

The Process of Grading

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As a member of The North Central Association and the Higher Learning Commission, NIU's faculty are required to assess student learning through term papers, examinations, or other means; link assessment activities to instructional goals and objectives; ensure assessment measures are valid and reliable; directly involve faculty; use assessment outcomes to improve teaching and learning; and ensure assessment is included in curricular, course, and budget plans (Walvoord and Anderson, 1998). Through the mandate, it becomes clear that grading is a crucial part of teaching that requires careful planning and follow-through.

Walvoord and Anderson, in *Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment*, present 12 principles to help faculty understand and work through the complexity of grading:

1. **Appreciate the complexity of grading: Use it as a tool for learning**—grades take on different meanings for each student and can be used to enhance learning.
2. **Substitute judgment for objectivity**—employ clear, thoughtful, standard's based judgment to enhance your grading practice.
3. **Distribute time effectively**—spend enough time to make consistent, thoughtful and sound judgment. More time spent grading does not correlate to better grading or better grades.
4. **Be open to change**—use grading systems that work in context with the students' current level of performance, subject, curriculum, university.
5. **Listen and observe**—derive clearly stated grading criteria and ensure your students understand them.
6. **Communicate and collaborate with students**—help students attain goals and objectives through communication and collaboration between you and your students. Show students that you learn from them as they can learn from you.
7. **Integrate grading with other key processes**—plan and tie grading criteria and schemes with course goals, objectives, methods, and activities so they are relevant and meaningful.
8. **Seize the teachable moment**—as with the actual task of teaching, giving grades can elicit a variety of feedback. Take notice when students question grades and turn the situation into a learning experience instead of a gripe session. Through careful listening and questioning, both you and your students can benefit from the situation.
9. **Make student learning the primary goal**—when equitably and carefully considered, grading can positively affect student learning.

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Tying one's grading system to instructional methods which encourage student-faculty and student-student cooperation and engagement and active learning has been shown to positively affect students' self-esteem and learning. Also, faculty who emphasize high expectations in realistic time frames, give prompt feedback, and respect students' diverse talents and learning styles tend to use grading to enhance rather than drive the learning process (Walvoord and Anderson, 1998, citing Astin and Chickering and Gamson).

10. **Be a teacher first, a gatekeeper last**—strive to help students learn in ways that address their learning preferences rather than using a cookie-cutter approach where everyone is treated the same.
11. **Encourage learning-centered motivation**—personally encourage students to learn for learning sake rather than to achieve grades. Stress the fact that hard work does pay off, that one can learn as much from failure as from a passing grade, and that personal motivation will move them forward in life.
12. **Emphasize student involvement**—students will be more motivated learners if they are involved in different aspects of instructional planning including assessment and grading. (Walvoord and Anderson, 1998, pp. 10-16)

Developing a Personal Grading Philosophy

Grading involves a number of elements that vary from your style of teaching and preference of grading strategies to the course content and how you perceive success in your class. Frisbie and Waltman (1992) developed an instructional module to help instructors develop defensible, effective, and fair grading practices. The module poses questions to ask yourself which may be helpful as you develop a personal grading philosophy:

1. **What meaning should each grade symbol carry?** Provide a description of each letter grade used in the class to help students understand the level of performance expected for each graded assignment, performance, or examination.
2. **What should “failure” mean?** Grades tend to take on a universal meaning and failure can be perceived differently by different people. Therefore, provide an array of “failure” scenarios. For example, does it mean that the student didn't learn anything? Did the student not perform as others did in the group? Did the student receive a failing mark because they cheated on the test or plagiarized on a major research paper? Turn failure into a teachable moment to help the student learn from the situation.
3. **What elements of performance should be incorporated in a grade?** What elements should be used in determining each grade level? Will writing skills, attitude, and motivation be included for each project or just for the final project? Rubrics are useful tools to help organize the elements of a project into discrete sections which are assessed separately yet contribute to the whole.

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After all assignments and exams have been graded, how will you determine the final grade?

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4. **How should grades in a class be distributed?** Consider whether or not you plan to curve the final grade, distribute an equal number of grades, or give everyone the same grade if they satisfy certain course competencies.
5. **What should the components be like/include which go into a final grade?** If students are allowed to submit draft material, will that count toward the final grade? How do you handle test items which the majority of the students missed? How do you combine all grades earned in the class?
6. **How should components of the grade be combined?** Will you weight grades for individual projects? Do regular examinations count less than the final exam? Are written papers worth more than a regular exam?
7. **What method should be used to assign final grades?** After all assignments and exams have been graded, how will you determine the final grade? If your grading policy for each project is based on a ten percent scale (90%=A, 80%=B, etc.), then the final grade should follow the same standard.
8. **Should borderline cases be reviewed?** Reviewing your policy for these cases with the students at the beginning of the class could prevent students from contesting their final grade. If you do consider borderline cases, will you consider every student who is borderline? What is the absolute cut-off and what will you factor in when considering these cases (extra credit, attendance, attitude, motivation, overall improvement)?
9. **What other factors can influence the philosophy of grading?** Does the university or department have written and approved policies which dictate how you grade? Consider how you have graded in the past and determine if you plan to follow the same principles. (Frisbie & Waltman, 1952), p. 2)

Summary

Becoming an efficient grader takes time and practice and strategies will change depending on content and curriculum. The nature of the grading will change with each course but it is best to use similar grading strategies for different sections of the same course to maintain consistency. Using the suggestions described here can help you develop your own grading philosophy and should help you adjust your instructional approach as you teach new and revise old courses.

References

- Frisbie, D. A., & Waltman, K. K. (1992). *Developing a personal grading plan*. <http://depts.washington.edu/grading/pdf/DevelopingaPersonalGradingPlan.pdf>
- Walvoord, B. E., & Johnson Anderson, V. (1998). *Effective grading: A tool for learning and assessment*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.