

Assessing And Grading Student Writing

Carolyn Haynes
Director of Windate Writing Center
Miami University (Ohio)

Note

Any faculty member knows that one of the toughest aspects of instruction is figuring out how to evaluate a student's writing. Fortunately, there are a number of different ways faculty can assess writing, some of which are explained below. No matter which approach you use for assessing writing, it is important that you find ways to communicate to students the strengths of their writing as well as areas needing improvement. Good assessment also helps students to see their progress over time so that they are aware of the learning that has happened throughout the course.

Grading Using Specified Criteria and Rubrics

Grading—or the assigning of a formal letter grade (A-F)—is the most traditional form of assessment. Yet, grades alone do little to help the student improve their writing. Thus, at the very least, you should include a narrative or short set of comments that explains your assessment of their writing to accompany the grade.

You can cut down on grade complaints and also improve students' learning by offering students a clear set of criteria for the writing assignment. This criteria should be clearly stated on the assignment prompt so that students are aware of how you will be evaluating the paper.

Another effective technique is to establish a rubric or scoring scale for each assignment. A scoring scale takes a lot of initial time to create--but it will help you to be more clear about what you are looking for in writing and thus to teach it better. It will also save you time when grading papers, and it will reduce grade complaints and help you be more clear about your writing expectations.

To do this, you need to come up with traits that you deem important to succeed in a given assignment (e.g., organization, thesis, materials and methods). Then you set up a 2 to 5-point scale for each trait. I have used a five-point scale. The scale consists of descriptive statements that identify what it means to perform that trait extremely well, moderately well, adequately, and poorly.

Scoring Scale for Argument Paper	
Score	Trait
5	Original and clearly stated thesis, persuasive, well-organized, imaginative use of source material
4	Clearly stated thesis, good use of sources, well organized
3	Obvious or general thesis; facts straight with a reasonable explanation of the subject under consideration
2	Poorly stated thesis, inadequate survey of available sources, poor organization

You check off where the student falls in each category, and this helps you arrive at a grade and a more detailed and exact idea of where the student is proficient and where she is deficient. I usually weight the traits to arrive at a grade. Certain traits count for more than others.

Margin Comments

These comments are often questions, concerns, interjections or thoughts that occur to the faculty member as he or she reads the paper. Using questions or comments to prompt the student to think more deeply or reflect more on an area is an important way to improve students' learning and to open up a dialogue between you and the student. Occasionally, some instructors use margin comments to point out mechanical or grammatical errors. In order not to overwhelm a student, try to limit your grammatical/mechanical comments to those errors most needing improvement. Look for one or two major problems, and focus on those.

Because margin comments are so brief, they should be accompanied by some comments at the end of the paper that summarize your general evaluation.

Narrative Evaluations

A narrative is generally one of the most preferred method of writing assessment because it generally allows you to create a conversation with the student about his or her strengths and weaknesses. Most instructors include a narrative at the end of each paper, but some type out their narrative responses to student work.

Narratives (often written in a letter format) also can be used to accompany a mid-term or an end-of-the-semester grade. Although mid- and end-of-the-semester narrative evaluations can be time-consuming, they can be highly beneficial. To expedite the process of writing these evaluations, you should create a system (checklist, running file, a set of symbols) for making notes or comments about a student's work throughout the semester. That way, you don't have to review every paper a student has written before composing the evaluation.

Contract or Criterion-Based Grading

Some instructors have had great success creating learning contracts with their students. In this case, the instructor (or more often the student along with the instructor) creates a set of criteria for students to achieve or complete by the end of a semester. The grade is determined by how many and how well the criteria are met. Because students often work with the instructor to determine the items on the contract, contract grading is an excellent means of helping students to take ownership of their own learning. It is important that the contract not contain only clear-cut items such as "attended class" or "wrote three papers." It should also include criteria that measure quality.

Portfolio

In the portfolio grading system, students collect their work throughout the semester in a folder or binder. Portfolios encourage revision and help to gauge progress made over the course of a semester. Some instructors ask students to collect and submit all of their work: in-class writing,

journal entries, drafts and polished projects. Others ask students to submit a certain number of their best writing at the end of the semester.

One successful method of portfolio evaluation incorporates reflection by asking students to write a cover letter for each major project in the portfolio or for the whole set of materials in the portfolio. In these letters, students address the rhetorical strategies they used, how their thinking and writing changed from first draft to last (or from first paper to last), what strengths and weaknesses they perceive in their writing, and what they have learned about themselves as a scholar and writer.

Student Guided Instructional Description (SGID)

In SGID, a colleague from the university comes into your classroom (generally in the middle of the semester) when you are not present. That person asks the students two main questions: “What makes this classroom community a successful learning environment?” and “What would make this a better classroom community?” SGIDs are not a place for students to grouse about the professor or a course; it forces students to think constructively about how to improve the course and classroom dynamics.

You can invite someone you know to do this or ask the MCIS Teaching Technologies Center who will do this assessment for you for free. Once you receive the feedback from the session, you should discuss the results with your students and the plans you and they have for improvement.

Class Dialogue

A less formal way to receive feedback is to ask students to get into small groups and discuss what they feel is going well in the course what they would like to see changed. You probably will not get as honest feedback this way as you would doing an SGID, but you will get the comments in a more timely fashion. You can have the students hand in their lists from the small groups for you to review alone; or, you can put a master list on the board for further discussion. As in the SGID, steer students away from making a list of complaints and toward creating constructive suggestions.

Individual Conference

Another highly effective, but time-consuming way of assessing students’ writing and performance in a course is to meet with them once or twice during the semester in an individual conference. Conferences allow the instructor and student to build trust and to focus on individual concerns in an in-depth manner. In a conference, the professor and student spend 15-30 minutes together to exchange feedback.

Conferences can address a certain piece of student writing (discussing a draft in progress), a series of papers (discussing writing trends and the progress of the student overall), or the course itself (exchanging ideas on how both the student and faculty can improve). Sometimes, it helps if you give the student a list of questions or topics that will be covered in the conference so that they come prepared to discuss.

Self- and Peer-Evaluation

The university requires students to complete an evaluation of the course and the professor, but rarely are students asked to assess their own performance at the end of the semester or at the end of a project. Asking students to assess their own performance and progress helps them to be more conscious of their learning and to appreciate the course assignments. Self-evaluations can be done by requiring a reflective essay at the end of the course, asking for a reflective memo or paragraph after each paper, or having students complete a short questionnaire after a project or at the end of the semester.

If you incorporate collaborative learning in your course, peer-evaluations can be an excellent means of receiving additional feedback. Give students a short questionnaire to complete on all of the members of their group.

Guidelines for a Rubric or Scoring Scale

A scoring rubric or scale (also called a primary trait analysis) offers benefits for students and instructors. It can make grading more consistent and it can offer students more specific information about what they do well and where they are deficient. Also, once it is created, it can reduce the amount of time instructors spend responding to student papers.

Here's how to create a rubric or scale.

- Start with your knowledge of past student performance on similar assignments. Jot down, from memory, the typical strengths and weaknesses you see in student work. Use them as a starter for developing the scale.
- Identify your main categories. Categories are generally put in noun or noun phrase form, such as "Organization," "Choice of Information," "Thesis Statement," or "Analysis." The number and type of categories depends upon the nature of the course and the assignment.
- For each category or trait, construct a two- to five-point scale. These are descriptive statements. For example, in a five-point scale under the category of "Thesis," a "5" thesis is limited enough to treat the scope of the essay and is clear to the reader. It enters the dialogue of the discipline as reflected in the student's sources, and it does so at a level that shows original thought and synthesis.
- Weight the traits and scales. How much will each category and trait be worth?
- Try out the scale with a sample student paper or review with team members, and revise for better accuracy. Remember these scales or rubrics are works in progress. You will need to revise until you believe that you are offering students grades and comments that accurately reflect your high standards.

Here's a portion of a Sample 4-Point Scale for a Science Report:

Student Name:		
Title of Paper:		
Introduction		
	4	Hypothesis clearly recognized or well crafted and elegantly stated in testable form. Hypothesis cleverly embedded in context.
	3	Hypothesis recognized or well stated. Contextual connections evident.
	2	Hypothesis detectable but may not be stated in testable form. Contextual connections tenuous.

	1	Hypothesis undetectable or garbled so as to violate scientific principles. Context absent or ignored.
Materials and Methods		
	4	Procedures clear, need no interpretation. Appropriate details present.
	3	Procedures easily interpreted. Relevant information dominates.
	2	Procedures unclear but interpretable. Irrelevant information interferes.
	1	Procedures scrambled. Irrelevant information predominates.

Here's a portion of a Sample 5-Point Scale for a Humanities Essay:

Student Name:		
Title of Paper:		
Thesis		
	5	The thesis and purpose are clear to the reader. The author develops an authentic, fresh insight that challenges the reader's thinking. The paper shows a complex, curious mind at work.
	4	The thesis and purpose are clear to the reader, and the thesis is somewhat insightful.
	3	The thesis and purpose are clear to the reader, but the thesis is obvious or unimaginative.
	2	The thesis is trite, obvious and shows no original take on the material at hand.
	1	The thesis and purpose are not clear to the reader.
Organization		
	5	The essay is organized in a way that fully and imaginatively supports the thesis and purpose. The sequence of ideas is effective, given the writer's thesis and purpose. The reader always feels that the writer is in control of the organization, even when the organizational plan is complex, surprising, or unusual. The subpoints serve to open and explore the writer's insight in the most productive way.
	4	Falls short of the "5" range in one or two ways.
	3	The essay is organized in a way that competently supports the thesis and purpose. The sequence of ideas is effective, given the writer's thesis and purpose. The reader almost always feels that the writer is in control of the organization, even when the organizational plan is complex, surprising, or unusual. The subpoints serve to open up and explore the writer's insight in a productive way.
	2	The organizational plan is inappropriate to the thesis; it does not offer effective support or explanation of the writer's ideas.
	1	The organizational plan is not clear to the reader.