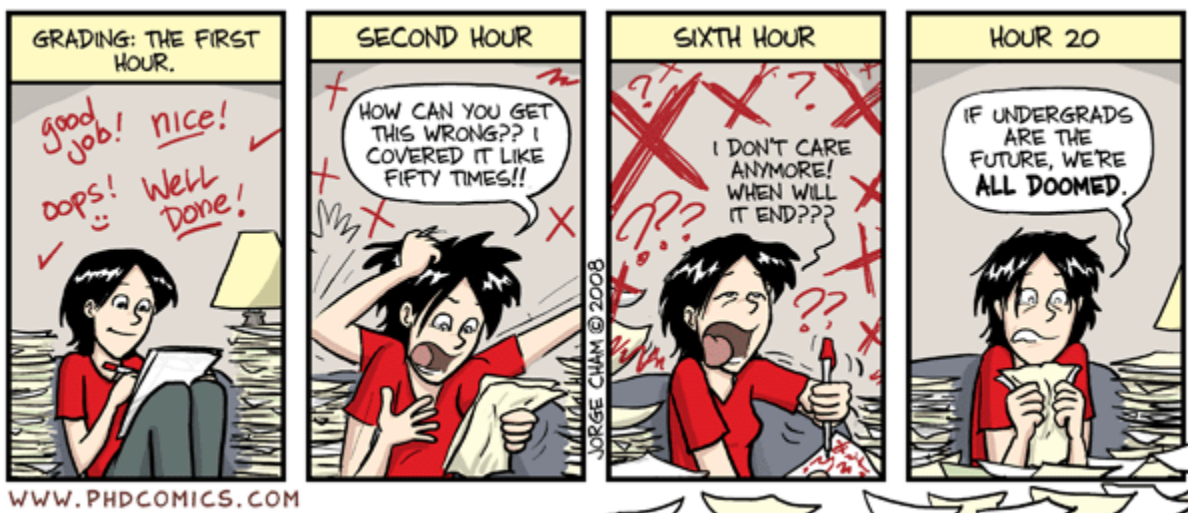


Learning and Teaching
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[GRADING STUDENT WRITING: A GUIDE FOR TAS]

What type of grader are you? Do you know what a rubric is? And how to create one? In this guide, you will find the information you require to grade undergraduate student writing. Whether you are just beginning or have graded previously, this guide will help you gain the confidence you require to grade fairly and efficiently, so that you can support students as they learn how to write.

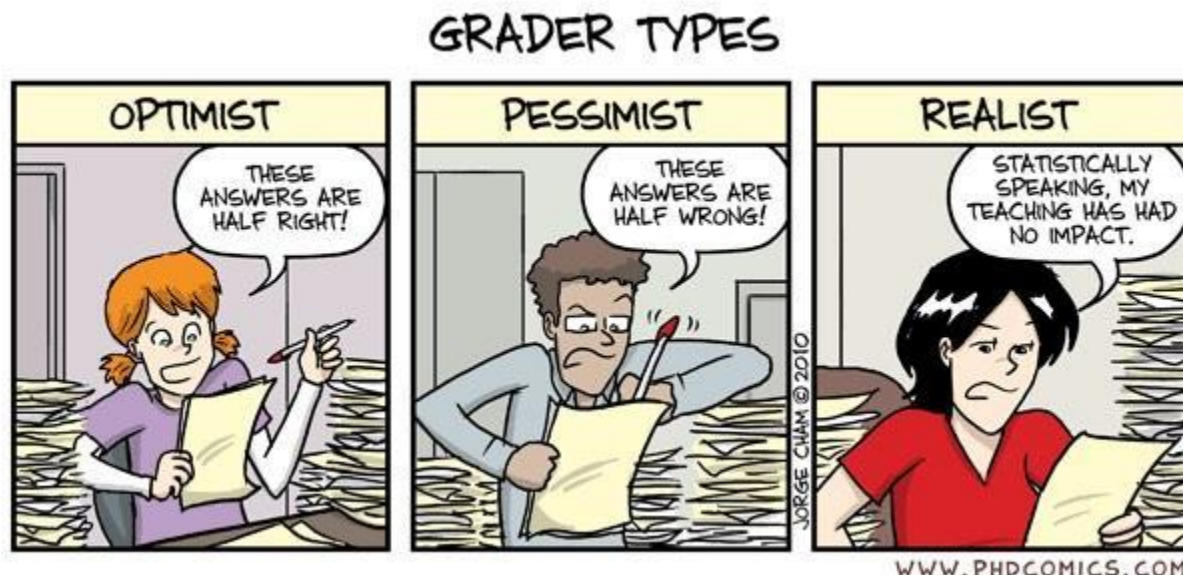
You just found out that your teaching assistant (TA) assignment requires you to grade student writing. What do you need to know? This guide provides the information you require to grade undergraduate student writing fairly, efficiently, and effectively, so that you can support students as they learn how to write.

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A. What type of grader are you?



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Steps:

1. Self-assessment
2. Identify your values, assumptions, and biases

I always find it helps to remember that undergraduates are held to different standards than you are as a TA, so just because you read something you could never submit doesn't mean it's as bad as you think. My experience is that TAs tend to be hard graders simply because they have to hold themselves to such high standards every day.

- Carly Tomblin, Teaching Assistant Consultant (TAC) for Greek and Roman Studies, 2015-16

1. Self-assessment

Are you an optimist, pessimist, or realist? If you encounter spelling mistakes or improper use of grammar, does that overshadow your ability to concentrate on the content? Or, are you feeling like an imposter and lacking confidence that you have the ability to judge and grade students' writing? This latter question is a very common feeling among all TAs as they first begin their duties.

Before you begin your work as a TA, you need to take stock of what is important to you and the affect that has on how and what you grade.

2. Take stock of your values, assumptions, and biases

Bias may consciously or unconsciously affect your perceptions of students' work. Without careful reflection and strategic management, **bias can creep into your marking** and cause you to

make poor judgements (Popham, 2012). Your goal as a TA is to become “extraordinarily attentive” (p. 7) to what might influence your choices in marking.

Origins

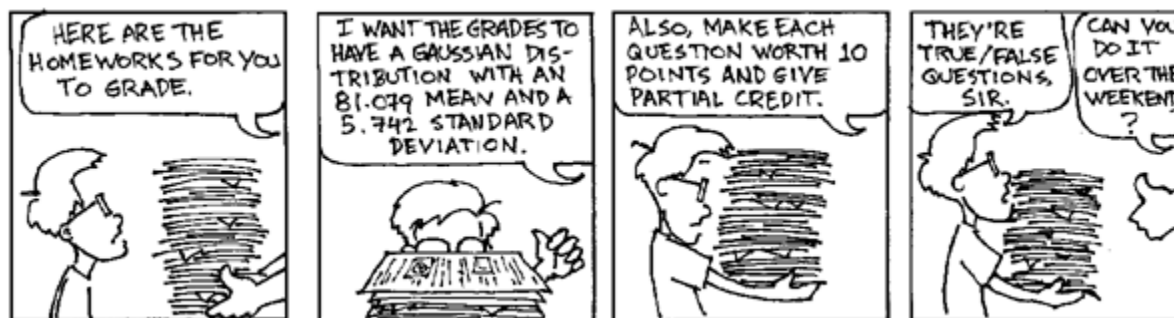
Biases in marking come from a number of sources. Malouff (2008) notes that it is difficult to demonstrate that bias affects marking. He cites a study done by Landy and Sigall (1974) that shows that markers’ perceptions of attractiveness lead to assumptions about intelligence, resulting in high grades. He goes on to list other influences on marking: niceness (or lack of it), performance on other assignments, work ethic in class, level of interest in course material, desire (or lack of it) and need for good grades, participation in class (or lack of it), and personal connections to the professor (Malouff, 2008).

When you are grading you are not only affected by external factors such as those highlighted by Malouff, but also affected by your own personal experiences with grading. You have been influenced by how you have been marked (Guskey, 2006). If you had negative experiences with biased and unfair marking practices in the past, you may feel that you are above such inclinations. You may be blind to the possibility that you have biases that may influence your grading. You may also hold strong personal opinions about particular topics and find yourself awarding lower writing marks to students who disagree with you even though they have presented a well-structured, clearly argued position. Likewise, you may feel tempted to give a high grade to a paper that presents an argument you agree with. Be aware of your biases when grading!

Barbara Davis in *Tools for Teaching* (1993) offers examples of how bias can creep into our considerations of students based on their background or characteristics. Do you discourage certain students from choosing topics that might be “too hard,” given their particular background or ethnicity? Do you pay less attention to written comments from English Language Learners (ELL) students because of the density of grammar errors? Do you find yourself making assumptions about students’ writing skills (or lack of them) based on their cultural background, gender, or level of participation in the class? Davis warns against protecting students from particular groups and giving them special consideration because of their background. **Instead, ensure that you are providing fair assessment and feedback based on the work itself, not on the student.** However, please be understanding and supportive of students from different backgrounds.

Before you begin marking, you need to be aware of your own tendencies and biases.

B. Your responsibilities



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Steps:

1. Prepare yourself
2. Talk to the course instructor
3. Consult the Teaching Assistant Consultant (TAC)
4. Prepare students to succeed
5. Expect diversity
6. Hold office hours

1. Prepare yourself

First refer to the syllabus for the course, which will clearly state the assignment expectations. If the course instructor has provided students with additional instructions on a handout and possibly a rubric or checklist (see below for more information), refer to these additional materials. As you prepare to talk to the course instructor, make note of any questions you have about the assignment. You want to make sure you clearly understand what is required of students. What does an A-level paper look like, as compared to a B or C?

TAs often feel that they do not have the necessary background to sufficiently grade student writing. This is a common concern. First, consider the fact that you know more about writing than the undergraduate students that you will be grading. You are in graduate school and have years of practice. Secondly, this guide will help you feel more qualified because you will have the background information and resources to help you grade effectively. It doesn't matter if you feel you haven't mastered academic writing in your discipline: you know more than the students, and you are training yourself as a marker, so you are qualified to grade student work. Through the process your own writing will benefit as you become more aware of aspects of excellent writing.

2. Talk to the course instructor

A conversation with the course instructor should clarify what the most important assignment grading criteria are. But, what if you do not understand what the course instructor is requesting? Do not hesitate to ask for clarification. This will not only help you but will also help

the course instructor. Your job is to make sure that students' writing is graded fairly and to do so, you need to understand exactly what is expected.

You may not be involved in the design of an assignment, but you need to carefully study the assignment for language/concepts that may reflect bias or stereotyping before you begin grading. Effective assignment topics have a broad appeal and are expressed in gender-neutral language. Be aware of cultural, literary, and historical references present in the assignment wording that may not be comprehensible to students from different backgrounds (Davis, 1993). If you find an element in the assignment that could create difficulties for some students, you need to discuss this with the course instructor as it may impact students' comprehension, the quality of their written response, and ultimately, their grade. You may need to alter your considerations for appropriate responses given the bias and recognize students' achievements in other areas.

Another important question to ask is to find out **how much time** the course instructor expects you to allot to grading the assignments. Do the math with the course instructor and if 5 or 10 minutes per paper seems like too little time, ask for instructions on how to grade fairly and effectively within that time frame. In an ideal world, you would have unlimited time to provide thoughtful, constructive feedback, but you are not marking in an ideal world. In fact, studies show that students can absorb only two to three areas of feedback per marked paper (Straub, 2000), so choose wisely and limit how much feedback you give to what is most important, as per the course instructor's instructions.

Also ask when the course instructor would like the grading completed. It is important to establish this **deadline** up front so that you are able to delegate your time appropriately. Prior to establishing the timeline for grading, make sure you are aware of your other commitments. For example, if you have a paper or project from a graduate course you are taking due the same week as you will need to do the grading for your TA work, then you have to manage your time so that you can complete both responsibilities on time.

Find out what **the procedures** are if you suspect plagiarism, cheating, working with ELL students, or encounter other issues. Typically, you would bring these to the attention of the course instructor immediately. Does the course instructor have a preference for the type of feedback to provide to students? After assignments are returned, how will student complaints about grades be handled? Lastly, you may be required to prepare an Excel spreadsheet that records all grades assigned. If so, the course instructor will provide you with the Excel spreadsheet with student information so that you can carefully record the grades you assigned. An important aspect of your work is to ensure that you maintain **confidentiality** of grades you assign and the content of students' writing. Student grades are not to be discussed with anyone except the course instructor.

Finally, get clear instructions about how you will be receiving the assignments, when, and how many. When you actually receive the assignments to grade, check to make sure that you have the number you expected and if not, notify the course instructor immediately. If you are responsible for receiving student assignments, find out how you should manage ensuring that students hand in the assignment on time¹. Additionally, bring student questions to the attention of the course instructor. If students are consistently asking for clarification about the same item, the course instructor can easily inform everyone about the issue.

3. Consult the Teaching Assistant Consultant (TAC)

Each department on campus has a TAC, who is a graduate student in a lead position to help all TAs with their assigned duties. Find out who the TAC is for your department and seek assistance, either through attending workshops or one-on-one consultations. The TAC can help you with grading issues, designing rubrics, or other mechanisms to help with your grading. The TAC is an excellent resource to find out what the best practices are in your discipline, such as obtaining a copy of department policies on grading, plagiarism, and so on.

4. Prepare students to succeed

Be purposeful about your grading from the moment you explain the assignment, and stick with it. If you have a clear idea of what the deliverables will look like when you present the assignment, you won't second guess yourself when you're seeing answers that come out of left field.

- Brittany Schina, TAC Geography 2015-16

Have students been informed of all criteria? Did they receive clear guidelines of expectations, such as the number of pages required, referencing format, the number of references expected, and whether a cover page is required? Was the rubric or checklist (see below for more information about rubrics) distributed to all students? Make sure you have any information that was made available to students to help them with their writing. Additionally, there are other ways that you can assist students, whether within tutorials or labs, as a guest during lecture time, or online through the course management system (CourseSpaces at UVic).

Make sure students understand all of the terms used in the assignment and in the rubric or checklist. For example, if the assignment requests students to analyze or argue, ensure that students know what those terms refer to. First clarify with the course instructor and then proceed to implement strategies to assist students. This could take the form of a handout or a dedicated tutorial or lab section.

If possible and with approval of your course instructor, **break the writing assignment down into chunks**. Have students hand in their title and thesis statement first so that you can provide

¹ Remember to always ask course instructors about how they would like you to respond to student requests for extensions.

feedback. Next have them hand in the list of references they have chosen. If there is time in the tutorial or lecture, have students bring in a draft copy before the assignment is due and pair students to read another's writing. This is a great way to have students go through and know what it is like to read someone else's work and practice identifying issues that will help their own writing. It's even better when students use the rubric or checklist to provide feedback on each other's writing.

Use annotated models if you can

One of the best ways to avoid student errors in the first place is to show them a couple of **annotated models** of how the assignment can be done well (Catt & Gregory, 2006). If you can find a couple of examples that approach the assignment differently, that can help students understand how to use their creativity, personal experience, interests, and so on, to approach the assignment. In an online environment, you can post examples of well-done assignments and indicate what makes them well done. That's the power of providing a model, and showing why it's a good model. Posting these annotated models online is powerful, too, because students can revisit the models when they want, however many times they want. This is particularly helpful for students who have English as an Additional Language and students with barriers to learning.

In class, you can either hand out annotated models or you can show them in your slides or with the document camera why they are well done. If you have the time, it can be a great classroom activity to ask students to identify what they like and don't like about the models. Students learn best from models of writing that are similar to their own, but are better in a few ways. If we show students only highly-polished writing, it can be too difficult for them to identify how they can improve their own writing, based on the model. This is what happens when we use only published texts to try to teach students to be better writers.

There are many things you can annotate in a model. You can annotate for layout and what to include (e.g., a Biology lab report), for the development of an argument (e.g. a third-year Political Science course), and for the very basics of academic writing, such as double-spacing, margin width, lines per page, size of font, etc. (e.g. a first-year writing course). Generally speaking, it is better to annotate for what you want students to do, rather than what you don't want them to do. Providing annotated models means you will help students avoid mistakes and misunderstandings about the assignment (Accardi & Davila, 2007).

The use of peer models is one of the best methods by which to demonstrate quality of writing (Sadler, 2002), so it is worth trying to find a way to provide at least one. If you can't find one make one, you can develop answers to the assignment and annotate them to demonstrate common student errors. Or, if you cannot show models before an assignment is due, check with the instructor to see if you can ask a couple of the students who did the assignment well if they would mind sharing, anonymously, their work, for the benefit of the class, to guide the discussion of how students in the class generally did, to help students do better in the next

assignment, or for use the following semester. If you would like to hold on to a couple of examples and annotate them for the next time you TA the course, be sure to ask for permission from the students and to remove their names from the assignments.

If you are able, it can be helpful to point out to students what North American academic writing looks like in your discipline; using an annotated model is a great way to do this. It is not that one way of writing for an academic audience is wrong or another way is better; simply, different cultures prefer different styles. Different cultures expect academic writing to look differently, just as different disciplines have different expectations of what formulates good writing. Teaching students the style of academic writing that is expected can help reduce these kinds of errors before you are faced with marking them. If you find these influences having affected a student's work when marking, it can be enough to point out how your discipline has a different set of expectations.

As well, you are not alone in explaining good writing to students. Encourage students to visit the Centre for Academic Communication (the CAC) in the Library to get feedback on their writing, ask questions about disciplinary differences in writing, and to improve a couple of areas in which they generally lose marks. It can be helpful to remind students that they have received feedback on their writing in other courses that they can apply to their current assignment, which the CAC can help students with.

5. Expect diversity

Students arrive at university with beliefs about themselves and their place in the world. Here are some beliefs students may have.

- They don't have the authority, the age, or the knowledge to add their voice or ideas to academic conversations
- If it's been published, it's correct
- It's pointless to explore questions that have no provable answers
- It's rude to critique
- Working with an older classmate, a tutor, or a TA means that they are in the lower social position
- They've misunderstood what is studied in their discipline of choice
- It's the instructor or tutor's job to give the information and the answers
- If they've never been good at writing, they can never become good at it

Addressing these beliefs in class can help students write better assignments. Prepare a small survey to find out how the beliefs students are bringing to their writing and then have conversations with students in class about these beliefs. As well, expecting diversity – rather than being surprised by it – means you may be intrigued by, rather than annoyed by, a completely different way of thinking about the topic than you had expected.

6. Hold office hours

Encourage students to visit you during office hours to get help. Let them know how valuable it will be for them to receive information before they hand in their writing. Common mistakes can be fixed before they hand in their papers, which will position them to potentially receive a better grade. Not all students will take advantage of this valuable help, but strongly encourage students in any way that you can to please do so. It can help if you provide scripts for your students to fill out or otherwise prepare for their visit, e.g.:

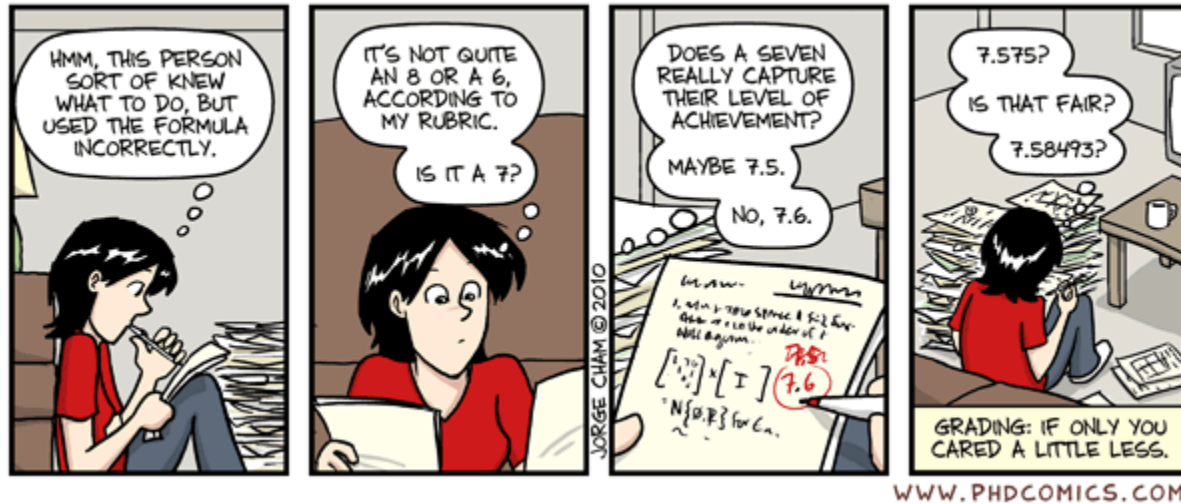
My thesis statement is ...

The evidence I'm going to use is ...

Something I'm not sure about is ...

Just like writing, culture plays a big role in how students perceive office hours. Students may not know why they should see you, or what is appropriate to ask about. They may be worried about having a more formal conversation in English than they are used to. Or maybe they are nervous about offending you by asking “stupid” questions. It can be helpful for students to know what sorts of questions they can ask, how much time an office visit usually takes, and what is not possible to ask for (e.g., to read through an entire draft and comment extensively on it for a 100-student class, or to correct the grammatical errors).

C. How to grade efficiently and effectively



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Steps:

1. Know what elements affect student writing
2. Access or create resources
3. Check resources

1. Know what elements affect student writing

There are many things to consider before attempting to grade student writing. For example, there are many different kinds of academic writing (Hyland, 2004) and a number of influences which can affect students' ability to write it well. Sometimes these influences stem from students having a first language other than English. Sometimes these influences stem from being raised in different environments within Canada. In your UVic classroom, there will be international and domestic students, but within these two categories you can find other cultures, such as those who are first in their family to attend university and mature students who have written successfully in their workplace before returning to school. Therefore, this section approaches influences in terms of culture, with the understanding that there are many cultures within Canada and within the world of academic writing.

In this section, "North American academic writing," while not monolithic, refers to writing that incorporates the ideas of others, is not casual, and follows rules particular to a discipline. For example, scientific writing generally avoids the use of the first person ("I") while academic writing in the Humanities might favor personal reflections with mandatory use of the first person. Another example is whether a discipline prefers the passive voice ("The experiment was conducted ...") or the active voice ("While interviewing the participant, I realized ..."). When reading this section, please keep in mind what your discipline prefers in academic writing.

Some elements that affect student writing are discussed below. You will want to keep these in mind as you develop the resources you will need to grade fairly and consistently, and to determine what is appropriate to expect of student writing, given the circumstances (e.g., what year, the background of students) in which you are marking.

<u>Element</u>	<u>Characteristics</u>
<i>Style</i>	Some prefer academic writing to be beautiful and engaging. One way to make writing more engaging is to lead the reader to the point, rather than making the point clear at the beginning of the paper. When used in North American academic writing, the paper can seem “out of focus” (Kaplan, 1966). Students may need to be told to start each paragraph with a topic sentence, and to outline the findings/argument in the introductory paragraph. Students may be surprised at how clear they need to be in their writing; some may find it challenging to keep to a drier, more ordered style; it may sound abrasive and condescending to the writer.
<i>Evidence and logic</i>	There are different ideas about what can be used as evidence in writing and how an argument should be structured (Kaplan, 1966; Leki, 1992). For example, in some cultures it is enough to cite a famous thinker as proof or as a frame for discussing a concept. As well, it is important to recognize that some cultures value statistics and authority less than in North American academic writing, but more highly value personal experience or teachings from religious texts, traditional stories, elders, and so on (Pfungstang, 2004).
<i>Audience expectations</i>	Another difference can be what is expected of the writer and the reader. In some cultures, the reader has more responsibility than the North American reader; texts written with this other audience in mind can feel like they are missing key pieces of information or clear statements about the argument, finding, and so on (Hinds, 1987; Leki, 1992). As well, it can be challenging for students to accurately guess what their audience (the TA, the instructor) wants them to include, explain further, and so on. In North American academic writing, very little is expected of the reader; the onus is on the writer to explain their ideas clearly and according to North American logic structures. A good example of this is the saying that North American academic writing follows the model of: “tell them what you are going to tell them, then tell them, then tell them what you told them.” Other cultures might find this repetitive and simplistic.
<i>Voice and tone</i>	

Appropriate voice and tone can be one of the most challenging aspects of academic writing to master. Those newer to academic writing (e.g., first year students) can find inserting their voice into the academic conversation awkward and intimidating. A good example is a student in a first-year English class who is asked to critique the text of a famous author. Doing so requires the student to use a style that is not insulting to the famous author, not too polemic (the famous author is, after all, famous for writing well), and fresh (despite thousands of first-year students writing on the subject each semester).

It is very common for students who are newer to post-secondary education in North America to engage a slightly inappropriate tone. The tone may be journalistic rather than academic. Or, it can be pedantic and condescending (typified by sentences like “Now, dear reader, let us explore the famous author’s use of adjectives”). A polemic tone – one in which the student has chosen to tear apart the work to be critiqued, mistaking critique for criticism – may also appear, in which the student makes the argument, for example, that the previously published and often-cited paper is without value. Striking the balance to be objective, informed, and analytical is a skill that students need practice to master.

***Use of the words
and ideas of
others***

Building on the ideas and findings of others can also be a challenge (Rose, 1989). Students learn how to find academic journal articles to inform and support their ideas, but it is a skill to be able to weave the ideas of others into their own writing in a way that does not trigger the academic integrity alarm. Accidental plagiarism can result; students need practice in using citations effectively, creating accurate but different-from-the-original paraphrases, and summarizing text appropriately. As well, what constitutes plagiarism in one culture is acceptable in another (Pennycook, 1996).

Rather than punish students for making mistakes with the conventions, it can be an excellent opportunity for a conversation, verbal or written, about how to do it correctly. Just like other aspects of academic writing, citing sources is a skill that takes practice. Unfortunately, making mistakes in citations can lead students to failing a part of a paper, the entire paper, or even the course.

Another, but less drastic, error that students can make is burying counter claims because they do not know how to address them in their writing.

Common or shared knowledge

Students from another culture may have difficulty knowing what is considered common knowledge (Ong, 2003). This is a problem because common knowledge does not need to be cited; if the student guesses that something is common knowledge, and it is not to the marker, then the student may have accidentally plagiarized. Likewise, students may cite what is common knowledge to the marker, which can make the writing clunky to read.

The learning curve

Learning to write academic assignments for higher education is just like learning anything else: mistakes should be expected. For example, if you are learning to ski, you can expect to fall down and you will require multiple opportunities to develop your skills. No one comes to university fluent in academic discourse, the “ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse in our community” (Bartholomae, 1986, p. 4). This second discourse of academic English must be learned by all new to university (Gee, 2001). And, just as when learning to ski, when learning academic discourse, developmental errors will happen (Rose, 1989; Brinkman, 2004; Spellmeyer, 1989). Therefore, we should expect students to make mistakes in their writing.

English is an additional language

Writing can seem limited in vocabulary and repetitive in sentence structures (Wang & Bakken, 2003). As well, it often contains grammatical errors (Silva, Leki & Carson, 1997).

Tips for grading

As markers are also influenced by their own physical, mental and emotional state, you should grade when you are at your best: rested, alert, and relaxed. If you can arrange to mark with other TAs for the same course, you may find that the extra support and focus will lighten the load. While it may seem like a lot of extra work, you might read through the entire set of papers, separating them into piles based on similar characteristics. Using a rubric, as discussed below in this guide, return to papers in each pile, determining the strengths and weaknesses of the paper, calculating the grade, and offering feedback. Working through each paper in a pile will enhance your consistency. You will readily see if papers in the pile are alike or whether they should be moved to different piles. This will help you mark to a clear standard, and will enhance your objectivity (CTL, Stanford University).

Another strategy is to divide the stack of marking into more manageable chunks. Instead of marking all the papers at once, which can create bias in marking (not to mention a sore body and a tired mind), divide the stack into smaller stacks, randomly. For example, you may divide your classes’ 100 papers into stacks of ten. Then, rather than marking all 100 at once, you mark

a stack of ten, then change to another task, then mark another stack of ten, and so on, until you are done.

And yes, the colour of your pen matters: studies show that the comments you write in red ink – even those that are positive and offering praise – are viewed more negatively by students (Yirka, 2013).

Anonymous marking

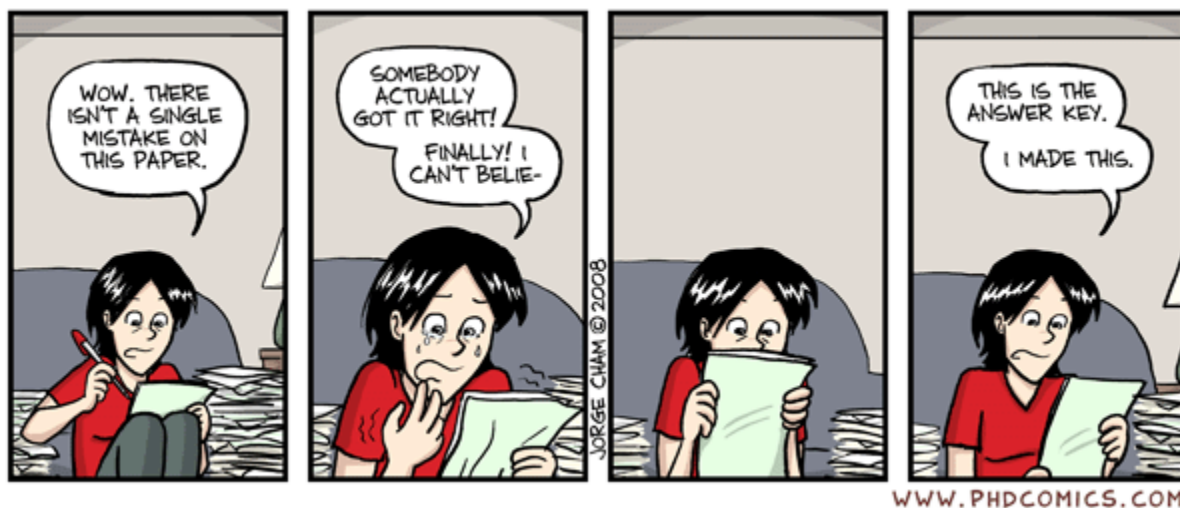
“Blind” or anonymous marking enhances objectivity when grading. Anonymous marking is used frequently and is becoming best practice in some higher educational institutions (Lancaster University, 2010) as it provides a fair, objective assessment of students’ work. Students perceive that they are fairly assessed with anonymous marking, and this protects TAs from accusations of unfair grading. You may wish to cover the students’ names on each paper before grading and ask students to remove their names from headers or footers. You may also wish to assign students numbers to use when submitting their papers.

While fostering objectivity, anonymous marking prevents you from giving students personal feedback on their work. You cannot compare their performance to previous work and note areas of development, and you may find it more difficult to highlight strategies and resources students may find useful for future papers. However, if you are marking for a large class, you may want to temper your expectations of the quality and quantity of personalized feedback you can give.

2. Access or create resources

There are many resources available to help you grade. These include marking keys, checklists, and rubrics. If they are not available, you can make your own.

Marking keys



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You may wish to ask the course instructor to provide a model marking key that they have used before. This will allow you to see what was emphasized, whether partial marks were awarded, and what constituted exceptional, satisfactory, and poor student responses.

Creating a marking key, like other methods of assessment, gives you the opportunity to ensure that you understand what is being tested and why. It also allows you a chance to predict possible misunderstanding students may have and think about alternative answers that may be acceptable.

To create a marking key, write the model answers. It may be best to use bullet points of the content you expect students to include. This is a good time to determine how partial marks will be assigned.

Consider that marking keys should not penalize the same mistake over and over. Penalize the error once if the rest of the response is reasonable. For example, if a student has misused a term, consider how much of a penalty that mistake should cost the student, if the term is required throughout the exam.

After students have written the exam, try out your marking key on a handful of the exams. Does the key work for you? Have students interpreted the question in a way that you didn't expect? Consider giving partial marks to answers that address the question but were unexpected.

It can be helpful to make notes on exams when marking, so when students come to your office hours, you can remember why you gave partial marks, why an answer was deemed incorrect, etc.

Checklists

Using a checklist to clarify where you should be focusing your marking efforts can help you focus your time on where the instructor wants it. On the next page is a sample checklist you can use or adapt for your needs; this checklist is designed for you to discuss with the course instructor. To make your own checklist, take the information you two agreed will be marked and create your own checklist to help you grade the class papers. This kind of checklist looks similar to a single-point rubric, discussed in the next section.

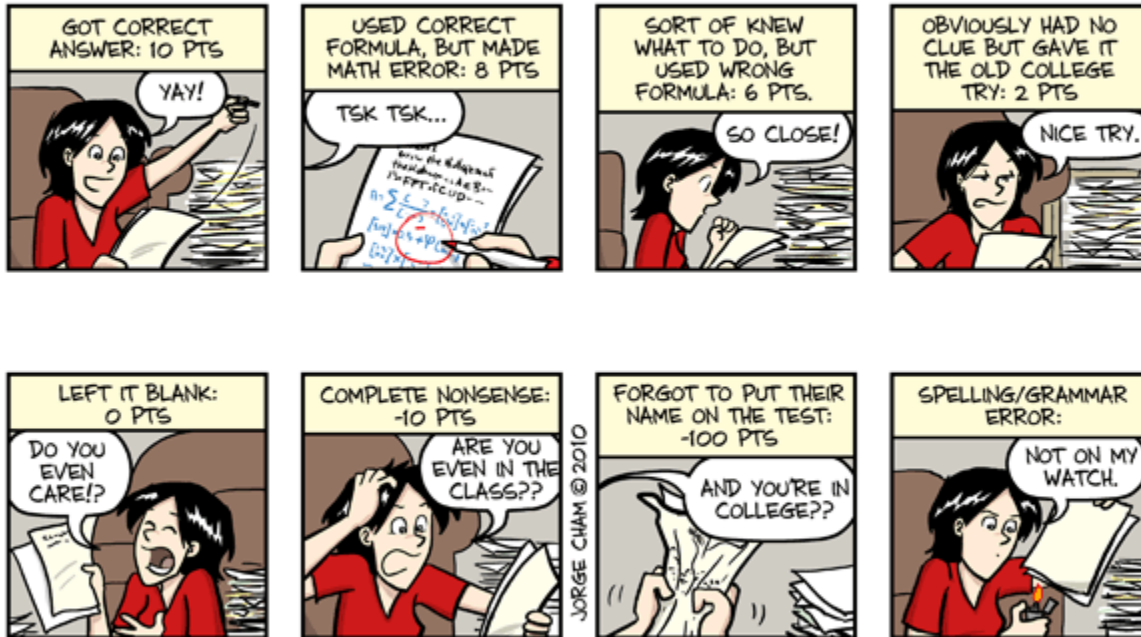
Grading Checklist

Ignore	Identify	Provide feedback	
			Specific grading criteria, based on course learning outcomes
			•
			•
			•
			•
			•
			Content concerns
			• Errors related to understanding the assignment
			• Errors related to understanding the course content
			Mechanical and stylistic concerns
			• Punctuation and/or capitalization errors
			• Errors with stylistic conventions, e.g. use of italics, boldface, and underlines
			• Spelling errors or wrong word forms, e.g. form/from
			• Lack of evidence of proofreading
			• Grammatical errors that interfere with reader understanding
			Writing concerns
			• Tone is inappropriate, e.g. too journalistic, too casual
			• Word choice is inappropriate
			• Confusing sentence structures and ambiguous passages
			• Paragraph structure issues, e.g. topic sentence placement/presence, transition between sentences
			• Transition between paragraphs is unclear
			• Unclear flow of argument
			Formatting concerns
			• Inconsistent or incorrect captions, tables, labels, etc.
			• Inconsistent application of required format, e.g. titles, indenting, references list
			Citation and evidence concerns
			• Deviation from the required citation guide
			• Incorrect or missing citations
			• Missing evidence, e.g. examples, quotations
			• Passages that are incorrectly cited or possibly plagiarized
			• Missing permissions for the reproduction of copyrighted material
			• Incorrect assumptions about common knowledge
			Other
			•
			•
			•

Rubrics

GRADING RUBRIC

PROBLEM 1 (TOTAL POINTS: 10)



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If the course instructor has provided a rubric, discuss it so that you share the same understandings about each item in the rubric. Using the rubric to grade a paper and then checking with the course instructor can be helpful, too, to know that you are grading according to their wishes. Rubrics that rely on quality markers, e.g. "very well" versus "well", namely analytic or holistic rubrics (see below), can be challenging because quality is notoriously difficult to explain.

If you have not been provided with a rubric, you can make your own. Use a model like the ones included in this package.

A rubric is a great tool to use in class to have students provide feedback on each other's drafts in a structure peer review session (see Jonsson & Svingby, 2007; Huba & Freed, 2000). The rubric allows students to focus feedback on items the authors will want to fix, because they are being graded on them. It can be challenging for students to know what to comment on when

providing feedback on each other's work, so using the rubric will focus their comments and help them provide the most useful feedback possible.

There are three main styles of rubrics: holistic, analytic, and single-point (Gonzalez, 2014). A rubric should be designed when the assignment is designed, so that assessment is in line with the learning outcomes of the assignment. However, if there is no rubric for an assignment, one can easily be developed from the assignment guidelines: take a look at what the criteria are, and determine how you will mark for it. Choosing the type of rubric to match how you will mark and what you will mark is essential in marking success.

Analytic rubrics

The most commonly used version is the analytic rubric. The analytic rubric has the criteria required in an assignment plus a description of what each criterion looks like at the excellent, well done, adequate, not well done, and poorly done levels. This kind of rubric can be useful when you are marking many, many papers and are not required to provide much feedback on each. It is also useful when you must quickly determine a numerical value of each piece of writing. The focus is on the score with a minimum of feedback. While no rubric produces inter-rater reliability – meaning, that using a rubric doesn't mean that the subjectivity involved in grading writing disappears – an analytic rubric can create some intra-rater reliability – meaning that if a number of TAs use the same rubric to mark a stack of papers, there will be more similarity in how they are grading than if they hadn't used the rubric (Stellmack, Konheim-Kalkstein, Manor, Massey & Schmitz, 2009; Svingby, 2007)

Example: Analytic rubric for a Biology lab report, out of 12 points total.

Criteria	Excellent – 4 points	Good – 3 points	Satisfactory – 2 points	Unsatisfactory – 1 point
Content: abstract, objective, background, apparatus list, procedure, data, results, and discussion	All parts are present, clear, and well written. The discussion section is robust.	Most parts are present, clear, and well written. The discussion section is fairly well done.	Some parts are missing, unclear, and/or not well written. The discussion section is not well developed.	Many parts are missing, unclear, and/or not well written. The discussion section is poorly developed.
Format and list of references	The format is correct and all references used have been listed correctly.	The format has a few mistakes and/or the reference list is mostly complete.	The format has a number of mistakes and/or the reference list is incomplete.	The format has many errors and/or missing sections. The reference list is missing.
Correctness of writing	Generally the writing is error-free.	Generally the writing has a few errors.	Generally the writing has a number of errors.	Generally the writing has so many errors it impedes reader comprehension.

Total: 8/12 points

As the example shows, students can see what is expected for each criteria and where they lost and gained marks. After circling how a student did for each criteria, you simply add up the points.

Holistic rubrics

A holistic rubric is the most general kind of rubric because it lists 3-5 levels of performance and a broad description of the characteristics at each level. The levels of performance can be listed numerically (e.g. 1 – 5), with adjectives (e.g., beginning – mastery), or letters (A – D, for example). This is the easiest rubric to use because you are simply picking the level of performance an assignment demonstrates, rather than looking at it from a few different categories and then adding up the average, as you would if you were using an analytic rubric. This kind of rubric may work well for tests, but does not provide much feedback to the student. So, if you have no time to give feedback, or no need to give feedback, this is the kind of rubric to use.

Example: Holistic rubric for a Biology lab report, out of 12 points total.

Scale	Description
4	All parts of the content (abstract, objective, background, apparatus list, procedure, data, results, and discussion) are well done. The format, references, and writing are correct.
3	Most parts are present, clear, and well written. The discussion section is fairly well done. The format, references, and writing are mostly correct.
2	Some parts are present, clear, and well written. The discussion section is adequately done. The format, references, and writing have some errors.
1	Many parts are not present, clear, and/or well written. The discussion section is not well done. The format, references, and writing are problematic.

3x3 = 9/12

A holistic rubric provides less detail and is much faster to mark than an analytic rubric. Students would need to ask for feedback if they wanted to know exactly where they lost and gained marks. You would choose which kind of rubric to use based on how much feedback students should have (is it an assessment or an assignment?) and how many papers you have to mark (given your situation, how much time do you have per paper?). Either way, the holistic and analytic rubrics may generate a reason for students to come visit you in office hours, which is a great opportunity for conversation on how students can improve their writing skills for the next assignment.

A word of caution about holistic and analytic rubrics: be sure to make your categories general enough that you don't get caught in the trap of counting errors. For example, if you list something like "makes 5-10 mistakes in the references list," then students may argue that you have miscounted or marked an error that should not be counted.

Single-point rubrics

A single-point rubric is considered the newest kind of rubric. It does away with stating anything other than how to succeed in meeting your expectations as the marker. To make this kind of rubric, write in a chart exactly what you want the students to do when they write their assignment. Then, when marking, you provide feedback about what each assignment has done well and what the areas of concern are. The main differences between this kind of rubric and the holistic and analytic rubrics are:

1. It lists only what makes the lab report well done. This means that you will need to spend some time thinking about, and then listing, all the components that create an excellent lab report.

2. It requires you to give feedback. This kind of rubric is best for formative assessment: you are helping students master the skills required to write better next time. You can also refer students to resources to help them become more skilled writers.
3. It gives students more information about how to write well in your discipline. In the rubric below, you can see that much more detail is provided to students when they are writing their lab report about what they should include, and how to include it well.

Regardless of which kind of rubric or checklist you use, it is recommended that you share it with the students before they hand in their assignments so they will know what you are marking for. In addition, it can help provide “shared language” (Martins, 2008) with which students can discuss their writing in your office hours. If you can, show students a model paper along with the rubric used to mark it. This will help students interpret how the rubric standards are applied to actual writing.

The example of the single-point rubric is on the next page.

3. Check resources

It is imperative that you check the resources that you will be using with your course instructor before you begin grading. You may want to try your rubric or marking guide on two or three assignments to see how they work for you before sharing with your course instructor. This way you may find areas of your rubric that you need to alter or develop more.

Example: Single-point rubric for a Biology lab report, out of 12 points total.

Content	Format and references	Quality of writing
<p>All required parts are present and clear: abstract, objective, background, apparatus list, procedure, data, results, and discussion.</p> <p>The discussion section is robust, and summarizes how the experiment fulfilled or did not fulfill the lab objectives, explains any possible errors or flaws, and discusses the inclusion of tables, charts or graphs and their significance. See <i>Academic Writing Essentials</i> pages 109 – 111 for more on what to include in the discussion section of a lab report.</p>	<p>The reference list includes the lab manual, lab reports or results others than your own that you used when writing your lab report, other experiments you discussed, and other sources of background information. It is suggested, but not required, that you use sources other than the lab manual when writing your lab report. The reference list must be complete and accurate.</p> <p>Tables, graphs, or charts must be included in Appendices, and must be appropriately labelled.</p> <p>The format follows the example shown on page 24 of your lab manual, including the margins, size of font, length, and style.</p>	<p>The lab report has been proofread.</p> <p>There are very few, if any grammatical or spelling errors.</p> <p>The writing in each section is clear and explains exactly what occurred in the lab.</p> <p>No use of the first person “I”. Use of the passive voice is acceptable, e.g. <i>The experiment was conducted</i> instead of <i>I conducted the experiment</i>.</p> <p>The outside sources used are drawn on to provide strength to the discussion. Outside sources are paraphrased, not quoted directly using quotation marks.</p>
3 / 4 points	2 / 4 points	3 / 4 points
Total: 8 / 12		
<p>Comments:</p> <p>While all parts are present and clear, the discussion section wasn't as robust as it could be. I suggest taking a look at <i>Academic Writing Essentials</i> pages 109 – 111 to find out what more you could have added. That will help you write the discussion section better next time.</p>	<p>Comments:</p> <p>The format of your lab report is excellent. It's clear that you followed the example in your lab manual. However, the reference list includes only the lab manual, but your report refers to two other documents that you didn't include. Also, you used two charts, but they have to be in the Appendices, and labelled as Appendix A and Appendix B, not in the body of the lab report.</p>	<p>Comments:</p> <p>The quality of your writing is quite high. To get full marks next time, be sure to use only paraphrases, not quotations. To understand the difference, see pages 40 – 48 of <i>Academic Writing Essentials</i>. You can also take this lab report to the Centre for Academic Communication in the Library, where one of the tutors can show you how to make the quotations into paraphrases.</p>

D. Ready, set, go!



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Steps:

1. Be comfortable
2. Give feedback
3. Address issues
4. Expect appeals and complaints
5. Wrapping up

1. Be comfortable

You've had one or more meetings with the course instructor and should have a good sense of what you are grading. During office hours, you probably encountered some issues that students were having with the assignment and were able to resolve those with them. For some issues, you may have sought advice from the course instructor. You have your rubric, checklist, or marking key ready. You have reminded yourself about your values and bias regarding grading student work so that you can be as objective as possible.

But now you have that big stack of grading in front of you. Facing that stack of student papers can be a daunting task. As our comic suggests, being well fed and comfortable with no distractions helps create an environment conducive to being able to concentrate on grading with effective feedback for students. However, make sure that you are not too comfortable! You need to be alert, awake, and have a clear head as you grade.

Earlier this document advised that you divide that stack of marking into more manageable piles. For example, if you are marking 80 papers, making stacks of 8 will make the task less daunting and will likely produce more even marking. Otherwise, if you try to mark all 80 at once, you may

find that the last ten papers receive lower scores or less attention than those you marked earlier on.

In addition to dividing up the marking load throughout your day rather doing it all at once, there are other ways to be comfortable.

- Take breaks. In between stacks of marking, do something that changes your physical position. Go for a walk, stretch, or wash the dishes. Changing your posture will help your back stay unkinked. A break is not time wasted; it is time required to recharge your mental batteries.
- Eat well. The brain is required for marking, and as part of the body, requires good quality food to maintain its strength and balance.
- Plan well. You may estimate that each paper will take you 15 minutes to mark. Maybe that is what you and the course instructor agreed to. So if you have 80 papers to mark and you can mark four an hour, you may assume that it will take you 20 hours to mark. However, if you budget a bit more time than that – for example, 22 hours, then you will ensure that you will be less stressed than if you feel pushed for time.
- Manage your time. Make sure that you do prepare well in advance for the time that will be required to grade students' writing. You will need to allocate time for your own work as well as for your job as a TA.
- Be prepared. Before you start marking, make sure you had that conversation with the course instructor about how much time you should allocate to marking and the expectations of the course instructor.

2. Give feedback

Research on students and feedback show that students often do not read it (Leki, 1990), and if they do read it, they read it first to understand the grade they got. If students read it to learn, they often cannot prioritize it as we want them to (Zamel, 1985), and feedback can often apply only to the assignment on which it is given, giving the feedback “nowhere to go” (Silva et al., 1997; Robb et. Al, 1986). Worse, providing too much error correction dissuades students from taking linguistic, rhetorical, and intellectual risks with their writing and does not allow for developmental errors (Elbow, 1998; Holt, 1997). And yet, feedback is necessary, not just to arrive at and justify a grade, but to help students improve their academic writing skills and to master the content (Walvoord & Anderson, 1998; Straub, 2000). In addition to the previous suggestion to mark in a colour other than red, there are many things to consider when giving feedback. There are five components to consider.

Planned

Ideally, you will know which course-level learning outcomes are being practiced and assessed. Feedback focused on these learning outcomes is the most relevant to students. Ask the course instructor what the priorities are for the feedback you are going to give. Ensure that the answers align with the course learning outcomes. For example, you won't want to spend time

providing feedback on aspects not essential to the course. You can also ask what extent of feedback is considered appropriate.

Focused

Once you have planned what you will likely focus your feedback on, stick to that focus. This can be really challenging!

You need to focus your feedback so that you are not providing a blizzard, which each piece of feedback its own unique snowflake. Students can have a difficult time determining which of these pieces of feedback is more important. So, while you may see 100 things wrong with a paper, the student is more likely to read and understand the feedback you give if it is focused.

Instead, focus on two or three areas of feedback per paper. Focus on the feedback that will be most beneficial for the student, both for the course learning outcomes and for their future assignments. It is the student's responsibility to apply feedback, so try to include links to help students learn the writing skills they need the most help with, e.g. to the APA style guide, to a good reference that explains how to paraphrase.

One question that often arises is how to address grammatical errors. These errors can range from annoying to confusing. Generally speaking, the best approach to grammatical errors as a marker is to note to the student that the errors are interfering with your ability to read their paper, and to demonstrate the extent of this issue. Rather than try to fix the grammatical mistakes or rewrite sentences, neither of which teaches students to fix it themselves, (Robb et al, 1996), choose one section of the paper (e.g., one paragraph), and indicate the confusing sentences and/or grammatical errors in it. Indicating the extent of the errors is your job, not explaining why they interfere with your ability to read the paper. Unless you have extensive knowledge of how to explain English grammar, it is probably better to refer students to a source or resource that can help them. As mentioned previously, you can encourage students to have a tutorial either online or in person at the Centre for Academic Communication in order to help them reduce the frequency of their grammatical mistakes.

Timely

Think strategically. If you are grading final papers at the end of term, there is a good chance that students may not see your feedback. If this is the case, you may want to prepare a sheet with common mistakes that can be posted on the course management system or sent via email to all students, rather than write that form of feedback on papers.

"Timely" also refers to how long it takes to return students' papers. Students are generally very keen to read your feedback if you hand the papers back soon after they are turned in. Over time, though, their interest in the feedback wanes, as does their memory of that particular assignment. Given that you have to provide feedback, it makes sense to do it at a time when students are most open to absorbing it.

A third aspect of timeliness is whether students can apply the feedback to improve their assignment and resulting grade. Feedback on a draft can be applied for immediate improvement, so if you have the option, provide feedback earlier in the writing process.

Applicable

The feedback you give should be applicable to future assignments as well as to the one you are currently marking. You may find it helpful to think of “feedback” and “feed-forward”: what advice can you give that will help students do better on the next assignment, in the next course, and in their next year of study? What do they need to know about writing in your discipline?

As well, if you want your feedback to be applicable, make it readable. This is less of an issue if you mark online, but if you are writing feedback by hand, remember that students will need to be able to read it in order to be able to apply it. Students can be quite shy to ask their TAs to explain what they wrote on their papers. If your handwriting is hard to read, you may want to consider typing it.

Neutral

When marking and providing feedback, it can be easy to become frustrated. Remember that the words that you write on a student’s paper can have a much more negative impact than you intended. How would you feel if a neutral third party were to read your comments? If you feel frustrated when marking, it is a good idea to set the marking aside, take a break, and do something a bit different until you can approach marking and feedback with a more neutral tone.

“The most important thing I learned when I first started grading at the university level was to judge the work, not the student. There are any number of reasons why a student might do poorly on an assignment; a lack of moral worth isn’t one of them. Students should see assignment feedback as an opportunity for growth, not as a commentary on their character.”

- Edwin Hodge, TAC Sociology 2015-16

3. Address issues

Cheating

Students cheat on their written assignments for a variety of reasons. Students might have time management issues or a heavier course load than they can handle, and look to previously published writing or pay-for-paper services in order to escape the situation. Other students may perceive that they do not have the required linguistic skills to succeed on written assignments and so has a friend heavily rewrite the paper. Yet other students may ask a friend to look over their work, and the friend provides far too much feedback – so much so that it fundamentally

changes the assignment. For all three of these scenarios, the intent is not to do less work, but to succeed. In such instances, students will often admit what they have done.

For those who intend to cheat, having an open conversation about what plagiarism is and why it can be heavily punished may deter those thinking of cheating (McKeachie, 2002). The culture in North American higher education is one of academic honesty; students may need to be reminded of this.

It can help to remember that there will always be a certain percentage of people who will cheat. Creating assignments that make it difficult to cheat and educating students about the value of academic integrity may help.

Accidental Plagiarism

When it comes to incorporating research into writing, students may make an academic misstep and accidentally plagiarize previously published work. This is almost always the result of a lack of skills and/or understanding. If you are reading a draft of a student's work, you can point out the section that you suspect is plagiarized and indicate that you feel the writing style is different. Often the student will admit that the section under scrutiny is from elsewhere, but they thought they had followed the conventions for correct citation. It can be challenging for students from different academic cultures (both domestic and international) to learn the rules they are expected to apply to their writing, especially when they are new to the university environment. A brief lesson on how to cite correctly, including paraphrases and direct quotations, can go a long way to preventing problems, but if you see issues when you are marking, you are past the point of a conversation. Follow the departmental protocol as outlined by the course instructor, whether you suspect the cheating is accidental or intentional.

4. Expect appeals and complaints

Students will come and talk to you about their marks. Some will want an explanation and some will want more: they will want their mark changed. Expect this when you are marking. Make sure that you are informed about how your course instructor would like grading complaints to be handled. Check with them to get guidelines on how to best handle this type of situation.

Make notes so that if/when a student comes to see you during office hours about a mark, you are prepared to discuss it. Notes will also help you remember a week after you marked when you assigned the mark you did.

Students may feel confused about why their work got the mark it did. It can be helpful to remember that some students are under tremendous pressure to achieve certain grades, so it's less about the mark they got than about them not achieving the mark they need. Also, students can have an unhealthy association of themselves with their grades: some students given a B on their paper, may feel that they as a person have been judged as a B. Third, students may believe that because they generally get a certain grade, they will always get that grade,

regardless of their mastery of the material. These are tough conversations but are manageable if you are prepared for them. Be prepared to defend the marks you gave, be open to hearing what students have to say, and be ready to postpone making a decision when asked to by the student to change a grade. It is acceptable to tell the student you need to think about it and then let the student know your decision in a timely, but postponed, manner.



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5. Wrapping up

As our comic above alludes to, it is not uncommon for students to neglect to pick up a final paper. If the paper is not provided to students before the end of class, students may have moved away or just want to move on. If papers are distributed to students after classes end, then you will most likely be asked to return graded papers to the course instructor.

If you are able to hand papers back before the class ends, ask students for feedback about the assignment.

Take the feedback from students to the course instructor with a summary of any major issues you encountered while grading so that adjustments can be implemented for the next time the course is offered.

Congratulations! You have successfully completed grading students' writing. You will continue to improve with more practice. Enjoy the learning process and we are always happy to hear how this guide can be improved. Do let us know if this guide was helpful!

Cynthia, Laurie, Nancy, and Kaveh

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