“Grading Written Project: What Approaches Do Students Find Most Helpful”

A Report on an article by Lois Smith
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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INTRODUCTION

Grading and leaving comments on student papers is time-consuming and fraught with questions about practicality. There are more questions than answers. Lois Smith offers information from her 2008 study in this article.

Questions
Instructors question if and how making comments on students’ papers works:
1. Do students attend to those comments and marks?
2. Do they skip to the grade and miss those carefully crafted words of advice?
3. If students do take the time to read the advice, what types of comments do they find most useful in improving their writing, and what form should those comments make?
4. Do students find matrices and rubrics useful, or are paragraph comments of different kinds most helpful?

The Sins are Inherited…
Often, students who do not know what to do with comments—or students who never read comments—become instructors who write comments on students’ papers… themselves. In addition, Gen Y is the most ethnically diverse, bringing in multiple backgrounds and (grading/commenting) experiences.

GRADING

“Grading doesn’t take place only in assigning a letter grade. Grading begins with developing assignments, answering students’ questions, commenting on drafts, and … responding to the completed effort” (326). In other words, students are receiving comments… and what we could call ‘unrecorded grades’ through instructor feedback from the beginning of class, and from the beginning of an assignment.

Dirty Word or a Necessary Evil…
• Using the word ‘grading’ can be substituted with ‘assessment.’
• Grading denotes record keeping.
• Requiring grading disallows instructors from holding the role of coach.
• Grades bring closure but they also bring a lack of control—on the part of the students.
**WHY GRADE**

Our education tradition is grounded in product creation and grade keeping. Our initiation into universities and colleges is based on grades from SATs, ACTs, etc. Grades are not optional.

**How to Grade**

Possible ways to improve grading practices.

- Use peer review methods.
- Focus on fairness. While grading is or can be subjective, fairness should be the goal.
- Develop—and use—grading rubrics.
- Give this information to your students.
- Use models.
- Set objectives.

**How to Comment**

Students want to hear what they have done right—not just what they have done wrong.

- Start with the positive.
- Then move to the ‘negative,’ keeping in mind that this can be expressed through more objective means.
- Criticize the text—not the student.

**SMITH’S STUDY**

**Method**

Population

- The population of this study; 98 women (42.3%) and 134 men (57.7%)
- Survey distribution: 232 students
- Reponse yield: 220 surveys
- Response rate: 94.8%

Survey: Two Sections

- First section: Asked students to indicate comment/grading methods
- Second section: Asked students to respond to best practices suggested by authors and literature reviews

“The grading comments used in the questionnaire related to a personal marketing plan assignment that students completed for the course.”
Grading Written Project:  
What Approaches Do Students Find Most Helpful

RESULTS

Students’ Preferences (in order of preference):
1. Matrix method: Rating of individual sections/traits of student’s paper on five-point Likert scale with short comments on traits and total score leading to final assignment grade (60.0%)
2. Method 3: Closing summary commentary with positive and negative comments combined (36.4%)
3. Method 2: Summary of problems and areas for improvement (2.3%)

CONCLUSION

Methods—First Section:
1. Method 1: Matrix method using a Likert rating scale with comments
2. Method 2: Paragraph form that listed problems in hypothetical paper and suggested improvements
3. Method 3: Paragraph form: Listed three positive traits for assignment, reiterated same problems and need for improvement

Methods—Second Section:
1. Used a five-point Likert scale to give feedback on “best practices and opinions expressed by authors in literature review” (327).
2. Respondents were encouraged to address issues regarding hand-written comment feedback from instructors related to grading, spelling, grammar, and closing statements by instructors.
Grading Written Project:  
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**TABLES**

**TABLE 1. Students’ Preferences for Grading Methods**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grading method</th>
<th>% Preferred</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Method 1: Matrix</td>
<td>60.0</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method 2: Paragraph suggesting improvements; negative comments</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method 3: Paragraph of strengths and weaknesses</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>1.4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td>220</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 2. Selected Comments Explaining Preferences**

*Comments from those preferring Method 1*

- Gave comments on a visual scale to allow students to see what areas needed working on.
- Shows positive and negative points of paper in an easy to follow table.
- It was really clear what areas needed more work.
- (Method) One clearly shows a higher level of preparedness by the instructor and it gives the best readout of the areas that did not meet pre-assigned standards.
- (Method 1) is specific: less judgmental.
- I like to know what I did wrong and what points were taken off for what reasons.
- The first method was best because it gave the most information in the most understandable format.
- I think grading papers is a gray area where students often feel that teachers are grading them instead of the paper. Standardizing the process as much as possible is really good.

*Comments concerning Method 2*

- (Method 2) only gives the bad and makes the student feel like a failure.
- (Method 2) was just mean.
- If I were a student who was going to rewrite this paper, I probably wouldn’t bother because the evaluation the professor wrote made it sound like he/she didn’t like it at all.
- (Method 2) made me feel bad and disgusted.

*Comments from those preferring Method 3*

- A written response gives a more personal way of evaluating.
- I like to get more feedback on what I did wrong rather than just a bunch of numbers.
- Method 3 gave compliments and offered/explained what else was needed.
- I don’t like ratings by numbers. I’d rather have the professor comment on each of the areas and then give a grade.
- (Method) 3 went into more depth; (Method) 1 felt impersonal.
- (Method) 3 lays out all that was wrong but not in a big page of disappointment.
- (Method) 3 gave me good news and bad news and it is easier to accept the bad news.
- (Method) 3 has more description about what is wrong.
TABLE 3. Agreement and Disagreement With Statements on Grading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I read the comments that my professor makes in the body of my paper.</td>
<td>4.73</td>
<td>0.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments on papers help me write better on my next paper.</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>0.81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If there are many marks on my paper’s text, I skip them.</td>
<td>1.86</td>
<td>0.87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.14 (Rev)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If there are just a few marks on my paper’s text, I will read them all.</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>0.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If my professor uses a correction system of symbols and codes that he/she passes out at the beginning of the semester, I will refer to that list when I get my papers back.</td>
<td>3.48</td>
<td>1.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If my professor marks spelling errors, I make a note to correct them the next time I write a paper.</td>
<td>3.71</td>
<td>1.09</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professors should include grammar and documentation as part of paper grades.</td>
<td>3.40</td>
<td>1.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I typically ignore spelling errors that my professor marks.</td>
<td>2.28</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.71 (Rev)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I want to know what I did correctly on my papers, not just what I did wrong.</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>0.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comments on papers are there to explain my grade, not to make me a better writer.</td>
<td>2.53</td>
<td>0.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3.47 (Rev)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I just look at the paper’s grade, not the comments.</td>
<td>1.54</td>
<td>0.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.46 (Rev)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. (Rev) = Reversed scoring for negative statements. Rating scale: 5 = strongly agree; 3 = neither agree nor disagree; 1 = strongly disagree.
APPENDIX
Methods of Evaluating Papers

All three of these methods of providing student commentary applied to the same essay assignment. Students were to develop marketing plans for their own careers. Students were to assume that the grade earned was an 81% (B–).

Method 1: Matrix

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Rating (1–5)</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5 = highest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Very interesting!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employer information</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Needs more research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What the employer is seeking in employees</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Salary data</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Specific</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locations/relocations</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment (interviews, resumes)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Good detail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-evaluation: Match with company</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Missing this part</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grammar and spelling</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Needs proofreading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentation (citations in text and works cited)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Missing some entries in paper’s text</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total 25

Method 2: Comments

Your paper has not fulfilled all of the assignment requirements because it is missing a conclusion discussing whether you are a good match for the company you researched. The writing needs proofreading, and several source citations are missing in the text of the paper. The paper could use more research on your employer.

Method 3: Comments

Your paper’s introduction was really excellent, as was your detailed information on salaries and the career path for this position. The stages of the recruitment process were well-covered and gave good direction. Your paper hasn’t fulfilled all of the assignment requirements because it is missing a conclusion discussing whether you are a good match for the company you researched. The writing needs proofreading, and several source citations are missing in the text of the paper. The paper could use more research on your employer.
References