

MARKING AND GRADING: A WRITING CENTRE HANDOUT FOR TAs

The main thing to bear in mind when you mark papers is to connect writing and learning in order to ensure that your evaluation reflects both. To help you do this, think of evaluation as a four-part process:

- First you have to have clear evaluation criteria that reflect the goals and requirements of the course you TA for.
- Then you do a quick reading of all your papers for rapid assessment of major strengths and weaknesses in order to group them in tentative mark categories.
- Once you have this overview, you do a careful second reading for detailed assessment of both global and sentence-level features together (*summative assessment*). At this stage you have to readjust your initial assessment to ensure fairness and consistency.
- Your final step is to give constructive feedback in the form of end comments that help each student improve in future assignments (*formative feedback*).

Assess global features in your first quick reading:

- Response to assignment
- Thesis/argument (intellectual grasp)
- Organization and structure
- Evidence and analysis (development)
- Use of sources

Assess sentence-level features in your second reading:

- Paragraph cohesion (transitions etc.)
- Expression
- Sentence construction
- Spelling, mechanics, and grammar

Laurier Writing Centre: www.wlu.ca/writing is a rich resource on academic writing with links to important university writing sites and many available handouts which can help you in teaching and evaluating writing, including the handout mentioned below.

When marking, use clear, precise language:

The handout called “**Essential Features of Academic Writing**” is a good place to start. It defines and names the major components of academic writing, giving you the specific vocabulary you need for marking.

Using Rubrics for Summative Evaluation

Rubrics or scoring guides are useful tools in the grading process. They make evaluation criteria explicit and help you apply them fairly and consistently, but remember that they need to reflect the goals of the assignment. Since assignment types vary, it is important to be cautious and not apply generic criteria to assignments calling for specific criteria.

However, since many assignments are graded for argument and use of language, the scoring guide below, developed by Stuart S. Yeh¹ of Stanford University, is suggested here as a general starting point. It focuses on *the development of argument, the credibility of the writer, and conventions of written language*. While Yeh uses a scale from 1 to 6, this rubric can equally well be assigned letter grades or numerical values appropriate for the course.

Development, Organization, Focus and Clarity	Voice (The use of language to establish the writer's credibility)	Conventions (Spelling, usage, correctness, and mechanics)	Pt
No primary claim	No voice	Continual errors in usage, grammar, punctuation, and spelling	1
Definite, but unsupported claim	Extremely immature voice/language for audience	Many errors confuse reader (4 types)	2
Definite claim supported by weak premises and warrants; overlooks stronger arguments, important objections or alternatives.	Moderately immature voice/language	Many errors (3 types)	3
Definite claim. Strong but underdeveloped reasons: reader must infer sub-arguments for premises and warrants, and against objections or alternatives.	Somewhat immature voice/language	Occasional errors (2 types)	4
Definite claim supported by strong developed arguments. Clarity could be enhanced through definition, elaboration, illustration, explicit connections, and conciseness.	Mature but bland voice/language	Infrequent errors	5
Definite, well-qualified claim or proposal. Strong, developed, well-organized supporting arguments. Responds to major objections and alternatives. Key terms, ideas and connections are defined, elaborated and illustrated to avoid misinterpretation. Sentences build on each other through connecting ideas. Wording is clear, concise, and consistent.	Mature voice—defined as appropriate, sophisticated, audience-centered vivid language full of conviction.	Virtually error-free	6

Yeh's rubric is based on Toulmin's model for arguments, which uses the term warrant to refer to the connection between reason and claim.

¹ Stuart S. Yeh. "Empowering Education: Teaching Argumentative Writing to Cultural Minority Middle-School Students." *Research in the Teaching of English* 33 (1998): 49-83.

Grading for Grammar and Punctuation

Many new TAs do not feel comfortable grading for grammar and punctuation. If you are in this situation, the best way to avoid making mistakes is to mark only the errors that you know you can identify correctly. But don't stop here. In the long term, you should learn to identify the major grammar and punctuation errors so that you can *find error patterns and help the student learn how to correct them*. Your priority should be errors that cause confusion or ambiguity such as the ones listed below:

Mark only what you know, but try to learn to identify the following errors correctly:

- Comma splice or run-on sentence
- Subject-verb agreement error
- Pronoun agreement or reference error
- Error in verb form or inconsistent shift in tense
- Dangling modifiers and misplaced modifiers

To learn more, go to *Hit Parade of Errors in Grammar, Punctuation and Style*: <http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/advice/style-and-editing/hit-parade-of-errors> available from www.wlu.ca/writing.

If you are in the sciences, you may prefer NASA's website on grammar and technical writing: <http://www.sti.nasa.gov/publish/sp7084.pdf>, also available from www.wlu.ca/writing.

Responding to Student Writing: Giving Formative Feedback

When you respond to an assignment, remember that you are entering into a dialogue with the student writer and that your comments have the potential to affect his or her long-term development as a thinker and writer.

But for this to happen, you have to *maintain a positive tone, emphasize strengths, prioritize the issues you raise, say what the student can do to improve, and ensure that your comments are legible*.

There are three types of comments, each with a different purpose:

- Marginal comments allow you to enter into a dialogue with the student about argument, use of sources etc.
- In-text comments offer specific sentence-level comments
- End comments sum up the major strengths and weaknesses and point out what the student can do to improve both argument and writing

For your comments to have an impact on student learning, they must be *transferable* to other course contexts. Therefore, ask yourself the following questions:

- Can I find a pattern of error/issue/problem?
- Which assumptions are behind the errors/issues/problems, and can I address these assumptions in my response?
- Can the student learn from my response?
- Do I write comments that the student can use in another paper?
- Can the student actually read my handwriting?

Recommended Books:

The books listed here all have chapters on *writing and learning, grading, and responding to student writing*.

Bean, John. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 2001.

Gottschalk, Katherine and Keith Hjortshoj. *The Elements of Teaching Writing: A Resource for Instructors in All Disciplines*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004.

Hedengren, Beth Finch. *A TA's Guide to Teaching Writing in All Disciplines*. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004.

Walvoord, Barbara E. and Virginia Johnson Anderson. *Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998.

White, Edward M. *Teaching and Assessing Writing: Recent Advances in Understanding, Evaluating, and Improving Student Performance*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1994.

For more recommendations on writing and resources go to

Laurier Writing Centre www.wlu.ca/writing

- Online writing resources: <http://www.wlu.ca/writing/resources>
- Handouts: <http://www.wlu.ca/writing/handouts>
- Recommended books and resources: <http://www.wlu.ca/writing/books>
- Writing support for graduate students: <http://www.wlu.ca/writing/graduate>
- Writing support for faculty: <http://www.wlu.ca/writing/faculty>
- Current writing research: <http://www.wlu.ca/writing/research>

University of Toronto <http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/home>

- Writing Resources for Faculty and TA's: <http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/faculty>
- Responding to Student Papers Effectively and Efficiently: <http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/faculty/responding-and-evaluating>
- I'm grading a set of student papers. How can I comment on my students' writing without killing myself – or them? <http://www.writing.utoronto.ca/faqs/grading-papers>

Emmy Misser, Manager, Laurier Writing Centre, 2009

A General Description of Letter Grades²

A Paper:

- the essay is rich in content, compelling in argumentation, and stylistically sophisticated
- the thesis statement establishes the direction of the argument with clarity
- the complexity and range of the subject are defined succinctly and perceptively
- the introduction engages interest; the conclusion impresses with convincing authority
- the argument informs through the clear and accurate expression of ideas; the A paper reveals the students's ability to explain, illustrate, define, compare, and synthesize ideas
- supportive detail sustains the argument and external resources are appropriately cited to confirm or enhance the argument
- paragraphs develop purposefully and in proportion, logically and clearly relating topic sentences to the argument
- careful organization and development demonstrate a true understanding and command of the subject and an appropriate awareness of the intended audience
- sentence structures are well-crafted, compelling interest in their variety
- transitions are smooth, and serve to clarify the direction of the argument
- appropriate diction is sustained: it is precise, clear, and free from cliché and jargon
- grammar, punctuation, and spelling follow accepted conventions and clarify meaning
- the consistently high quality in content, structure, and style found in reading this paper prompts the classic response: "delightful and instructive"

B Paper

- more than competently written, with many of the merits of an A paper to reveal the organizing principle in the thesis statement and the development of the argument, but with a few minor errors in some matters of grammar, punctuation, or diction
- substantial in content and quality of material presented, demonstrating a good knowledge of the subject matter, but occasionally losing some clarity in vague statements or disorganized passages
- demonstrates fluency in expressing and supporting the central ideas of the argument, but is subject to occasional inadequacies or flaws in argument, organization or style
- in general, a carefully developed and coherently organized treatment of the subject
- requires some specific revising to achieve the quality of an A paper

C Paper

- generally competent, meeting the assignment but revealing only an average knowledge of the subject and a lack of conviction or commitment to the topic
- reasonably well organized and developed, but may treat the subject in too general a manner, and occasionally lose sight of the argument
- although ideas are supported, they tend to be poorly formulated and are unconsciously repeated rather than developed; a general weakness in effectively stating, explaining and discussing ideas
- uneven in the quality of writing, occasionally exhibiting a tentative grasp of elements of style and mechanics
- insufficient care given to opening and closing paragraphs; inconsistent development or lack of proportion in paragraphs in the body of the text
- transitions are abrupt, mechanical or missing
- weak sentence structures; predictable subject-verb-object order
- diction flawed by imprecision, redundancy, and cliché
- occasional serious grammatical errors and/or several minor errors
- more than occasional errors in spelling and/or punctuation

D Paper

- treatment and development of the subject are only rudimentary, and expose a poor grasp of the

² Suzanne S. Webb, Judy Brown and Jane Flick, *Instructor's Manual for Harbrace College Handbook for Canadian Writers*, 3rd Edition (Toronto: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990) 126-128.

- subject matter
- little sense of direction, making the argument hard to follow, though some organization is evident
 - little discussion or development of ideas, which tend to be confused and inadequately supported
 - paragraphs carelessly or inadequately organized and developed, without unity or logic
 - sentences awkward in structure or ambiguous in meaning
 - inappropriate diction, vague or unidiomatic enough to interfere with the clarity of meaning or the development of the argument
 - conspicuous major errors and several minor errors in grammar and punctuation; lacks control of fundamentals

F Paper

- demonstrates unsatisfactory performance in all areas
- treats the subject superficially, failing to meet the stated requirements of the assignment
- consistently falls below acceptable minimum requirements in writing; remedial work in fundamental skills of writing is needed
- prompts the response of incompetence or illiteracy; an accurate assessment of the reasons for the poor performance must follow
- if there is evidence of plagiarism, a clearly understood and specific policy must be invoked