

Managing the Stacks of Students' Papers to Grade Without Going Crazy

Robert Hill

After that first or second year, the workload becomes more manageable, but the hardest—and, to me, most stressful and distressing—part of the job remains: grading students' work. It's the part of the job that, in my opinion, induces the greatest uncertainty, discomfort, and angst. (Tierney, 2013, para. 3)

One of the onerous and least attractive parts of being a faculty member or teacher, no matter what the level of education, is grading students' papers. While a necessary and vital part of

our professional duties and responsibilities, no one eagerly awaits the arrival of the first set of student papers once the semester begins. However, there is no need complaining about or loathing this routine part of academia as it comes with the territory. It would be analogous to doctors talking about their profession but complaining about having to see patients. I do not know anyone who actually enjoys reading and grading a class set of students' research papers. It is often tedious and time-consuming work that not all of our students appreciate. Yet through mostly trial and error, I have gleaned some successful instructional strategies over the last 30 years of teaching that I hope will help others get through their own grading, assessment, and evaluation of students' work while also managing their own stress levels. While teaching is both an art and a science, grading (especially students' writing) can also be quite subjective. I hope, though, to impart here some practical tips to readily take away and put to good use this semester.

First of all, some context: I currently teach doctoral-level students mostly online via Blackboard in three 15-week trimesters. Often, I teach two or three courses that include live interactive synchronous class sessions. I routinely assign one collaborative "team assignment" at the end of the semester where all the two to three member teams present to the rest of the class on



Robert Hill,
Program Professor, Higher Education Leadership,
Abraham S. Fischler School of Education,
Nova Southeastern University,
1750 NE 167th Street, North Miami Beach, FL
33162-3017. Telephone: (954) 262-8613.
E-mail: hillr@nova.edu

a case study or a current topic via Collaborate Live. This group activity is usually a Powerpoint or Prezi presentation amounting to 10-15% of the overall semester grade, but it is not a formal academic paper to grade. I also do not give formal tests or quizzes to doctoral students. I would not do this even if had a face-to-face class or a blended/hybrid class, although I know there is now technology that would safeguard this type of online activity. I want graduate students to exercise critical thinking (analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating) rather than to merely utilize lower level skills (such as remembering facts, definitions, etc.), only to regurgitate information in a timed test and then forget later.

Consequently, most of my students' grade is determined through written work—whether it be on the class discussion board via the typical threaded discussions where students post to some prompt and then reply to each other's response or via major written assignments. Thus, I usually have two to three major American Psychological Association (APA)-formatted assignments in each course I teach with one being a capstone research paper totaling 12-14 pages. With all the technological innovations in education, there is not yet a reliable machine or software that responds to student writing as the professor does in the context of his or her instruction. So until a more sophisticated and highly personalized Scantron machine is developed, having a working strategy to manage the sheer number of papers I receive and be able to provide quick yet meaningful academic feedback to my students is essential to maintaining my sanity. Yes, welcome to my world, but although I often feel alone, isolated, and sometimes under the crunch, I know my colleagues share my plight, as do thousands of other faculty.

Like most professors, I routinely visit my course syllabi and tweak them—adding more specifics and emphasis (bolding, underlining, and clarifying certain pas-

sages) in the explanations and directions of particular assignments. I also have rubrics (which I know some colleagues resist) for each assignment, as I want my students to know exactly how they will be evaluated. I have refined these rubrics or writing guides, modifying the criteria and point values over the last couple of years. I have wrestled with the notion of providing sample papers from previous students (with their permission and names removed). I no longer provide samples for doctoral students (though I might consider doing so for undergraduates), because the sample paper can hinder students' creativity. Moreover, no professor wants to read 12-15 papers that are organized identically.

A recent innovation that I have incorporated into my online courses is a 5-minute video recorded in our studio with the information technology folks or sometimes with just a simple laptop camera using Camtasia software. I have recorded these for each major written assignment in the concentration courses that I teach and later added graphics and clip art, along with the syllabus. The videos are posted so students can view them anytime, even before they enroll in the course. I have found that by doing this they can watch the video any time and as many times as they want, and it really cuts down on the instructional time that I have to spend answering questions during my live or synchronous class sessions. If you regularly teach the same course and have developed a good assignment, I would recommend utilizing this easy strategy to avoid having to explain the same assignment over and over.

Another effective strategy to employ *before* the semester begins, regardless of the course level or even the instructional delivery format, is first to print out monthly calendars (you can easily find blank monthly calendars as Microsoft Word documents online for each month) for each course you teach. I am a visual learner and I need to physically see and plan when I will make Assignment #1 (and #2, etc.) in one class

due to avoid the same due date in one of my other classes. Trust me, once you have two major sets of papers due on the same date, you will never ever do that to yourself (or your loved ones) again. Students really appreciate receiving these finished calendars, as I type the dates right on them in different colors when the various assignments are due and when we are scheduled to meet synchronously online. Granted this is mostly common sense, but having 7 days to grade 14 students' papers due one Sunday night at midnight before another set of papers from another class comes in the following Sunday makes all the difference in the world.

Tangentially, if you have 7 days to grade 14 students' papers, it is very manageable and not so overwhelming if you just strive to do two to three papers a day. At my school within the larger university, we have established a "2-week turnaround time" for returning all students' work and I find by approaching it as a goal of completing two to three papers a day, I never need to take the full 2 weeks. What I do is grade them the first thing in the morning, after my coffee, before I even shower, dress, or leave the house. Once one gets to campus one never has total control of the day, as there are meetings to attend and interruptions, and if you are like me, you may need total quiet to concentrate. This reminds me—one also needs to know one's own daily biological clock regarding optimal work times. Although I am a night owl, my eyes are generally tired after dinner or class, and I know I do not want to have to read the same page repeatedly: so coming back with fresh, rested eyes can certainly help.

Do not procrastinate or break your routine. More importantly, do not fool yourself into thinking you work best under pressure and say, "I have all weekend to get to that set of papers." Trust me, trying to read and grade 15-18 twelve-page student papers all on Sunday night will make you miserable and very unproductive. There is a phenomenon called "rater reli-

ability" (and "rater bias") and if you try to get through that stack in one session, you will wonder if on the last papers you are consistent as you were on the first few. There is a tendency to want to read the good papers first and put the more troubling ones on the bottom of the pile. This is also not recommended. I grade them in the order that they come in and thus I try to reward the earlier ones.

Another best practice that I would encourage is the use of a "rewrite opportunity." I clearly write in all of my course syllabi that "one paper per term may be redone and only at the discretion of the instructor. Rewrites will not be allowed for the purpose of boosting an already acceptable passing grade to still a better grade." Oftentimes, I stop reading, writing comments, and making corrections after the first or second page and write:

I am stopping here. As per the course syllabus, you are afforded "one rewrite" and I suggest you exercise that option here and redo/fix your paper by adding more content (and also thoroughly editing/revising/proofreading) and then resubmit it (without penalty) within the week. Please let me know as soon as possible if you will indeed take me up on this offer, or if I should continue to grade your paper.

No one has ever not taken me up on this opportunity. Graduate students are busy folks and they often procrastinate. Some will take the path of least resistance and wait to see how the professor graded or responded to their assignment. However, who wants to spend excessive time on a paper riddled with careless errors? Typically, I return a paper for a rewrite or if someone did not follow the requirements or ignored minimum expectations (i.e., length, number of references, missing certain headers, etc.). Having been at a university for a while and having already established a reputation for high expectations helps as students do talk to one another. However, that initial assignment

should always be gone through diligently or as they say, with “a fine-tooth comb.” Although it is a long semester, you only have one chance to make a good first impression and set the proverbial bar high.

Another piece of advice is to not be one of those inflexible professors who will not accept a “late” paper because it was submitted to the assignment drop box 5 minutes after the posted deadline. What I routinely do is say that all papers are due by Sunday night midnight your own local time; however, on the preceding Friday I usually send out a course message or an announcement (or even both) that if they “need an extra 24 hours to finish the paper or to edit it with a fresh set of eyes, no problem. Get me the papers the following night.” What difference does that extra day make? I was not going to start grading the papers at 12:05 A.M. my time anyway. You come across as a good person, although my former students know this is one of my regular procedures. I would rather the students submit finished papers of which they are proud—even if it is technically a day late—than to have mediocre or incomplete papers that are submitted on time.

One more strategy I would pass on is to use a *certificate of authorship* form that students complete (sign and date) for each submitted assignment. This cover page also lets them know I will upload their papers to the Turnitin.com antiplagiarism site and I hope this serves as a deterrent for academic misconduct. I now address plagiarism pretty hard both in the course syllabus and at the course orientation session held the first week of the semester; so generally the number of incidents has declined. Sometimes the originality reports indicate a high percentage match, not because of plagiarism but rather because they are paranoid and quoting (and citing) excessively. If this is the case, I also return their papers. I do not want a series of quotes one after another. I want to see a synthesis of the literature and more paraphrasing and less relying on other people’s

verbatim words. I now also include in my assignment directions “no block quotes” or “lists of bulleted items,” as I want graduate students to analyze and distinguish between different parts of the literature or take a stand and justify a position. They need to formulate and hone their own conceptual frameworks.

I post a number of useful writing and APA resources including various helpful websites, as I am sure most of you do. In the first week, I now also send all my students a link to a short YouTube video on how to change the grammar-checker settings in Microsoft Word so that they can work smarter, not harder. Most people are not aware that you can turn up the basic default settings to catch many often-overlooked grammatical errors (i.e., clichés, wordiness, etc.). Many graduate students do not have a close family member or colleague to proofread their drafts. Thus, this little tip alone will improve your students’ papers while saving you time grading time.

Whether you use the track changes feature inside the actual Word document to grade and make marginal comments or print out the students’ papers as I do, I am not going to be so prescriptive here to say one method is better than the other. If I had to pay for my own paper and ink cartridges or toner, then perhaps I would use the former method. Instead, since I first print and then later scan graded papers (to then upload) into PDF files on the department office’s copiers, I figure why spend even more unnecessary time staring at a computer screen than I already do. Thus, I personally handle all the papers and hand-write my comments, et cetera. I can readily crosscheck the reference list with the in-text citations this way without having to toggle back and forth. I can also sit outside on the patio not worrying about my wireless connection or battery level and even enjoy an occasional cigar.

It is no longer enough to be a fastidious editor as our high school English teachers

once were. Personal comments do not replace the grade or point total score—they enhance it. If possible, I try to make two reads of the paper looking at just the overall content all the way through. Then I go back and comment on form and style, syntax, et cetera. Sometimes I do this vice-versa depending how I feel at the time. I also try to finish a student's paper in one sitting before I get up and take a break—which I suggest you do hourly. Most importantly, do not work when there are distractions or if you are in a bad mood. Take a walk. The papers will still be there when you return!

I am sure most of us try to find something positive to say about a student's work to balance all the negative. I recommend always personalizing your evaluation using a student's first name in your final comments on a paper and then dating it. I also routinely wish them good luck on the next assignment. Occasionally, it is worth noting the sheer effort that was demonstrated, although the final grade might not reflect that. I also have my students include the respective assignment rubric as the last page. That makes it easier to complete the rubric with the point total and to provide some specific academic feedback besides the noted corrections or comments on the previous pages. Endeavor to discuss the content of the paper and not just the student's format or mechanics. I have heard students tell me that certain professors only seem to care about APA format, which they perceive as minutia, as they yearn for feedback on their ideas.

At the doctoral level, I want to always be cognizant of the academic references utilized to ensure that they are not only current but also from good, scholarly journals and from primary sources if at all possible. It also goes without saying that if you want your students to use good, current reference sources that you also have to update your courses to incorporate current text-

books, et cetera. We need to "practice what we preach" and not exhibit a "don't do as I do, do as I say" attitude. While I require my students to use (cite) from the required course textbooks, I do not want them also to *only* use other required course textbooks from the program's other required courses. We want our students to become familiar with the various academic gurus and the seminal works in the field, which will only help them later on in the dissertation stage.

There are certainly many other specific grading techniques and instructional strategies into which I could delve if I had the space. There are also a plethora of guides and resources on teaching and grading to assist. Marilla Svinicki and Wilbert McKeachie's *Teaching Tips*, first published in 1950, and now in its 14th edition, is a classic reference that every professor should own. Suffice it to say that what works for me might not work for you. Read your students' end-of-the-semester faculty course evaluations and look for recurring comments. Update your syllabi, textbooks, and perhaps periodically change assignments or tweak rubrics to keep them and you fresh. Make sure that your major assignments are genuinely assessing mastery of the course content or more specifically, course learning outcomes. Finally, although grading papers can be laborious, do not dread it as it is part and parcel of the work that we, as college professors, regularly do and you do not want to make this a self-fulfilling prophecy. Good luck, everybody!

REFERENCES

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