Fair, Transparent & Meaningful Grading

Why is this important?

		Whether we like it or not, students pay attention to grades. If grading practices appear inconsistent, arbitrary, mysterious, or otherwise unfair, you can spend a lot of energy dealing with student challenges.
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Guidelines

Here are some suggestions to ensure that your grading system is fair, transparent, and meaningfully connected to the most important learning in your class:

No grades just for showing up!

First and foremost, students should never receive a grade for simply physically (or electronically) showing up. All grades you assign must be related to work (major assignments, in-process assignments and building block assignments) the student has completed as part of your class.

Create assignments (and the grading standards for them) with the learning outcomes in mind.

The grading criteria for important projects, papers, and tests should dovetail with the stated course learning outcomes on the syllabus. Make the connection explicit for your students by explaining how each major assignment helps develop the skills needed to achieve the final course outcomes.

Learn more: Assigning Homework | Student Learning Outcomes

Grade what you teach: teach what you grade.

Assess what students learn in your class, not skills and knowledge they have acquired outside of your class. It's okay to assume they will transfer and develop skills from previous classes, especially in upper division classes. However, weight your grading to focus on the concepts and skills developed in your course. Grading the critiquing skills of first-semester students, for instance, if you haven't explained and practiced how to give constructive criticism, is hardly fair.

Learn more:

Assess the full range of skills being taught.

Check to see you have a way of measuring achievement for each outcome on your syllabus. If your course has four learning outcomes but your assignments assess only two of them, you will not have a full picture of student ability for your course.

Learn more: Connecting Assignment Criteria to the Critique

Keep students on target by sharing grading criteria in advance.

It's difficult for students to meet your standards if they don't know what you are looking for. Well-crafted rubrics with specific criteria and levels of achievement provided when the assignment is introduced help students live up to your expectations and progress.

Learn more: Using Rubrics for Critique & Grading | Assigning Homework

Grade early and often.

Students are more likely to hit the target if they have more than one shot. Give students an early opportunity to learn your standards early and keep them informed of their progress throughout the semester. Don't wait until midterms, or worse, the end of the semester, to let students know where they stand on the core skills and ideas being taught in your class. In addition, multiple measures of performance (projects, quizzes, and critique participation) are more reliable; they give a more accurate picture of ability than a single measure.

What and how to grade

At the Academy, our focus is always on the quality of student work. Students demonstrate that they have met the outcomes for a given course by creating work that meets a specific set of criteria. This is called **criteria-referenced grading**.

Using criteria-referenced grading, you can grade anything that students produce during your course: art objects, presentations, discussions and/or participation. You can even grade professional behaviors if you have clearly articulated what behaviors you expect to see. **The key is to grade students using criteria that you have taught and discussed with students well *before* you assign grades**.

Use **rubrics** to implement criteria-based grading. Rubrics have at least two components: 1) A list of criteria for an assignment or task. 2) Descriptions of each criterion for different levels of achievement. Using the rubric you can compare the characteristics of a student's work to the criteria you have selected.

Example

Imagine you have assigned students to bake chocolate chip cookies. Using the **cooking grading rubric** (click to view), you would taste each student's creation and compare its features to the descriptions.

- One student's cookie may be only "acceptable" (C), even though it has enough chips, because the texture, color, taste and richness need improvement.
- Another student's work may be "good" (B), but not "delicious" (A) because there aren't chips in every bite.

In each case, you can add comments to indicate how the student can improve next time.

Learn more

- Rachel Levin (Faculty Development) led a workshop on avoiding grading pitfalls and using rubrics to clarify for yourself — and for your students — what and how you'll grade: view workshop video.
- Why Grades Matter
- Assigning Homework
- Using Rubrics for Critique & Grading
- Student Learning Outcomes
- Minimizing grade complaints
- When Students Complain About Grades