

Responding to and Grading Student Writing

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Grading writing assignments is often the task that teachers like the least, but there are ways to make this process easier as well as more helpful and more transparent for students. The following tips are adapted from a variety of texts for writing teachers, presented here with teachers of other disciplines in mind.

- **Read the work as a real reader would.** Read for the ideas the writer has presented and think about these ideas from the perspective of the intended audience of the piece.
- **Reserve judgment (and do not comment) until you've read the whole paper.** Think about how well the work responds to the assignment and how well it shows the student's ability to master the course outcome(s) assessed.
- **Comment first on content, and be as specific as possible.** A note that says "good" in the margin is less helpful to the student than "accurate use of culinary math concepts in this paragraph."
- **Ask questions to help push students' critical thinking abilities.** Instead of indicating an error in thinking, ask "What would happen if the weather were more humid when you were baking this kind of bread?"
- **Balance laudatory and instructive comments.** Students can learn as much from what they are doing well as they can from what needs improvement.
- **Don't mark all errors.** Instead, identify a pattern of error (fragments, comma errors, etc.) and suggest that the student work with a writing tutor to learn how to find and edit their own errors.
- **Keep comments brief on final drafts that students will not be revising.** Extensive comments on final papers at the end of the term often go unread and will not necessarily help the student improve on future papers.
- **Write a few sentences at the end summarizing your overall evaluation of the paper.** Praise what went well, suggest further work in weaker areas.
- **Explain your grading decision.** You may want to use a rubric to help you come to a decision on a grade or a score sheet. If these are completed and returned to the student, they will provide justification for the grade assigned. (The less information in the grading sheet, however, the more needed in the summary comment.)
- **For journal entries, consider commenting only on content.** Students sometimes need the freedom to get ideas on paper without worrying about correctness.

In the following pages, I've created several kinds of assessment sheets, all based on generic criteria. You are welcome to use and adapt these in any way that works for your class and assignments.

For journal entries, keep the grading as simple as possible.

In this grid, place check marks in the appropriate box on the right to show how closely the student's work corresponds with the description of excellent work on the left.

Scoring guide for journal entries

Excellent work does the following:	Good	Average	Poor
Addresses the prompt in a thoughtful, original way			
Demonstrates excellent critical thinking; pushes beyond the obvious			
Connects ideas to class lectures			
Meets length requirement			
Comment:			

if a student earns all checks in the good column, the entry might earn five points. All checks in the average column might earn 3 points, and all checks in the poor column might earn 1 point. 4s and 2s can be assigned for checks falling in various columns.

Criteria near the top of the list can be weighted more heavily than items near the bottom.

For each criterion, circle the relevant descriptive word at the right, and then determine an overall evaluation.

Rubric for a paragraph-length assignment

	Good or very good work in this area (Grade of A or B)	Passing work in this area. (Grade of C)	Work in this area would not be passing for this class (Grade of D or F)
Focus and accuracy	Paragraph responds to the assignment and the learning objectives with excellent focus and accuracy as well as originality and strong critical thinking.	Paragraph mostly responds to the assignment and learning objectives but does not display originality or strength in critical thinking.	Paragraph is too general to represent well-focused, original thinking, OR paragraph moves off the topic assigned.
Topic sentence: first sentence that introduces the focused subject of the paragraph	Topic sentence is clear, strong, and controls the paragraph.	Effort at a topic sentence is evident, but the idea presented may not accurately encompass the paragraph.	No topic sentence is present OR the topic sentence does not clearly relate to the support sentences in the paragraph.
Focused supporting sentences	Every sentence has a clear connection to the topic.	One or two sentences may move off topic, at least from a reader's perspective.	Supporting sentences cover several topics that might be more appropriately developed in separate paragraphs.
Supporting detail	Ample, specific, and appropriate descriptive detail is used to develop this paragraph.	Some detail may be used, but no enough or not appropriate for the assignment.	Descriptive details that would help illustrate ideas are absent, thus making the paragraph too general.
Sentence clarity	Sentences are clear, correct, and effective.	Sentences may contain errors that confuse the reader.	Sentences contain numerous errors that do not reflect college-level work.
Formatting, length, submission details	This paper is formatted according to course expectations, is of adequate length for the assignment and is submitted as requested.	This paper may contain errors in formatting, may be slightly shorter than required, or was not submitted as requested.	This paper does not follow guidelines for formatting, length, or submission.

Comment:

Summary comments are a good place to provide positive reinforcement in your own voice. Try to offer commentary on good aspects of students' writing as well as areas for improvement.

Criteria and questions are provided on the left.

For each criterion, circle the relevant descriptive word at the right, and then determine an overall evaluation term. Criteria near the top of the list often “weigh” more heavily than items near the bottom.

Evaluation sheet

Learning outcome(s) Does the student show competence in the outcome(s) being assessed?	Excellent	Very good	Adequate	Weak	Poor
Follows assignment, uses critical thinking Did the student complete the assignment given and show depth of thought?	Excellent	Very good	Adequate	Weak	Poor
Development Did the student say enough on the topic?	Excellent	Very good	Adequate	Weak	Poor
Detail/evidence Did the student use enough and appropriate details for the given audience and purpose?	Excellent	Very good	Adequate	Weak	Poor
Documentation of sources (if applicable to the assignment) Did the student use an acceptable documentation style to give credit to sources and avoid plagiarism?	Excellent	Very good	Adequate	Weak	Poor
Sentence clarity Is the work carefully edited and proofread?	Excellent	Very good	Adequate	Weak	Poor
Assignment specifications Did the student meet all requirements?	Excellent	Very good	Adequate	Weak	Poor
Overall evaluation	Excellent	Very good	Adequate	Weak	Poor

Summary comments:

When using rubrics with generic descriptors, the summary comment becomes even more valuable to the student. Comment on the content of the work.

This score sheet provides specific criteria with descriptions of best work.

Write a score in the points earned column, total up the points.

Score sheet

Criterion	Description of A-level work	Points earned
Learning outcome(s) (Does the student show competence in the outcomes being assessed?)	Work demonstrates outstanding evidence of meeting the outcome(s) relevant to this assignment (as noted in the assignment sheet)	___ / 20
Follows assignment, uses critical thinking (Did the student complete the assignment given?)	Addresses the assignment as written and applies course content in an original, unique, and creative way; work shows significant depth critical thinking.	___ / 20
Development (Did the student say enough on the topic?)	Provides a thorough discussion of all elements as required by the assignment sheet	___ / 15
Detail/evidence (Did the student use enough and appropriate details for the given audience and purpose?)	Provides a level of detail that is appropriate and clear for the audience and purpose of the assignment; detail is discussed and connected to the main points being made	___ / 15
Documentation of sources (if applicable to the assignment) (Did the student use an acceptable documentation style to give credit to sources and avoid plagiarism?)	Provides responsible, thorough and accurate documentation of any sources used for the assignment	___ / 10
Sentence clarity (Is the work carefully edited and proofread?)	Use clear, cogent language that is appropriate for the audience and situation, is free of sentence-level errors, and is formatted according to assignment sheet specifications	___ / 10
Assignment specifications (Did the student meet all requirements?)	Meets all assignment sheet specifications for format, page or word-length, preliminary (process) assignments, etc.	___ / 10
Point earned/points possible		___ / 100
Comments:		

Write a summary comment that explains the strengths and weaknesses that justify the overall grade.

The middle column could also be printed without text and the instructor can write in comments.

Criteria normally are presented in order of importance to the teacher/assignment.

Generic rubric for essays

	A-level	B-level	C-level	D-level	F-level
Learning outcome(s) (Does the student show competence in the outcomes being assessed?)	Work demonstrates outstanding evidence of meeting the outcome(s) relevant to this assignment (as noted in the assignment sheet)	Work demonstrates better than average competence in the outcome(s) assessed with this assignment.	Work shows average competence in the outcome(s) assessed, but student will benefit from further practice	Work does not show competence in the outcome(s) assessed but familiarity with the concepts is evident	Work does not demonstrate adequate progress toward competence in this the outcome(s) assessed
Follows assignment, uses critical thinking (Did the student complete the assignment given?)	Addresses the assignment as written and applies course content in an original, unique, and creative way; work shows significant depth critical thinking	Addresses the assignment as written with some areas of uniqueness and creativity; some critical thinking evident	Addresses the assignment as written and with standard responses; relatively little evidence of critical thinking	Work may only tangentially address the assignment as written; work submitted may show little evidence of critical thinking	Work does not address the assignment as written; assignment submitted shows no critical thinking
Development (Did the student say enough on the topic?)	Provides a thorough discussion of all elements as required by the assignment sheet	Provides discussion of required elements but needs more development; OR provides thorough discussion of most elements (one/some may be missing)	Provides discussion of only a few of the required elements as noted in the assignment sheet; OR Provides mention but not a thorough discussion of required elements	Major gaps may be evident in the paper.	Assignment is underdeveloped and does not meet the passing-level expectations of the assignment
Detail/evidence (Did the student use enough and appropriate details for the given audience and purpose?)	Provides a level of detail that is appropriate and clear for the audience and purpose of the assignment; detail is discussed and connected to the main points being made	Provides appropriate detail in most sections; may need more detail in some areas for the audience and purpose assigned; may lack some discussion connecting details to main points	Provides very little detail to support the discussion for this audience and purpose; OR detail may be mentioned but not adequately discussed	Some detail provided, but no discussion is present to explain or connect detail to main points; work shows lack of understanding of audience's needs or purpose of paper	Work lacks adequate detail for this audience and purpose

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<p>Documentation of sources (if applicable to the assignment) (Did the student use an acceptable documentation style to give credit to sources and avoid plagiarism?)</p>	<p>Provides responsible, thorough and accurate documentation of any sources used for the assignment</p>	<p>Provides responsible documentation of all source use with occasional minor errors</p>	<p>Provides adequate indication of source usage, but may contain several errors in style/format</p>	<p>Effort at documentation is present but does not demonstrate college-level competence in this area</p>	<p>Lacks adequate documentation of source use (this may be grounds for failure of the paper regardless of success in other areas)</p>
<p>Sentence clarity (Is the work carefully edited and proofread?)</p>	<p>Use clear, cogent language that is appropriate for the audience and situation, is free of sentence-level errors, and is formatted according to assignment sheet specifications</p>	<p>Uses clear, mostly correct writing; may need further proofreading, but errors do not interfere with clarity for the intended audience and situation</p>	<p>Sentences may contain one or two patterns of error; these occasionally interfere with clear communication of ideas; editing needed</p>	<p>Sentences contain numerous errors such that ideas are often unclear; editing skills need development</p>	<p>Sentences contain significant patterns of error; regular work with a tutor is highly recommended</p>
<p>Assignment specifications (Did the student meet all requirements?)</p>	<p>Meets all assignment sheet specifications for format, page or word-length, preliminary (process) assignments, etc.</p>	<p>Meets most assignment sheet specifications for format, page or word-length, preliminary (process) assignments, etc.</p>	<p>Meets some assignment sheet specifications for format, page or word-length, preliminary (process) assignments, etc.</p>	<p>Meets few assignment sheet specifications for format, page or word-length, preliminary (process) assignments, etc.</p>	<p>Does not meet assignment sheet specifications for format, page or word-length, preliminary (process) assignments, etc.</p>

Circle or highlight the box or text that most closely describes the student's work, and then determine an overall evaluation.