as Erickson and Strommer (1991) point out, how you grade depends a great deal on your values, assumptions, and educational philosophy: if you view introductory courses as "weeder" classes—to separate out students who lack potential for future success in the field—you are likely to take a different grading approach than someone who views introductory courses as teaching important skills that all students need to master.

All faculty agree, however, that grades provide information on how well students are learning (Erickson and Strommer, 1991). But grades also serve other purposes. Scriven (1974) has identified at least six functions of grading:

- To describe unambiguously the worth, merit, or value of the work accomplished
- To improve the capacity of students to identify good work, that is, to improve their self-evaluation or discrimination skills with respect to work submitted
- To stimulate and encourage good work by students
- To communicate the teacher's judgment of the student's progress
- To inform the teacher about what students have and haven't learned
- To select people for rewards or continued education

For some students, grades are also a sign of approval or disapproval; they take them very personally. Because of the importance of grades, faculty need to communicate to students a clear rationale and policy on grading.

If you devise clear guidelines from which to assess performance, you will find the grading process more efficient, and the essential function of grades—communicating the student's level of knowledge—will be easier. Further, if you grade carefully and consistently, you can reduce the number of students who complain and ask you to defend a grade. The suggestions below are

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designed to help you develop clear and fair grading policies. For tips on calculating final grades, see "Calculating and Assigning Grades."

## ***General Strategies***

**Grade on the basis of students' mastery of knowledge and skills.** Restrict your evaluations to academic performance. Eliminate other considerations, such as classroom behavior, effort, classroom participation, attendance, punctuality, attitude, personality traits, or student interest in the course material, as the basis of course grades. If you count these non-academic factors, you obscure the primary meaning of the grade, as an indicator of what students have learned. For a discussion on why not to count class participation, see "Encouraging Student Participation in Discussion." (Source: Jacobs and Chase, 1992)

**Avoid grading systems that put students in competition with their classmates and limit the number of high grades.** These normative systems, such as grading on the curve, work against collaborative learning strategies that have been shown to be effective in promoting student learning. Normative grading produces undesirable consequences for many students, such as reduced motivation to learn, debilitating evaluation anxiety, decreased ability to use feedback to improve learning, and poor social relationships. (Sources: Crooks, 1988; McKeachie, 1986)

**Try not to overemphasize grades.** Explain to your class the meaning of and basis for grades and the procedures you use in grading. At the beginning of the term, inform students, in writing (see "The Course Syllabus") how much tests, papers, homework, and the final exam will count toward their final grade. Once you have explained your policies, avoid stressing grades or excessive talk about grades, which only increases students' anxieties and decreases their motivation to do something for its own sake rather than to obtain an external reward such as a grade. (Sources: Allen and Rueter, 1990; Fuhrmann and Grasha, 1983)

**Keep students informed of their progress throughout the term.** For each paper, assignment, midterm, or project that you grade, give students a sense of what their score means. Try to give a point total rather than a letter grade. Letter grades tend to have emotional associations that point totals lack. Do show the range and distribution of point scores, and indicate what level of performance is satisfactory. Such information can motivate students to improve if they are doing poorly or to maintain their performance if they

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are doing well. By keeping students informed throughout the term, you also prevent unpleasant surprises at the end. (Sources: Lowman, 1984; Shea, 1990)

### ***Minimizing Students' Complaints About Grading***

**Clearly state grading procedures in your course syllabus, and go over this information in class.** Students want to know how their grades will be determined, the weights of various tests and assignments, and the model of grading you will be using to calculate their grades: will the class be graded on a curve or by absolute standards? If you intend to make allowances for extra credit, late assignments, or revision of papers, clearly state your policies.

**Set policies on late work.** Will you refuse to accept any late work? Deduct points according to how late the work is submitted? Handle late work on a case-by-case basis? Offer a grace period? See "Preparing or Revising a Course."

**Avoid modifying your grading policies during the term.** Midcourse changes may erode students' confidence in your fairness, consistency, objectivity, and organizational skills. If you must make a change, give your students a complete explanation. (Source: Frisbie, Diamond, and Ory, 1979)

**Provide enough opportunities for students to show you what they know.** By giving students many opportunities to show you what they know, you will have a more accurate picture of their abilities and will avoid penalizing a student who has an off day at the time of a test. So in addition to a final exam, give one or two midterms and one or two short papers. For lower-division courses, Erickson and Strommer (1991) recommend giving shorter tests or written assignments and scheduling some form of evaluation every two or three weeks.

**Consider allowing students to choose among alternative assignments.** One instructor presents a list of activities with assigned points for each that take into account the assignments' educational and motivational value, difficulty, and probable amount of effort required. Students are told how many points are needed for an A, a B, or a C, and they choose a combination of assignments that meets the grade they desire for that portion of the course. Here are some possible activities:

- Writing a case study
- Engaging in and reporting on a fieldwork experience

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- Leading a discussion panel
- Serving on a discussion panel
- Keeping a journal or log of course-related ideas
- Writing up thoughtful evaluations of several lectures
- Creating instructional materials for the course (study guides, exam questions, or audiovisual materials) on a particular concept or theme
- Undertaking an original research project or research paper
- Reviewing the current research literature on a course-related topic
- Keeping a reading log that includes brief abstracts of the readings and comments, applications, and critiques
- Completing problem-solving assignments (such as designing an experiment to test a hypothesis or creating a test to measure something)

(Source: Davis, Wood, and Wilson, 1983)

**Stress to students that grades reflect work on a specific task and are not judgments about people.** Remind students that a teacher grades only a piece of paper. You might also let students know, if appropriate, that research shows that grades bear little or no relationship to measures of adult accomplishment (Eble, 1988, p. 156).

Give **encouragement to students who are performing poorly.** If students are having difficulty, do what you can to help them improve on the next assignment or exam. If they do perform well, take this into account when averaging the early low score with the later higher one. (Source: Lowman, 1984)

**Deal directly with students who are angry or upset about their grade.** Ask an upset student to take a day or more to cool off. It is also helpful to ask the student to prepare in writing the complaint or justification for a grade change. When you meet with the student in your office, have all the relevant materials at hand: the test questions, answer key or criteria, and examples of good answers. Listen to the student's concerns or read the memo with an open mind and respond in a calm manner. Don't allow yourself to become antagonized, and don't antagonize the student. Describe the key elements of a good answer, and point out how the student's response was incomplete or incorrect. Help the student understand your reasons for assigning the grade that you did. Take time to think about the student's request or to reread the exam if you need to, but resist pressures to change a grade because of a student's personal needs (to get into graduate school or maintain status on the dean's list). If appropriate, for final course grades, offer to write a letter to

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the student's adviser or to others, describing the student's work in detail and indicating any extenuating circumstances that may have hurt the grade. (Sources: Allen and Rueter, 1990; McKeachie, 1986)

**Keep accurate records of students' grades.** Your department may keep copies of final grade reports, but it is important for you to keep a record of all grades assigned throughout the semester, in case a student wishes to contest a grade, finish an incomplete, or ask for a letter of recommendation.

### *Making Effective Use of Grading Tactics*

**Return the first graded assignment or test before the add/drop deadline.** Early assignments help students decide whether they are prepared to take the class (Shea, 1990). Some faculty members give students the option of throwing out this first test (Johnson, 1988). Students may receive a low score because they did not know what the instructor required or because they underestimated the level of preparation needed to succeed.

**Record results numerically rather than as letter grades, whenever possible.** Tests, problem sets, homework, and so on are best recorded by their point value to assure greater accuracy when calculating final grades. (Source: Jacobs and Chase, 1992)

**Give students a chance to improve their grades by rewriting their papers.** Many faculty encourage rewriting but do not count the grades on rewritten papers as equivalent to those of papers that have not been rewritten. See "Helping Students Write Better in All Courses."

**If many students do poorly on an exam, schedule another one on the same material a week or so later.** Devote one or more classes to reviewing the troublesome material. Provide in-class exercises, homework problems or questions, practice quizzes, study group opportunities, and extra office hours before you administer the new exam. Though reviewing and retesting may seem burdensome and time-consuming, there is usually little point in proceeding to new topics when many of your students are still struggling. (Source: Erickson and Strommer, 1991)

### *Evaluating Your Grading Policies*

**Compare your grade distributions with those for similar courses in your department.** Differences between your grade distributions and those of your colleagues do not necessarily mean that your methods are faulty. But

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glaring discrepancies should prompt you to reexamine your practices. (Source: Frisbie, Diamond, and Ory, 1979)

**Ask students about your grading policies on end-of-course questionnaires.** Here are some sample questions (adapted from Frisbie, Diamond, and Ory, 1979, p. 22):

To what extent:

- Were the grading procedures for the course fair?
- Were the grading procedures for the course clearly explained?
- Did you receive adequate feedback on your performance?
- Were requests for regrading or review handled fairly?
- Did the instructor evaluate your work in a meaningful and conscientious manner?

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