

# GRADING STRATEGIES

## Alternative Grading Models: Holistic Grading

A growing number of teachers have moved away from the traditional method of evaluating student writing, which entails taking papers home, reading them, and assigning a grade. Some teachers have become frustrated with this model not only because of the amount of time it takes but also because of the message it sends to students that one teacher is the audience for their paper. Holistic grading, an alternate grading model, can alleviate some of these tensions.

Holistic grading was originally designed to reduce the individual subjectivity of grading written work by relying on the initial, almost intuitive, reactions of a number of people in order to assign a grade. More importantly, holistic grading prevents the reader from concentrating only on grading; as a result, he or she reads student work more "naturally" as if she or he were reading any text.

### Advantages:

- Statistically it is a highly reliable method of grading.
- It reduces the amount of time needed to grade.
- It stresses the rhetorical aspects of composing, helping students formulate a real audience for their writing.

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## Faculty Based Holistic Grading

The most difficult part of using holistic grading is getting started. Below are the five steps involved in beginning to use holistic grading. Although this grading model might seem involved at first, the success of grading in this way depends on the commitment of

your group in participating actively in the early stages. Once your group is setup, however, most of these steps will be unnecessary.

### **Forming a Group:**

The first step in preparing to set up a holistic grading model is to locate a group of teachers who want to use this grading model. The most convenient and efficient group would be several people teaching multiple sections of the same course. It is possible to use this model with a more varied group of teachers; however, such diversity would require a re-norming (part of the grading process described below) for each assignment individual teachers assign. Teachers of multiple sections are more likely to be assigning similar papers.

A minimum of three people is needed for holistic grading. There is no maximum or ideal number; the larger the group, the more quickly the grading process will progress.

### **Creating Criteria:**

Before your group meets to begin grading, spend at least one meeting developing grading criteria. You may choose to develop either a general criteria sheet for all papers, or a set of criteria specific to each assignment. If your group chooses the latter option, you will need to meet and develop criteria before each grading session on a new assignment.

Before working on the criteria itself, your group must decide on the number scale that will be used when grading because the range of numbers will correspond to the specificity of your criteria. Any even numbered scale will serve your purpose, although many people find a scale of 1-6 useful because it allows for a clear division among criteria and corresponds fairly closely to an A-F scale. However, a scale may range as high as 1-12 or as low as 1-2. The only rule of thumb is to always keep the range of the scale an even number to prevent central tendency (i.e., a tendency for the group members to begin grouping their scores on or around the middle number).

Once you have decided on a number scale, the next step is to design written criteria to correspond with each score. Criteria are usually worded in general terms and develop a hierarchy according

to the issues your group feels characterize good writing (e.g., purpose, organization, address to audience, style, grammar). For example, on a 1-6 scale, the criterion relating to purpose might read "A clear controlling idea," for #6, and "Controlling idea discernible but not clearly stated," for a #5, and so on for scores 1-4. Hence, if a group decides on the list above as issues related to good writing, a sentence relating to each of these categories would be included in the criteria for each score. (See sample criteria sheet attached.)

### **Preparing for the Grading Session:**

Once you have the group of papers to be graded, someone must take responsibility for separating the papers into manageable piles, usually groups of 7-10, and preparing three copies of a cover sheet with students' names for each pile. These sheets will be necessary for each reader to assign a score that cannot be seen by the second reader.

### **Norming to Scale:**

Norming is the first part of each and every grading session and frequently will take up to 50% of the grading session itself. The purpose of this time is to achieve a consensus among the group on how to apply the criteria to actual papers. The group leader either chooses an example of a high, medium, and low paper to discuss, or the group can arbitrarily pick 3 or 4 papers from the pile to be graded to be used in norming. Each group member then individually reads through all the papers selected (a copy for each member of all the papers will be necessary). After reading through all the papers, each reader silently assigns a score to each paper. Once all the "anchor" papers have been scored, each paper should be discussed individually with each group member explaining his/her reasons for assigning the score he or she did in terms of the criteria sheet.

Finally, each paper is discussed with the entire group participating in order to reach an agreement about the score it should be assigned. It is essential at this stage that the group decide on a score through consensus rather than a majority vote since the purpose of norming is to achieve a similar application of the criteria by all the readers. If the group continues to disagree even after

discussing 4 papers, you might need to select another paper or two to discuss. Such disagreements should not be discouraged, however, because they need to be discussed openly if the grading session is to be successful. Once agreement has been reached, these sample papers become "anchors" and should be referred to by readers during the grading session frequently to remind individual readers of the group consensus.

### **Orchestrating the Grading Session:**

Once norming is finished, the grading itself should proceed fairly quickly. Before grading, however, it is useful to assign one person to be administrator for this session. If you only have three readers in your group, however, you should save the administrative duties described below as the last step because a third reading of a paper may need to be completed by one of the initial readers and a substantial amount of time should pass before this can be done with any reliability.

Each reader takes a folder or group of papers and reads through them quickly, assigning a score to each one. He or she then flips the cover sheets to the next blank page, initials the folder or pile, or attaches a post-it, and begins on a new pile. It is important that no one mark either a score or an initial on the actual papers because the student should not know who graded the individual paper. A second reader then reads the same group of papers, following the same procedures. At the beginning, the "administrator" also reads papers, but as soon as a group of files or piles have been read by two readers, he or she will begin collecting these folders. The administrator then checks for agreement between the two readers. He or she marks the papers on which agreement was not reached in some way and passes these on to a third reader who has not yet looked at the papers for a third reading. If all three readers disagree, the administrator usually averages the three scores for the final score.

Although the process of norming and grading may seem lengthy, it is frequently possible to grade over 50 papers in less than two hours.

## **Student Based Holistic Grading**

In order to help students better imagine a real audience and encourage them to become better readers and critics, many teachers are beginning to use the holistic grading model with students grading their classmates' writing. Using a model by which students grade each other also distributes the authority in the classroom and allows the teacher to become a "coach," rather than an authority figure with complete control over evaluation. Although this model has many advantages, it will take students some time to become accustomed to this model, thus it is necessary for a teacher to commit totally to this paradigm for a quarter and not change models mid-stream. Teachers experienced in using this grading model; however, do say that students are usually well-calibrated and achieving extremely reliable scores of each other's work by midterm or earlier.

### **Initial Student Training:**

Because this model requires students to develop criteria before reading papers, it is useful to run the class through some practice training sessions using predetermined criteria. These practice sessions will give the students experience in the ways in which criteria will be applied. For these sessions, you will need to select sample papers (approx. 3) of a similar assignment, ideally written by students in previous quarters, and prepare a criteria sheet appropriate to this assignment. The class would then follow the same procedure described in the norming section above. Such practice sessions will also help prepare students for future peer responding sessions to drafts because they will become more familiar with explaining and justifying their evaluations and impressions.

### **Developing Criteria:**

Just as in the holistic model with teachers, the class collaboratively develops the criteria for each assignment; however, you should determine beforehand the range of the numerical scale to be used since you will be the one converting this scale to grades at some point. The most effective time to develop such criteria is immediately after the class has received and discussed a paper assignment. In this way the criteria also become an instructional

tool, serving as a guide for the students while writing their papers. Of course, you, the teacher, have a role in all these decisions, but it is important that you do not become the final authority on the workability of the criteria. If the students begin to see you as the final authority, the collaborative nature of student holistic grading will be undermined.

### **Responding to Drafts:**

Using peer responding to drafts is essential in this grading paradigm because these responses come from the actual audience (and evaluators) of the final product. In fact, teachers who have used this grading model report that their students take their role as responders much more seriously than when the teacher is the sole grader of the paper. Similarly, the writer of a paper is more likely to incorporate and value the comments of student readers in this paradigm. Student and teacher comments (you will still be responding to drafts) also become more important in this model because students will not receive comments to their final products. Although students may find the lack of written justification for a grade frustrating at first, this model of grading uses commenting at the appropriate stage when students still have time to revise.

The criteria developed in an earlier class session should also serve as a useful rubric for peer responding sessions to drafts. In fact, frequently classes decide to revise the criteria after a peer responding session because they develop a clearer idea of what a finished version of such an assignment should look like.

### **Orchestrating the Grading Session:**

Grading sessions with student readers are almost identical to the sessions involving other teachers. A good portion of time should be spent on norming with anchor papers, and each paper should receive two readers. However, in this model, the teacher takes on the role described as "administrator" above. You will choose the three anchor papers representing "high," "medium," and "low", as well as code the papers (e.g., with numbers, letters, etc.) to protect the anonymity of the writer. Students should pass in two copies of their paper with their name attached on a post-it or on a cover sheet that may be removed. In this way, only you will know the identity of each author. Administering a student grading

session requires one additional duty. When distributing the papers to be read, avoid giving a student's paper to members of his or her peer responding group. In this way, students will not be able to judge the identity of the author or be influenced by what they have seen in previous drafts.

Finally, each paper will receive two readers as in any holistic grading model, but you will serve as third reader for any disagreements. Usually, after students have become accustomed to grading each other, there are few of these disagreements to moderate. Once the papers are scored and you record the score, the paper is returned to the author in the same class session. Comments on graded drafts are unnecessary at this point; the criteria serve the same function and are frequently more understandable to the students because they have created and applied these criteria themselves.