Leaving Your Mark: Grading the Essay

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REFLECTION

1. Recall memorable experiences you had as a student in getting back an essay (positive or negative).
2. Where did you learn how to or get a sense of grading and marking?
3. Why do you give essay assignments?
GRADING EXAMPLES

Mint - as close to mint as one could expect on a can of this vintage. In the eyes of some, the small dent near the top rim would downgrade this can to grade 1.

Grade 1 - Some handling scratches showing, otherwise, very good condition.

Grade 2 - Some spotting and rim rust showing. Still very "displayable."

Grade 3 - Words and name recognizable but nearing the point of looking tacky on your shelf. Acid might improve this one to grade 2.

Grade 4 - Heavy rust, paint peeling, large dent on right side. A lot of work could improve this can but it might be best to wait for a better specimen. Anything less than this can would be Grade 5 and not worth collecting.
Academic Writing

I used to hate writing assignments, but now I enjoy them.

I realized that the purpose of writing is to inflate weak ideas, obscure poor reasoning, and inhibit clarity.

With a little practice, writing can be an intimidating and impenetrable fog. Want to see my book report?

The dynamics of interbeing and monological imperatives in Dick and Jane: A study in psychic transrelational gender modes.

Academia, here I come!

Bill Watterson, Calvin and Hobbes: Homicidal Psycho Jungle Cat
Session Feedback Form

“What did you learn that you could use in your own teaching?”
“Not to use essay questions.”
KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

☐ What is the assumed year (level) of the course?
☐ Are all the students in that year?
☐ What do they know?
☐ What don’t they know?
☐ What are their writing experiences?
KNOW YOUR PURPOSE

☐ Why are you assigning an essay question?
☐ Would another type of testing or evaluation be more suitable?
☐ If you are not comfortable or capable of seeing and marking writing problems, why are you giving essay questions?
KNOW YOURSELF

☐ Attitude towards students:
  ▪ What are your assumptions about your students?
  ▪ What are your expectations of your students?

☐ Your limitations:
  ▪ What do you have the time to grade?
  ▪ What do you have the ability/skills to grade/comment on?
Being Honest About Writing

*Writing is the hardest work in the world not involving heavy lifting.*

~Pete Hamill~
Learning to Write

- Writing is a complex skill.
- Writing is an important part of a student's skill set.
- Writing has specific, concrete aspects that can be taught and learned.
- Writing problems are individual.
- Writing problems are general.
- Writing proficiency takes time.
THE CONSTRUCTION OF WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Loopholes in exams

1. Explain Newton's First Law of Motion in your own words.

Calvin & Hobbes
GENERAL

- Don’t use essay questions if you are simply testing recall
- Spend time designing the questions
- Fit questions to content, intent, and level of the class
- Consider issues of cheating and plagiarism
“When writing your essays, I encourage you to think for yourselves while you express what I’d most agree with.”

~ Mathew Henry Hall ~
Wording

☐ Write clear instructions

☐ Consider ambiguity

☐ Consider terminology
Structure

- A single question
- A paragraph containing a question
- A series of questions
Other Issues to Consider

- Offer choice: too much or too little?
- Offer a challenge to students
- Length should fit the topic, time, purpose, and grade percentage
- Indicate value of assignment (and time if in-class)
Test the Question

- Try it out on a colleague
- Try it yourself
- Try it on students
The Implementation of Writing Assignments

- Time – how far ahead will you give it?
- Written / Verbal communication
- Do they know what you want? Do you?
- Follow-up: how will you know they know what you want?
GRADING OF WRITING

- Before Marking
- During Marking
- After Marking
“Establishing criteria for grading is central to using writing as a pedagogical tool to enhance student learning. Without clear criteria, students will interpret your goals in unexpected ways; that is why extra time taken at the beginning to define your own criteria will save you from getting papers that drift far from your intentions.”

~ Michael Flanigan~
BEFORE MARKING

- Design an evaluation mechanism
  - a Rubric
- Give the students the mechanism
- Decide intensity of marking
- Outline your expectations of a good answer and/or good writing
- Recognize that you are not a machine
DURING MARKING

METHODS

☐ Mark randomly and return to previous graded papers for “compass”
☐ Put papers in piles according to grades after all are marked—reread and compare
☐ Mark “blind”
☐ Grade the same questions at the same time
☐ Choice of utensils
☐ Time
COMMENTS

☐ CONTROLLED - too much/too little
☐ APPROPRIATE - to audience/purpose
☐ UNDERSTANDABLE – to your students
☐ CONNECTED – to class and expectations
☐ SPECIFIC AND FOCUSED
☐ GENERAL
☐ POINTED AND HELPFUL
☐ HONEST- positive vs. negative comments
  - equality and fairness
☐ TONE
AFTER MARKING

- Provide general feedback to the whole class
- Make students accountable
- Keep track
- Timing: returning essay, next assignment, discussing with students
- Meet with students if desired and necessary
The Point

After this process of

- receiving the assignment,
- writing the paper,
- having you mark and comment on their writing,
- and reading and interacting with all of that
The Point

the students should understand

• what went well,
• the areas of weakness,
• what needs to be addressed and in what order,
• how (or where) they may go about this
Challenges

Skills & knowledge of grader
Skills & knowledge of students
Non-native writers
Time
Grade distribution
Complaints/remarking
Questions?
Sources and Resources


- "Grading Written Reports or Papers”  TA Handbook
  [http://www.tss.uoguelph.ca/id/ta/tahb/tah6b.html](http://www.tss.uoguelph.ca/id/ta/tahb/tah6b.html)
  (Barbara Christian, The Learning Commons, University of Guelph)

- “In the deep end of essay marking” – Martin Gough
  [http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/prsddocuments/12](http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/prsddocuments/12)

- Marking Strategies - Mantex/Clifton Press 1993-2011

  Marking Composition: Designing Rubrics That Work
  Clear Instructions, Great Expectations: Creating good writing assignments

- “Section 4. Marking work and giving feedback.” LSE Handbook for Graduate Teaching Assistants
  [http://www2.lse.ac.uk/intranet/staff/teachingAtLSE/graduateTeachingAssistantsHandbook/section4/Home.aspx](http://www2.lse.ac.uk/intranet/staff/teachingAtLSE/graduateTeachingAssistantsHandbook/section4/Home.aspx)