

Fourth Edition

ASSIGNING,
RESPONDING,
EVALUATING

A WRITING TEACHER'S GUIDE

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CHAPTER 4

ISSUES IN GRADING WRITING AND USING SCORING GUIDES

GRADING AND STUDENT MOTIVATION

Most students hate to be graded. Most teachers hate to give grades. Everyone hates to talk about grades. Pat Belanoff, in her preface to the best book we have devoted to grading (Zak et al.), calls grading “the dirty thing that we do in the dark.” Some writing teachers ascribe to a romantic view of student writing: that it is so imbricated in student personality and development that to impose external definitions of quality on individual expression is both intrusive and paternal. The best writing (according to this view) is a voyage of discovery, both of the topic and of the self, and the only audience that really matters is the self. Certainly, if you are committed to that view, your responding style will be nonevaluative and you will resist any kind of assessment. My experience with teaching from that perspective — and most of us give some assignments based on this theory — is that a few students flower in such an environment, but most find themselves at sea, uncomfortable with such a subjective and unaccountable view of writing. So, as problematic as it might be, grading student work is necessary. Our concern in this chapter will be to relieve some of the curse of grading from our lives, at the same time considering ways to integrate it sensibly into our responding and to use the power of grades to support the improvement of student writing.

The most important problem with grading student writing is that it tends to discourage students from taking creative risks with their writing. For some students, a grade is a measure of self-worth; for others, of teacher approval. The external and internal pressures on students to get good grades are so powerful that student concern for grades tends to reduce any assignment to some version of “what does the teacher want?” Unless the teacher is able to align the grading system with the demands and options of the assignment, students’ concern for grades can encourage them to retreat to formulaic writing, safe forms (such as the five-paragraph theme), and cautious revision (fixing only what the teacher has marked as needing improvement).

We do not need to assess every piece of writing that students give us. Sometimes an encouraging word or a simple check mark indicating satisfactory work is more appropriate than a grade. But encouragement and praise are only part of teaching; it is a self-deceiving illusion to imagine that we can avoid judgment as part of our work. We are required to inscribe grades for students at the end of the term, and those symbols are a powerful response to students about the quality of what they have done. And most students are concerned enough about how they are doing to keep asking if we try to put them off until the end of the term. We should not condemn them for this; it is a perfectly professional and sound question for any diligent learner to ask. If we are wise teachers, we do not allow student concern for the grade to replace the drive to express oneself and to improve; the assessments are means to an end, not ends in themselves. Judgment is tough to do and tough to take, but unless we do it we are not professional; it comes with the territory. The reading of student writing always awaits us, and the way we do it to some degree defines us. The problem is to find ways of assessing student work that are fair, consistent, public, clear, and responsible — grades that support teaching and learning rather than substitute for them. If we can combine such responsible assessment with useful and supportive responding to student work, our students will learn that essential aspect of all learning: self-assessment.

One of the most effective ways to do this is to use scoring guides. Scoring guides make grading criteria public, so students do not have to guess why they received the grade they did. Also, students who are clear about the tasks assigned and about what standards the teacher will be enforcing are likely to produce better writing and learn how to improve their writing than in less focused environments. Further, if the assignment is clear enough and the scoring guide focused enough, it will encourage the students to assess their own work, which is the most important educational outcome of giving grades. Thus grading is best dealt with head-on: by making it an integral part of the teaching of writing. Chapters 6 and 7 will give four sample topics for short papers, suitable for in-class writing and for use in class, with scoring guides and sample student writing.

USING SCORING GUIDES TO IMPROVE ASSIGNMENTS AND TEACHER GRADING

Scoring guides, developed originally for large-scale assessment of writing, have unexpectedly become a powerful teaching tool as classroom teachers have adapted them for responding to student writing. The scoring guide describes with some detail the textual features that lead to particular scores or grades. A good scoring guide will open up possibilities of writing for students, not close them down. If the focus of the discussion, and of the creation of the scoring guide, is on the writing task and its creative possibilities, the guidelines in the scoring guide do not become formulas or restrictions; they wind up describing the ongoing work of the class. Thus they actually become liberating, since students can see what excellent work will accomplish and they can aim for it. A poorly developed scoring guide, on the other hand, can force student writers into narrow patterns, such as the five-paragraph theme or other formulaic ways of meeting goals. For example, one scoring guide in use by a school district actually defines a well-organized paragraph as one containing three complete sentences, regardless of whether or not those sentences have anything to do with each other or make any sense. Teachers need to use scoring guides to help students discover and shape meaning, not to establish patterns that all students must follow.

Here is an example of a scoring guide that has been widely used for grading essay questions:

Scoring Guide

Score of 6: Superior

- Addresses the question fully and explores the issues thoughtfully.
- Shows substantial depth, fullness, and complexity of thought.
- Demonstrates clear, focused, unified, and coherent organization.
- Is fully developed and detailed.
- Evidences superior control of diction, syntactic variety, and transition; may have a few minor flaws.

Score of 5: Strong

- Clearly addresses the question and explores the issues.
- Shows some depth and complexity of thought.
- Is effectively organized.
- Is well developed, with supporting detail.

- Demonstrates control of diction, syntactic variety, and transition; may have a few flaws.

Score of 4: *Competent*

- Adequately addresses the question and explores the issues.
- Shows clarity of thought but may lack complexity.
- Is organized.
- Is adequately developed, with some detail.
- Demonstrates competent writing; may have some flaws.

Score of 3: *Weak*

- May distort or neglect parts of the question.
- May be simplistic or stereotyped in thought.
- May demonstrate problems in organization.
- May have generalizations without supporting detail or detail without generalizations; may be undeveloped.
- May show patterns of flaws in language, syntax, or mechanics.

Score of 2: *Inadequate*

- Will demonstrate serious inadequacy in one or more of the areas specified for the 3 paper.

Score of 1: *Incompetent*

- Fails in its attempt to discuss the topic.
- May be deliberately off-topic.
- Is so incompletely developed as to suggest or demonstrate incompetence.
- Is wholly incompetent mechanically.

(White, 298–99)

This example illustrates many features common to all scoring guides. It uses numerical scoring rather than letter grades, a useful shift in symbolism for students carrying a burden of self-doubt from years of more or less arbitrary alphabetic assessments. It employs the 6-point scale, now the most commonly used one, with its generally acceptable upper-half scores centered around the 5 and its generally unacceptable lower-half scores centered around the 2. Each score descriptor follows a similar pattern, listing a set of criteria in order of importance.

Here, the first descriptor has to do with the content of the response, in relation to the question asked; the second deals with depth and complexity of thought; the third with organization; the fourth with development; and the last with correctness. To be sure, some readers will inevitably have a different order of importance, an issue that leads to much debate during large scoring sessions. But perfect agreement on this matter is not necessary, since the score is based on an overall impression of the student writing as a whole (thus, “holistic” scoring) with an understanding that strengths in one of the criteria will compensate in part for weaknesses in another. However, this scoring guide is probably more useful for proficiency exams than for classroom assignments, since it is so general in nature.

Creating a scoring guide is much more complicated than it seems. The scoring guide is a kind of test of the writing assignment, which too often has unclear purposes. You cannot create, or work with your students to create, a scoring guide until you are yourself clear on what the assignment is asking students to do and what it will be teaching them. Furthermore, no class assignment exists without a context of class discussion, reading assignments, papers already completed and to come — that is, the assignment is part of the class curriculum. Thus the assignment in question needs to fit in with overall course goals and the particular goals for that time in the course. If it does not, the vagueness of the assignment’s purpose will become glaringly evident when you attempt to put together a scoring guide.

Consider the assignment below:

Some people think schools do not encourage students to be creative. Why do you suppose the critics of the schools take that position? Locate some sources arguing for or against that view and analyze what they say. (Be sure to cite your sources properly.) Finally, think about your own schooling and whether it was or was not creative.

If we wait until we have received the essays students will write to this assignment, we will have a difficult time deciding how to respond. We are also likely to be disappointed in the quality of the writing, which is likely to be disorganized and superficial. But if we attempt to devise a scoring guide before we give the assignment, we discover how confused and confusing it is. The creation of a scoring guide forces us to ask a number of questions: What will distinguish the best papers from those that are weak? What will we focus on and value enough for commentary? What are the papers supposed to accomplish, and what is the process that the writer should go through to accomplish those goals? And how will we know if they have learned whatever the assignment is out to teach?

As we start to write the scoring guide, we notice that there are five major tasks the assignment is asking students to accomplish: first, they must select, understand, and (at least in part) summarize sources arguing whether or not the schools teach creativity (which, in turn, needs to be defined); second, they must use that understanding of the sources and quotations from them to figure out “why” they say what they do — a formidable and perhaps impossible task; third, the students are cautioned to use correct citation form (a sure distraction at early stages of writing, better left for the editing stage); fourth, they need to “think about” their own schooling, describe and analyze it, all in relation to what the sources have said; and, finally, they need to develop their own ideas on the same topic — which means that the students must understand the difference between *asserting* ideas or referring to the chosen authors’ ideas, on the one hand, and *developing* their own ideas, on the other. There may be a few students in a typical class who will be able to rewrite the assignment so that it can be answered in a coherent way, but most of the writing elicited by this assignment will be unsatisfactory to both writer and teacher. How could it be otherwise? We’re also left to wonder if the teacher who composed the assignment was aware of the many different kinds of demands it makes on the student writer.

At this point, we need to decide what we really intend to teach. If the goal is principally the first I listed above — to help students learn to make use of outside texts — we’ll have to set aside class time to practice these activities. Some work in locating appropriate material, writing a summary, using quotations properly, and accurately referring to positions that one disagrees with would all be useful as part of the teaching and learning involved with this essay. Citation format and plagiarism issues might well enter the curriculum at this point. If another important goal is to teach the importance of definition, some dictionary work might be called for that focuses on how differing views of “creativity” can emerge from the same word. But perhaps the assignment seeks to help students examine the meaning of texts. If so, the class might focus for some time on ways to analyze argument, so that students can evaluate the arguments in the articles they have chosen. Without such instruction, students are likely to simplify or distort the arguments presented, say they are right or wrong without much consideration of why, and then assert their own views without giving contrasting evidence. But perhaps course work in both those matters has taken place and the fifth goal is what matters for the assignment: development of one’s own ideas. If so, then, the class may need instruction in the difference between asserting (and reasserting) ideas, on the one hand, and developing ideas using argument, definitions, and evidence, on the other. Or, perhaps, if we are looking at the critical thinking issues in the assignment rather than the rhetorical ones, we need to engage the

class in some discussion of the arguments for and against differing versions of creativity in education. It is difficult to construct an argument without much information.

Is it reasonable or fair to expect students to know enough in the five areas I have just outlined to be able to accomplish the writing task set out? I don’t think so. This assignment is in fact asking for superficial arguments and analysis; it is asking for the poor writing that it surely will elicit. By speaking in a casual and superficial way about its very complex demands, the assignment suggests that an equally casual and superficial response is good enough. Until we attempt to compose a fuller, more detailed writing assignment and devise a scoring guide for the assignment, its complexity and difficulties are not apparent; we might be tempted to blame the weak writing on the laziness of our students, or perhaps on the schools, which never teach their students as much as we wish. But as we start to unpack the various tasks the assignment demands and notice how many advanced skills are needed for the task, we see that an entire curriculum is adumbrated by the apparently simple task. In this way, the creation of a scoring guide demands that we articulate our criteria and goals for the assignment and understand how it fits into the purposes of our course as a whole.

We could profitably spend class time and preparatory writing assignments on each of the five major tasks involved, and then, more reasonably, have high expectations for the completion of the larger writing task. The writing assignment then would be a natural part of the class work and the class goals, and everyone involved would be well aware of these connections. Because the teacher had made clear the various components of the assignment, the students would be able to work on each and on bringing them together coherently.

If we wanted to use this assignment, after some genuine instruction in the various rhetorical and research skills it involves, we could put together a scoring guide for it. All we need at this point is a set of criteria for the scores of 5 and 2:

Score of 5

These papers will demonstrate an ability to construct and develop an argument in response to several articles from a professional journal. Specifically, they will

- Clearly and fairly summarize the articles on a controversial topic.
- Analyze the argument of the articles to demonstrate their strengths and weaknesses.
- Respond to the articles by showing how and why the writer of the paper differs from the views expressed in the article.

- Develop the views of the writer of the paper in an organized way, using personal experience and other sources, to demonstrate a conclusion.

Score of 2

These papers do not accomplish the five tasks set out in the assignment or they do so in a superficial and unsupported way. Specifically, they will

- Select weak or superficial articles and/or fail to summarize them with clarity and fairness.
- Instead of analysis of the article, present quotations or summaries without much discussion.
- Allude casually or not at all to the articles in presenting the opinions of the writer of the essay.
- Present assertions of opinion without organized development or evidence.

Again, it would be easy enough to develop the additional score points through elaboration of the criteria already set out. As the students work through a series of drafts moving toward completion of the assignment, the clear set of criteria becomes a yardstick for them to use on their own work, especially if the teacher will respond to drafts using the scoring guide. The result of this use of a scoring guide, as any teacher who has followed this process will attest, is remarkable. Once students see and understand what is expected, they can usually produce it — given enough time and support. Instead of encouraging superficiality and failure, a carefully developed scoring guide helps students work toward and achieve success.

Here is a well-conceived first-year composition assignment, designed to teach analytic reading and writing as well as use of sources (see the discussion in Chapter 1, pages 19–21), for which a scoring guide will be very helpful:

Write a short essay examining what the anthropologist Jules Henry means in the following passage and showing the extent to which the passage applies to your own schooling.

Another learning problem inherent in the human condition is the fact that we must conserve culture while changing it; that we must always be more sure of surviving than of adapting — as we see it. Whenever a new idea appears, our first concern as animals must be that it does not kill us; then and only then can we look at it from other points of view. In general, primitive people solved this problem simply by walling their children off from new possibilities by educational methods that, largely by fear (including ridicule, beating

and mutilation), so narrowed the perceptual sphere that other than traditional ways of viewing the world became unthinkable. . . . The function of education has never been to free the mind and the spirit of man, but to bind them. . . . Schools have therefore never been places for the stimulation of young minds.

—From Jules Henry, *Culture against Man*

It is worth exploring why this is a particularly good assignment to teach research skills. It has a clear purpose (to help students learn to use a source as evidence for an argument) and will help students understand a new idea and test it, combining personal experience writing with analytical writing. Even though it is accessible to everyone with memories of schooling, it contains challenges for the best writers: to understand an unconventional idea, to examine the evidence for it (some teachers will want to distribute the book chapter from which the passage is taken), to narrate and examine personal experience in relation to a source's ideas, to control point of view and tone, and to understand the relative power of evidence from research and from personal experience. Discussion of these matters in class will help students understand the complexity of the assignment, despite its clear demand and focus. Although the assignment does not state that quotations from the passage must be quoted and examined for meaning, its definition of the goal of the paper ("showing the extent to which the passage applies to your own schooling") in fact requires use of the source. Thus one clear pedagogical goal of the assignment is to help students see that they cannot merely insert quotations into their own writing, like raisins in a pudding, but rather need to introduce and discuss quotations as part of their argument.

If the class is unusually worried about grades and relatively inexperienced with this kind of assignment, all that may be needed is a 2-point scale, reflecting satisfactory or unsatisfactory work depending on whether the assignment is fulfilled. But we might choose to call those score points 5 and 2, with the intention of developing a 6-point scoring guide. A writing class will be ready, after some discussion, to come up with something like the following:

Score of 5

These papers show clear understanding of Henry's point about schools in general and also give clear evidence from the writer's experience about the degree to which that point described their own schooling. Quotations from the source are well integrated into the essay. The writing has a developed idea and its conclusions have been supported by evidence. Writing errors do not distract the reader.

Score of 2

These papers show little understanding of or respect for Henry's evidence and argument. The focus may be almost entirely on a defense of the writer's school and personal experience; the language may lack convincing detail or argument; and quotations from the passage (if they appear at all) are inserted without introduction, analysis, or connection to the paper's controlling idea. Editing is needed to deal with surface matters that distract the reader.

It would not be hard to expand these descriptors or to fill in the scores on either side of them. For example, the 6 paper would be able to show how schools must manage a series of sometimes conflicting goals. The 4 paper would accomplish the job but in a minimal way — that is, with a relatively superficial reading and analysis of the passage and little detail for the personal experience. Again, the 3 paper might have just a bit of detail and an unclear attitude toward the central argument of the passage, while the 1 paper just doesn't understand or address the task, or perhaps is a mechanical disaster. The score of 1 will mean different kinds of writing for different classes, depending on the backgrounds and abilities represented by the students.

USING SCORING GUIDES IN PEER GROUP ASSESSMENT

Once the criteria for grading have become clear enough to the teacher and to the class, they become a natural part of the writing assignment itself. The students will know from the outset the standards by which their work will be judged. Some teachers make sure to involve the students themselves in the *creation* of the scoring guide, so that they can see the quality standards as partly of their own devising. Teachers who use scoring guides in this way spend more time working constructively with students as they write their papers, since the standards for performance are clear and public and the students are more ready to seek help in meeting them.

This application of scoring guides opens new possibilities for the efficient use of student and teacher time. Since the standards for judgment are out in the open, and since they have at least in part been developed by the class, the teacher can now ask the class members to respond to and even grade the papers written by their peers. Since the students now have both a vocabulary and a scale to use for discussing and evaluating the writings they examine, they need no longer deliver only the vague and unhelpful comments common to unstructured peer groups. Instead, they can (and in fact do) hold the other students' essays to the standards set out in the scoring guide. Moreover, by learning how to read and evaluate the papers written by other students, they learn how to read their own.

This procedure has the magical value of increasing student learning while at the same time decreasing the teacher's paper load. Although few teachers will want to use peer evaluation and response for final drafts or for crucial decisions on course grades, many teachers find it a constructive and economical way to help students read and assess their early drafts.

Some writing teachers are beginning to use computer programs to assist in peer review, and the best of these programs have the additional advantage of allowing writing and writing assessment to take place in very large classes. A good example of such a program has been developed by the chemistry department at the University of California at Los Angeles, with assistance from the National Science Foundation. The program, called "calibrated peer review," is available at cpr.molsci.ucla.edu/. It includes the full presentation of a writing assignment, a scoring guide, a training program to help students "calibrate" their responses to given examples of writing to the assignment, a way for students to then respond to and grade writing done by others in their peer groups, and an assignment to use that background for self-assessment. In other words, it presents the advantages discussed in this chapter in such a way that students can perform all the activities within their peer groups, with the aid of computers, and without personal intervention by the teacher. It is not a computer grading program (with all of its problems) but rather a program to assist students in using assessment to improve the writing of other students and, as a result of that practice, their own drafts.

At the same time, the program presents its material with an air of authority that many writing teachers will resist, most particularly its assured distinctions of right versus wrong responses to the assignment and to others' writing. Perhaps that attitude is more appropriate in the sciences than it may be in other fields. Yet the program is flexible enough to offer writing teachers teasing possibilities for use in peer groups without increasing their already too high workload. No doubt other such programs will evolve rapidly.

USING SCORING GUIDES TO HELP STUDENTS ASSESS THEIR OWN WORK

One of the paradoxes of teaching writing is that the most experienced and professional writers will revise time and time again, sometimes with dozens of drafts, while the least experienced writers are usually perfectly happy with their first drafts. Teachers nowadays speak of the necessity of revision as part of the process of writing, but we are notoriously unsuccessful at convincing our students to undertake genuine revision. Diligent students will edit their work, particularly if we

have marked up their drafts, in accordance with teacher demands. But a genuine revision, one that reconsiders and changes in substance what has been said in an early draft, is rare indeed. Why is this?

There are, of course, many reasons, including simple laziness and more interesting competing activities. But even diligent and serious students rarely revise their work, and the tyranny of the first draft undercuts most teacher efforts to help students improve their work. One answer to this persistent problem is related to the absence of public assessment criteria: students do not revise their work because, in their heart of hearts, they don't really think there is anything wrong with it. All writers have some difficulty reading their own drafts, and the least experienced writers have the most trouble of all.

This is at heart an assessment problem. If students could learn to assess their own work, they would be much more likely to adopt the work habits of professional writers — who usually consider the first draft as working copy to get them started, not the end of the line. The difference is not that professional writers turn out wonderful first drafts (though all writers occasionally do), but that professionals are good enough at assessing their own work to know how to delete, move text, change direction, and turn out new drafts. If we can help our students assess their own work, we will be helping them develop writing habits that will lead to better and more satisfying work throughout their lives.

The class work with scoring guides that this chapter describes has as an underlying purpose this change in the way our students produce texts. Instead of producing a draft the night before it is due and praying that the teacher will be kind, the students will have a set of clear criteria before them from the time the assignment is given. They will be expected to participate in drawing up those criteria and to apply them to the drafts they and their peers turn out well in advance of the due date.

CONCLUSION

Scoring guides help teachers teach more effectively: first, by helping teachers review and revise their assignments in the light of pedagogical goals; second, by supporting simple fairness in teacher grading; third, as a means of restoring credibility to grades by making grading criteria clear and public; and, finally, as a way for students to internalize standards for their peers and themselves. We need to be cautious and thoughtful in our use of them, however, for they can easily become formulas for text production instead of liberating influences for writers. But as part of a thoughtful curriculum with well-conceived writing assignments, scoring guides offer teachers ways to help students understand revision and make distinctions. They can relieve the teacher's workload by making

peer response groups helpful and productive, at least for early drafts. They form a link between general statements of what constitutes good writing and the power of grading particular assignments that can lead to much improved student writing. As writing teachers, we need all the help we can get, and scoring guides are a particularly helpful classroom device for us.

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