CHAPTER 11

Fair and Consistent Evaluation

"Honest criticism is hard to take—especially when it comes from a relative, a friend, an acquaintance, or a stranger."

—Franklin P. Jones

In this chapter you will learn

- how to develop and use analytic grading rubrics.
- how to develop and use holistic grading rubrics.
- how to assure consistency when more than one grader is working with a class.

Grading papers is probably what you dread most about being a TA. If it is any comfort to you, it is also probably what teachers dread most, and students (as you no doubt know) certainly dread being graded. Evaluating writing seems so subjective, not like correcting a math problem, which is either right or wrong, or an objective test, which has a clear percentage score.

This chapter discusses ways to grade writing both fairly and consistently. To be fair, you must consider the same criteria for each paper and not have more stringent expectations for one student than for another. To be consistent, you want to be sure that you grade the first paper you read according to the same expectations as the last and that one grader uses the same criteria as another for the same assignment.

A good way to assure that grades are both fair and consistent is to have a clearly delineated list of criteria on which to base a grade. Such a list of grading criteria is sometimes called a *grading rubric, grading sheet,* or *scoring guide.* It really doesn't matter what you choose to call it. Preparing such a guide at the time the assignment is made, distributing it to the students to refer to as they write, and using it carefully as you grade will bring about better writing and better grading. Learning how to create and use a grading rubric will lead to more fairness and consistency.

Analytic Grading

Evaluating papers is similar to many other judgments you must make every day. Should you wear a sweater or a coat today? What kind of car should you buy?

Should you tell Sue what you really think of her new pants? When you make judgments like these, you use, either consciously or subconsciously, standards to guide your decision: temperature and weather, price and dependability, Sue's personality and the social consequences of those pants. Determining the relevant criteria makes a reasonable judgment easier to come to. With rational criteria as a guide, you are less likely to be distracted by emotional, irrelevant factors.

Likewise, assigning a grade can become less mystical for you and your students if you develop a list of criteria to guide your grading. Analytic grading relies on an analysis of the various criteria for a good paper in order to assign value. Although you can't reduce an assessment of writing to a purely objective numerical formula, you can break down the main standards you are looking for. If you share these criteria with the students before they write their papers, they will strive to meet those standards and submit a more carefully written paper. Having the criteria will help you to be more consistent in your grading. Whether the paper is read first or last, whether you are feeling cranky or mellow, you will still need to evaluate each of the stated criteria for each paper, which will help your assessment to be more complete and fair. Your professor will probably take most of the responsibility for determining grading criteria; however, this section will help you to better understand what is behind the grading rubric you will use.

DEVELOPING GRADING CRITERIA

To determine what criteria are important in evaluating a paper, consider the purpose of the assignment. If the main purpose of the assignment is to show an ability to synthesize information from a variety of sources, then ability to synthesize should be one of the grading criteria. If the assignment is designed to show that the student is able to describe experimental data clearly, then that goal needs to be included in the criteria.

Grading criteria are most effective if they are customized to each assignment or kind of assignment. Though it may seem easier to use one standard grading rubric for all papers, it is better to have one set of criteria for the lab notebook and another for the research paper, because there are different expectations and purposes for each. The following steps can help you and your professor to develop your own assignment-specific grading rubrics.

List Important Criteria. List all the important qualities of a good paper written in response to that particular assignment. The list for a lab report, for example, might include the following.[1]

- professional presentation, including a letter of transmittal, cover page, abstract or summary, table of contents, list of illustrations, and glossary of terms
- a clear introduction stating the problem or purpose of the experiments, why it is important, and the hypothesis the experiment is to prove
- a literature review that summarizes work that has been published on this problem

- an interpretation of data/conclusions section that explains the significance of the findings
- visual aids such as drawings, photographs, charts, or graphs
- a conclusion expressing specific recommendations for further research
- a list of sources
- style and mechanics that are clear, effective, and correct

The list for your particular assignment will vary. The following is a list a teacher developed to guide her evaluation of history papers.[2]

- An interesting title and opening paragraph prepare the reader for the paper.
- Issues and events are placed in time and set in a historical context.
- Historical evidence or quotes support claims made by the author.
- Competing historical points of view are considered.
- Structure is coherent and focused, with a summary in the concluding paragraph.
- Presentation, style, and mechanics enhance, rather than detract from, the paper.

With the important elements isolated, you can then add descriptions of what you require in each area. Think of your students as you describe the various requirements. Sometimes a series of questions helps to clarify what you are looking for. If you have a textbook that discusses these elements in more detail, you can refer the students to specific page numbers in the book for further information. A well-prepared grading rubric can serve as a powerful teaching tool. Explain the criteria clearly so students will understand what they need to do to improve.

Decide the Criteria Weighting and Format. Once the important elements of the paper have been determined, work with your professor to decide which elements of these criteria are most important. You may decide that all the criteria are equally important, or you may decide to weight some more heavily than others. There is no one right way. Some teachers like to assign a certain number of points to each criterion, while others explain that each criterion is worth a certain percentage of the final grade. You and the professor will need to decide what best fits the class and requirements of the assignment.

A variety of formats can work for grading rubrics. Will the sum of points, the average of the points, or your feedback determine the grade? You and your professor will need to decide what will work best for you. Examples 11.1 through 11.4 show various grading rubric formats that are used in a variety of courses.

Technology Tactics

Downloadable versions of the grading rubrics in Examples 11.1 through 11.5, as well as other useful forms and worksheets, are available at <bedford stmartins.com/ta_guide>.

EXAMPLE 11.1. Graduated Responses[i]

FSN 445—PAPER GRADING SHEET

Name: _____

1 **Content: (25 pts)** Is the paper informative, with a clear purpose? Is the Introduction helpful? Do the ideas/concepts develop logically and clearly? Does the conclusion sum up the paper adequately?

Definitely	Mostly	Marginally	Not Really

2 **Tone: (4 pts)** Are the level of the writing and the use of language appropriate and professional?

Definitely	Mostly	Marginally	Not Really

3 **Use of Resources: (4 pts)** Was the depth of research adequate? Were reliable sources used? Were ideas paraphrased or summarized honestly and effectively?

Definitely	Mostly	Marginally	Not Really

4 **Format: (4 pts)** Does the paper follow the required format? Do headings guide the reader through the paper?

Definitely	Mostly	Marginally	Not Really

5 **Documentation: (4 pts)** Are citations in the text and the reference page correct according to appropriate style?

Definitely	Mostly	Marginally	Not Really

6 **Mechanics: (4 pts)** Is the paper free from spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors? Has it been carefully proofread?

Definitely	Mostly	Marginally	Not Really

7 **Overall Quality: (5 pts)** Is the topic worth writing about? Does the paper hold together well, present sound argument or description, reflect clear thinking? Is it enjoyable to read?

Definitely	Mostly	Marginally	Not Really

Score: _____

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[i]Thanks to Nora Nyland, Department of Nutrition, Dietetics and Food Services, Brigham Young University (BYU)

EXAMPLE 11.2. Numerical Responses[ii]

111 GEOL—TERM PAPER BIBLIOGRAPHY EVALUATION SHEET

Name: _____

Grading Criteria

The bibliography will be graded on the quality and number of references (10 is adequate; after 15 I won't look at them), the quality of the annotation, the variety of source types (there must be at least one from each of the categories listed on the assignment sheet), and format (including reference style and order of citation), as well as neatness, grammar, and spelling. Consult the grading sheet below.

Categories	Possible	Earned	Comments
Neatness	10	_____	
Grammar	10	_____	
Spelling and capitalization	10	_____	
Quality of references and category	10	_____	
Clarity and style of annotation	10	_____	
Quality of references	10	_____	
Content and accuracy of summaries	30	_____	
Reference format	10	_____	
Score:	**100**	_____	

EXAMPLE 11.3. Scales[iii]

MFHD 340—GENERAL GRADING CRITERIA FOR SEMESTER PAPERS

Name: _____

Accuracy in using concepts

1 —— 2 —— 3 —— 4 —— 5 —— 6 —— 7 —— 8 —— 9 —— 10

unclear definitions   *very clear concepts, defined and understood*

Ideas (creativity and quality of thought)

1 —— 2 —— 3 —— 4 —— 5 —— 6 —— 7 —— 8 —— 9 —— 10

shallow, mundane   *substantive, imaginative*

Support (detail, sufficiency, substantiality, relevance)

1 —— 2 —— 3 —— 4 —— 5 —— 6 —— 7 —— 8 —— 9 —— 10

week, feeble, fallacious arguments   *very strong*

Organization (unity, coherence, progression)

1 —— 2 —— 3 —— 4 —— 5 —— 6 —— 7 —— 8 —— 9 —— 10

very loose   *very tight*

Technical control (use of spelling, capitalization, punctuation, grammar, APA style)

1 —— 2 —— 3 —— 4 —— 5 —— 6 —— 7 —— 8 —— 9 —— 10

ineffective   *very effective*

Score: _____

EXAMPLE 11.4. Written Comments[iv]

FIRST YEAR WRITING: HONORS 200 RUBRIC FOR CRITICAL ANALYSIS	
Name: _____	
Organization and Arguments	**Comments**
Thesis clearly communicates topic, focus, and purpose	
Thesis (intro) delineates organization	
Essay covers all aspects promised by thesis	
Logically organized	
Thesis supported by main ideas	
All material is directly on topic	
Main ideas directly related to thesis	
Adequate evidence supports all claims	
Evidence is thoroughly analyzed and explained	
Body paragraphs are well developed, have main ideas, and provide reasons, facts, and examples	
Introduction—attention/introduces topic/leads into thesis	
Conclusion—completion/slightly new idea/not merely a summary	
Analysis, not summary	
Subject Matter	**Comments**
Suitable topic	
Covered completely	
Sound reasoning/no logical fallacies	
Style and Mechanics	**Comments**
Transitions	
Citing textual evidence accurately	
Citing outside evidence accurately	
Concise	
Sentence structure—variety and emphasis	
Grammar	
Punctuation	
Formality	
Passive voice	
Sexist language, slang, clichés, etc.	
Grade: _____	
Drafts: _____	

USING THE GRADING RUBRIC

Using an analytic grading rubric requires evaluating each aspect of the paper separately. After reading through the paper as a whole, turn to the grading rubric. Determine how successful the paper is in each area. How well focused is the thesis? How well developed are the main points? Are the sentences clear? In each area, show students how successful they were by filling in the points or by marking the graduated continuum. When you want to give students more feedback, write brief notes on the grading guide to explain your evaluation. One of the main advantages of the analytic grading rubric is that it allows you to give students specific feedback on the most important skills you are trying to teach. Students can look at the grading rubric and quickly identify areas that are working and areas that still need work. The analytic guidelines remind you to consider all aspects of the paper when you are assigning the grade and also help you to be both fair and consistent in your grading.

Holistic Grading

Analytic evaluation is good for formative evaluation, because it provides clear expectations for students and guides revision and improvement on future assignments. It can also help with summative evaluation, providing a clear explanation of how the grade was determined. Sometimes such a detailed breakdown of a final grade can be misleading, however. If you have assigned 10 points out of 100 for the presentation of the paper, do you really take only 10 points off if the mechanics and style are so bad that you can barely decipher the meaning? In reality, each aspect of a piece of writing influences all the others, and it is almost impossible to isolate one from another.

Holistic grading is a more unified approach to evaluation. Edward White, a leading authority on writing assessment, points out that holistic grading "allows

us to consider writing as more than just the sum of its parts."[3] The holistic grading rubric, rather than breaking down the various elements of a paper, describes the qualities of a paper at various levels of expertise. The guide would describe the qualities of an *A* paper, then a *B* paper, and so forth. To use such a guide, the grader would read the paper and compare it with the descriptions to see which level the paper most closely matches.

To develop a holistic grading rubric, think of the qualities you would expect to find in an *A* paper, *B* paper, *C* paper, and so forth. Write a description of those qualities for each grade designation. Include various important criteria in each description. (See Example 11.5.) Each description should include some discussion of the level of focus, structure, support, paragraphing, style, mechanics, and other criteria you may choose to focus on.

Holistic evaluation works well for giving an overall judgment of a piece of writing. It is especially good for summative evaluation. Though less detailed feedback is included on the grading sheet, the overall assessment is probably very reliable. Holistic evaluation is often used for scoring a large number of essays because it can be done very quickly and with good reliability. It is not as effective for encouraging revision, however, because of the less specific nature of the feedback given.

Teaching Tip: Emotions Vs. Responsibilities

Remember the following points when you are grading your students' writing.

- You may feel terrible about giving a low grade, but you must remember that *not all students are good students*. They may be very much aware of the problems in their papers and have simply chosen not to fix them. They may be expecting the very grade their paper earns.

- You do not "give" grades—students earn them. They make their own choices. You just describe the relative quality of their work using the symbol of a grade.

- Try not to fall into what Connors and Glenn call the "*B* fallacy."[4] Even though you know a paper is only adequate, you may be tempted to still give it a *B* grade. You may think students will be happier and less likely to complain, but you need to remember a *C* grade means average. Assign *B*s only to those papers that are truly above average, and *A*s to the few papers that are in fact exceptional.

- Letter grades have psychological weight. You may find it easier to grade fairly if you use point values or other symbols to show relative merit.

Grade Norming

Whether the assessment is analytic or holistic, it is imperative that students feel their work will be evaluated fairly no matter who is their grader. Students need to feel that the TA will assess their papers in much the same way as the professor. In large classes where more than one grader is evaluating papers, graders

EXAMPLE 11.5. Holistic Grading Rubric[v]

	TMA 300—CRITICAL ANALYSIS GRADING RUBRIC
A	An analysis earning an *A* will have selected a complicated text that requires careful investigation. This investigation will clearly follow a thesis statement that is concrete, unique, and contestable. The analysis will employ at least one critical theory we have studied this semester and will show a familiarity with the purpose, vocabulary, and application of the theory. The paper will have few or no grammatical or mechanical errors. It will be written in a clear, flowing style, with precise word choice and a variety of sentence length. It will have at least three solid critical sources to support or contest its argument. Most important, it will demonstrate deep critical thinking about the text, the theory, and how this impacts some attitude or aspect of society.
B	An analysis earning a *B* will include all of the above, but the writer's discussion of the text and the theory will be less carefully developed. *B* papers may have less than the required bibliographic sources. It will include a high number of stylistic, mechanical, and formatting errors.
C	An analysis earning a *C* will include all of the above, but it will show less evidence of careful thought, will misapply a theory, or be missing any critical bibliographic sources. It will show a greater number of stylistic, mechanical, and formatting errors.
D	An analysis earning a *D* will have more than one error of *C*-level work (for example, less evidence of careful thought *and* misapplication of theory), in addition to having the other characteristics of no higher than *C*-level work. A paper with a substantial number of stylistic, mechanical, and formatting errors and little evidence of careful thought will also earn a *D*.
F	An analysis earning an *F* will have the characteristics of *D*-level work but will also lack either a critical theory or a text.

need to strive for consistency. Otherwise, students will talk about who got the hard grader and who got the easy grader. They will feel that they got a low grade unfairly, and they will complain to the teacher. Such disparities in assessment lessen the credibility of TAs.

Having "published" grading criteria will help to minimize these problems, but holding regular grade-norming sessions will help even more. In a grade-norming session the professor and all TAs for the course practice grading sample papers together, applying the grading criteria, and explaining the grading decisions they make. Through this practice, the group of graders learns to evaluate

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papers similarly. Your professor will probably want to take charge in such a session. The following guidelines can serve as a resource for planning and participating.

1. Your professor will select several sample student essays that respond to the same prompt as the group of papers that will be evaluated. Essays representing a range of quality will be represented, from very good to very poor, with several in the medium range. About four to five sample essays is a good number. There should be enough copies for all the participants.

2. Before you begin looking at the sample papers with the group of graders, your professor will review the predetermined grading criteria and clarify any questions you TAs may have. Your professor may choose to use a six-point scale (6 is high, 1 is low) to sidestep the psychological baggage of letter grades. On the other hand, your professor may choose to use the same grading system you will use for the students, so that you become familiar with using it.

3. All of the TAs (graders) will read the essays, and individually assign scores to them, referring to the grading criteria.

4. The graders share their grades for each essay, while your professor writes the range on the chalk board or an overhead transparency. Note the range in grades. If the grades vary by more than one point, your professor will have the high and low graders defend their scores, referring to the grading criteria. Then the graders will reevaluate the contested essay and see if the grades are more in line.

5. Keep doing this until the group is grading the essays relatively consistently.

6. Your professor will have you repeat this exercise as necessary, for new assignments or midway through the semester.

If your professor does not feel that such a large-scale training session is practical in your situation, you could have a more informal discussion with your professor when the papers to be graded are first turned in. Before you start grading, ask your professor to look at one or two papers with you. He or she could explain what to look for in the papers as you read them together, explaining how to apply the grading rubric.

Another good idea is to meet with your professor and/or other TAs after grading the papers and before passing them back. Each grader should bring copies of a paper that was particularly difficult to evaluate. Read the papers together and discuss the best way to respond to and evaluate them. Doing this regularly will help you to feel more confident about the grades you assign.

Conclusion

Evaluating papers will always be a challenging yet necessary task. Students need to know how their writing measures up and what they need to change to become better writers. You are not being fair to your students if you do not grade

their writing at regular intervals during the semester to let them know how they are progressing.

Identifying and weighting criteria, using either an analytic or holistic grading rubric, and holding grade-norming sessions can increase your reliability as a grader. Remember that you are not punishing students with a grade; you are simply describing the quality of their work so that they can learn how to write better.

Chapter Checklist

☐ Work with your professor to identify and weight grading criteria.

☐ Help your professor to prepare a clear grading rubric (either analytic or holistic) and make it available to both students and graders.

☐ Participate in grade-norming exercises with other graders so that you are all using the grading rubric consistently.

Applications to Your Own Situation

1. Using a writing assignment for your class, make a list describing important elements that would be found in an excellent paper. Decide how to weight those elements. Prepare an analytic grading rubric for that paper.

2. Using the same criteria as for Application 1, develop a holistic grading rubric. Notice the differences between the two kinds of guides.

Working with Your Professor

1. Discuss grading criteria with your professor and help him or her to refine the criteria.

2. Ask your professor how he or she wants to deal with possible grade complaints. (See Chapter 13 for more on handling student complaints about grades.)

3. If many different TAs grade papers for your class, discuss with your professor the possibility for setting up a grade-norming session to help standardize grading in the class.

4. Ask your professor if he or she would like to hold post-grading sessions where graders share difficult-to-grade papers and discuss ways to respond to them.