

Grading Faster And Smarter

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As a TA, you're generally going to be grading a lot of assignments per semester (or quarter). Grading, though **a perpetually thorny issue**, is important and it is a big part of teaching at the university level. And while it's oftentimes hard to keep up, **it doesn't have to be the gruesome, draining thing that makes teaching all-consuming**.

Whether you're grading assignments, essays, lab reports, or exams, there are some general strategies that can help you save time AND ensure that you're being fair towards your students.

A. Preparing for Grading

Remember that grading starts well before you actually sit down with your pen (or laptop). Having an efficient system for assigning and collecting work, and a good grading guide, can make all the difference.

Communicate your expectations clearly

Discuss the grading rubric with students, provide them with writing and referencing guides, or hand out samples of poor, adequate, and excellent responses. Whichever method you choose, make sure your students have a good understanding of what you're going to be grading for. Don't rely on students consulting the syllabus or course website, even if the expectations are discussed extensively there. Rather, devote some class time to reviewing that information with them, offering examples, and answering questions.

Don't underestimate the little things

I collect homework assignments during every class, and so keeping track of everything can be a real challenge. To keep track of all the papers, I alphabetize them right after I collect them, clip them together, put a sticky note with names of students who did not turn their assignments in, and mark the date of collection on the sticky. This helps to keep students (and myself) accountable, and saves time when entering their grades into the gradebook.

Set rules for tardiness and stick to them

I've made a habit of not accepting late assignments unless for serious emergencies, which has made a real difference. Going back to problems you've covered days or weeks before, and grading piles of papers that cover different topics, is much more time consuming than most people realize.

Prepare an answer key or grading guide in advance

The key/guide is really worth the time and fuss—I had to learn this the hard way. If your course instructor provides you with a rubric, consider yourself lucky (even if you don't agree with all the details). If they don't, make a list of the things you will be specifically looking for in each question. If you're unclear, don't hesitate to reach out to your supervisor or fellow TAs for help. For assignments like drills, multiple choice, and true/false questions or short written responses, you might also want to consider providing your students with the key, have them mark each other's work (or their own, **if you're opposed to students correcting each other**) and submit the assignments back to you.

Review drafts

I know this sounds like twice the work, but trust me. It will help you detect problems early, seriously improve the quality of the assignments students turn in, and save time when grading. A paper that completely misses the point, has no structure, or is strikingly off-topic can be a real challenge to grade and, if you don't review drafts, chances are you'll get more than a few of those. Especially if you're teaching a GE course.

Find a pleasant place for grading

I often find that going somewhere nice and quiet, like a coffee shop, museum café, or library, helps me get a lot more done faster than I would if I were just sitting around my house or in my TA office. There is only one thing I have to work on if I take it somewhere and I don't get distracted as much as a result. I favor places without wifi for obvious reasons and if I need to look something up, I just use the 3G on my phone.

B. During the Grading Process

If you've prepared properly, you've already done half the work by the time you get to the marking itself. Below, I offer a few suggestions on how to make the grading process more responsible, smooth, and efficient.

Skim all assignments before you start grading

If all is too many, then use a random but decently sized sample. This will help you determine the general level of performance and tweak your rubric/grading guide if required. Skimming is especially important for essays or more complex work, as it will save you time from having to go back and readjust your grading scale.

Mark one section or aspect at a time

Marking one section at a time does not only help eliminate bias, it is also much, much faster than grading one paper at a time. It keeps you focused on one topic and if you're "lucky" and grading a drill/quiz type of assignment, then you can even memorize the answers, which will naturally increase speed. Now you're thinking, how does that work for an essay or research paper? When you can't grade one section at a time, grade one aspect at a time. In other words, grade all submissions for content first, then return to assess structure, the clarity and consistency of their argument, and writing quality.

Record your grading criteria as you grade

This helps you become more efficient, as you encounter the same mistakes repeatedly and it ensures you stay consistent in your grading; you have a record of how you handled the same issue or mistake previously without having to shuffle through a pile of papers.

Set potentially plagiarized papers aside

Checking for plagiarism can be distracting and time-consuming. If you suspect a paper is plagiarized (they're fairly easy to spot), put it aside and deal with it after you've finished grading everything else. Find phrases that pop out and check them on Google and Google Scholar. Contact your course instructor immediately if you come across cases of plagiarism. Remember not to accuse your student of anything before running it by your supervisor.

Avoid over-marking

Rather, provide just enough feedback. Highlight, underline, or use symbols (which you've communicated to your students!) to mark what was done well and what's problematic. While providing some individual feedback is important for building rapport and improving student performance, correcting every grammar mistake or rewriting the assignment for them is not. Set yourself three goals and keep it short: highlighting what was done well (starting out this way is always a good idea), pointing out key mistakes and weaknesses, and providing suggestions for improvement. For essays and research papers, I like using a

separate “feedback sheet” (rather than commenting on the paper directly). It includes the rubric/grading scale and their respective points for each element, as well as a designated space for general remarks at the bottom. I also like encouraging students to visit me during office hours for more extensive feedback, especially when too much red ink is starting to build on the paper.

Provide collective feedback

To avoid repeating the same comments over and over again, some TAs like using a file of common comments when marking documents electronically and copy-pasting feedback as appropriate. I prefer making notes of common problems and mistakes as I grade and providing students with general post-exam or post-assignment feedback. It’s usually a class handout or powerpoint, although sometimes I simply incorporate common mistakes into my next review. In general, I have found that discussing mistakes with students works better than only giving them written feedback—so many don't even read the written comments!