

Grading Student Work

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What About Grading? Using the Trait Model to Arrive at Fair Grades in Writing

At workshops and in teachers' rooms across the country, the great grading debate rages on. Some teachers are abandoning grades completely for narrative reports, while others are perfectly happy to stick with the traditional A-B-C-D-F system. Others are modifying that system by reporting only work that meets or exceeds state standards, while giving students whose work does not meet that expectation time to improve. Teachers and administrators are struggling to create reporting systems that accurately communicate what individual students know and have achieved, while many parents just want to know how their children are doing compared with their classmates.

Later in this section, I show you how to use the trait scoring guides to arrive at fair grades in writing. But first, I want to share some general points to consider when grading, regardless of the system you're using.

Three Ps to Consider When Grading

Report card time is overwhelming, considering the number of students we teach, the variety of strengths and weaknesses they have, and the various points at which they fall on the developmental spectrum. But I've found grading is easier if I stay focused on three areas: performance, progress, and participation.

Performance: Knowledge about and skills in writing at a particular point in time

Ask yourself these questions:

- What are the student's capabilities? Where is the evidence?
- What is his or her level of achievement?
- What criteria am I using to assess writing performance?
- Does the student meet those criteria?

Progress: Growth in writing skills over time

Ask yourself these questions:

- What has the student learned? Where is the evidence?
- Did the student meet the writing goals for this grading period?
- If not, which goals did he or she miss and why?
- Are there any issues to consider that may be impacting the student's progress, such as special education or ELL status?

Participation: Effort and attitude toward learning

Ask yourself these questions:

- Was the student on time to class? Did he or she turn in work when it was due?
- Did he or she follow directions?
- How hard did the student work on a daily basis?
- Did the student work well with classmates and on his or her own?
- Did the student cooperate with you and peers?

Although all three of these areas are equally important, they should be graded separately because combining them sends out a mixed signal. For example, if a student receives high scores for performance, but poor ones for participation, averaging those two scores for a grade does not clearly indicate where his or her strengths or weaknesses lie. And we can't expect improvement unless we're clear about what needs to be improved. Taking the time to grade the "three Ps" separately tells students and their families where they are succeeding and where they aren't.

If you feel one area is more critical to learning than two others, assign a higher percentage of the final grade to that area. For example, you might assign 50 percent of the final grade to performance, 25 percent to progress, and 25 percent to participation. When reporting grades, be sure to list these three grades separately and then average them for the final grade to give students and their families a good sense of how the final grade was derived.

Grading and Reporting Dos and Don'ts

DO	DON'T
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have a clear vision of what successful performance looks like. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use grades to reward or punish performance.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share criteria with students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep your criteria secret.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Treat students fairly and equally, based on their current performance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assume good or poor performance, based on prior performance.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report achievement and participation scores separately. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Report an achievement grade based on participation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate product and process separately. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lump product and process into one evaluation.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allow students time to change/revise work before the final evaluation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insist all work be completed within a rigid time frame.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assign enough grades to ensure the final evaluation is a fair and accurate reflection of learning, but not so many that grading gets in the way of teaching. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assign so many grades that assessment takes all your time or so few that the final evaluation is not a fair and accurate representation of learning.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate only work that shows evidence of learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluate everything the student produces.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Base final grades on what the student learned, not on what he or she didn't know at the start of the grading period. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Average grades equally from the beginning of the grading period to the end, regardless of growth and improvement.

Using the Trait Scoring Guides to Determine Progress

Because they provide clear criteria with which to measure where your students are and how far they have come, the trait scoring guides, which can be found in the file entitled “Scoring Guides” on this CD, will help you report performance and progress. They won’t, however, help you report participation because they don’t cover issues such as timeliness, cooperation, and following directions. I suggest developing your own scoring guide for participation, based on what you have seen and expect from students. Here are some suggestions for using the trait scoring guides to determine grades for performance and progress.

Don’t score every student paper for every trait every time you grade. Score it only for the trait you just taught and practiced. For example, if you carry out a lesson or activity on voice, and your students write papers based on that activity, score the papers for voice only. Score a larger project—one students are working on over time and feel invested in—for all the traits.

Use number scores from the scoring guides instead of letter grades on papers in progress. If you give a piece 4s and 5s in some traits, but 1s and 2s in others, you give the writer a good sense of where revision or editing should take place for her next draft.

Be honest. Don’t give unrealistic scores for effort. If you give a student’s paper 3s and 4s, but it deserves 1s and 2s, you provide feedback that is inaccurate and unhelpful. Inflated scores are misleading no matter how tempting it is to assign them when a student tries hard or turns in her best work of the year. Find other ways to reward good effort.

Informing Students of How They’ll Be Graded

The writing cover sheet on page 5 allows you to inform students about specific criteria upon which they’ll be graded, such as their application of one or more of the traits and skills related to the writing process. Use it to show students the percentage breakdown of the criteria so they’ll know exactly how you plan to arrive at the grade they receive.

Figuring Grades With a Handy Chart

Knowing how to convert a trait score to a grade is trickier than it seems. It’s not as simple as dividing the total points a paper earns by the total points possible to get a percentage, and determining a letter grade based on that percentage.

Letter grades are not equally distributed from 1 to 100. They usually break down this way: 90–100 = A, 80–89 = B, 70–79 = C, 60–69 = D, 59 and below = F. There are 11 scores that earn an A, 10 for a B, 10 for a C, 10 for a D, and 59 for an F. Consider this example: On a six-point scoring guide, I consider a score of 3 as average, or a C. But if you convert a 3 to a percentage by dividing it by 6 you wind up with 50 percent, or an F.

A simple way to handle grading is to use the handy chart on page 6, created by Michael Lippold of Smartacus Inc., which enables you to arrive at a grade for a paper quickly and easily by pinpointing a percentage based on the number of traits scored and the total number of points earned.

Time-Saving Tip

Don’t mark up final papers. Instead, after you grade them, provide students with several trait-specific comments, pointing out what they did well and what they need to focus on in the next paper. In other words, give them truly useful revision and editing advice they can apply the next time they write. After all, if students are not going to work further on a piece, why belabor ways to make that piece better? They won’t be able to implement your suggestions and corrections, and could wind up with a bad taste in their mouths about writing.

Arriving at a Final Grade Based on Trait Scores

There are two good ways to arrive at a final grade in writing for the report card.

1. One way to determine a letter grade from a scoring guide is to add up the percentages earned on each assignment and divide by the number of assignments to get an overall average grade, or mean grade. (See page 6 for a chart to convert number of traits scored and number of points earned to a percentage.) Align the answer to your school's or district's grading range. For example, many schools identify a range for each grade: 90–100 is an A, 80–89 is a B, 70–79 is a C, and so on. Once you have determined the percentage score, you can assign a letter grade to it that aligns with the percentage-to-grade guidelines used in your school or district.

Be sure your final score, the one you will use for the grade at the end of the term, only contains percentages for completed work. You may be tempted to give zeros for incomplete or missing assignments, but zeros make it impossible to arrive at a mathematical score that reflects what the student knows and can do. Failing to turn in work or turning in incomplete work is a participation issue, not a performance or progress issue. It matters, but does not reflect what the student knows and can do in writing.

2. Another option is to determine the mode, the score that is assigned most often, and use it for the final grade. To arrive at the mode score, examine the student's record for the most frequently assigned score. If a student typically gets 4s in ideas, but happens to score a 1 on one assignment, it's more reflective of the student's real skill level to assign a 4 for the final grade and ignore the occasional low...or even the extraordinary high. The mode score addresses the reality that we all have bad writing days.

To convert the mode score to a grade, use the following chart:

6 = A+	5 = A	4 = B	3 = C	2 = D	1 = F
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In the example above, if the student's mode score for the grading period was a 4, then she would receive a B for the final grade.

Final Thoughts About Grading

Whatever method you and your colleagues decide upon to determine final grades, remember that the purpose of assigning trait scores during drafting, revising, and editing is primarily to communicate how strong the paper is in one or more traits at that point in its development. Assessment, or assigning scores based on a scoring guide, should spotlight where students need to apply their energy most and where they don't. It should confirm for students whether their work is improving. Evaluation on the other hand, is used to assign a grade when the work is finished and the grade is marked on a final paper or on a report card at the end of a grading period.

Writing Cover Sheet

Name _____ Date _____

Paper: _____

Before you turn in your paper that will be assessed for

Ideas	KQ	1	2	3	4	(_____% or points ____)
Organization	KQ	1	2	3	4	(_____% or points ____)
Voice	KQ	1	2	3	4	(_____% or points ____)
Word Choice	KQ	1	2	3	4	(_____% or points ____)
Sentence Fluency	KQ	1	2	3	4	(_____% or points ____)
Conventions	KQ	1	2	3	4	(_____% or points ____)
Presentation	KQ	1	2	3	4	(_____% or points ____)

(KQ = Key Quality)

...please check to make sure you have:

1. followed all directions.	(_____% or points ____)
2. turned your work in on time.	(_____% or points ____)

Other criteria that will affect your grade:

a rough draft	(_____% or points ____)
notes from conference	(_____% or points ____)
evidence of proofreading (peer checklist)	(_____% or points ____)
citations and references	(_____% or points ____)
reflection	(_____% or points ____)
a cover sheet	(_____% or points ____)
other	(_____% or points ____)

Total % _____ (100%) or points _____/(_____)

Use the flip side of this checklist to tell me anything else that is important before I read and grade your final paper. Thanks!

Grading Chart

Grade	Point Total	Number of Traits Scored						
		7	6	5	4	3	2	1
	1							60.00%
	2						60.00%	68.00%
	3					60.00%	64.00%	76.00%
	4				60.00%	62.67%	68.00%	84.00%
	5			60.00%	62.00%	65.33%	72.00%	92.00%
	6		60.00%	61.60%	64.00%	68.00%	76.00%	100.00%
	7	60.00%	61.33%	63.20%	66.00%	70.67%	80.00%	
	8	61.14%	62.67%	64.80%	68.00%	73.33%	84.00%	
	9	62.29%	64.00%	66.40%	70.00%	76.00%	88.00%	
F	10	63.43%	65.33%	68.00%	72.00%	78.67%	92.00%	
	11	64.57%	66.67%	69.60%	74.00%	81.33%	96.00%	
	12	65.71%	68.00%	71.20%	76.00%	84.00%	100.00%	
	13	66.86%	69.33%	72.80%	78.00%	86.67%		
	14	68.00%	70.67%	74.40%	80.00%	89.33%		
	15	69.14%	72.00%	76.00%	82.00%	92.00%		
	16	70.29%	73.33%	77.60%	84.00%	94.67%		
D	17	71.43%	74.67%	79.20%	86.00%	97.33%		
	18	72.57%	76.00%	80.80%	88.00%	100.00%		
	19	73.71%	77.33%	82.40%	90.00%			
	20	74.86%	78.67%	84.00%	92.00%			
	21	76.00%	80.00%	85.60%	94.00%			
	22	77.14%	81.33%	87.20%	96.00%			
	23	78.29%	82.67%	88.80%	98.00%			
C	24	79.43%	84.00%	90.40%	100.00%			
	25	80.57%	85.33%	92.00%				
	26	81.71%	86.67%	93.60%				
	27	82.86%	88.00%	95.20%				
	28	84.00%	89.33%	96.80%				
	29	85.14%	90.67%	98.40%				
	30	86.29%	92.00%	100.00%				
B	31	87.43%	93.33%					
	32	88.57%	94.67%					
	33	89.71%	96.00%					
	34	90.86%	97.33%					
	35	92.00%	98.67%					
	36	93.14%	100.00%					
	37	94.29%						
A	38	95.43%						
	39	96.57%						
	40	97.71%						
	41	98.86%						
A+	42	100.00%						