

# Assessing Student Learning

Practices related to grading—both as an assessment of student performance and as a mechanism through which students receive feedback on their work—vary widely across disciplines, course levels, departments, institutions, and instructors. However, there are several strategies that most instructors agree contribute to successful grading: creating clear grading criteria, communicating these criteria to students, giving constructive feedback, and employing time management strategies when grading large amounts of student work.

This collection of pages provides an overview of key issues related to assessing student learning:

- [Establishing Assessment Standards](#)
- [Constructing Tests](#)
- [Grading](#)
- [Keeping Records](#)
- [Cheating and Plagiarism](#)
- [Additional Resources](#)

## Establish Assessment Standards

It is strongly suggested that you explain assessment standards clearly when you introduce the course to your students and probably at several subsequent points during the quarter as well. Most students use grading criteria to determine what they should concentrate on learning in a course. By making your grading policies clear, you can focus students' attention on what is most important for them to learn and retain.

Because grades communicate the relative weight of course goals and assignments, and because grades in a course may have great influence on students' future academic work, most students are very sensitive about grades and the criteria on which they are based: "Will this be on the test? How much does the quiz count toward the final grade? Do you consider attendance and participation?" are typical questions. Determine assessment criteria from the onset, it is helpful to explain these standards clearly to students, and reinforce their application consistently throughout the quarter.

Consistency is also important when it comes to concerns such as accepting late papers and taking more than the time allotted for an exam. Attention to these matters in the beginning will save you time and energy later.

## **Keeping Records**

Keep accurate and thorough records of your evaluation of each student's performance throughout the quarter. You should also keep your records for a while after the quarter is over, since students may come back later to question a grade, finish an incomplete, or ask you to write a recommendation. Your records will help you to justify and/or reevaluate a student's final grade if necessary.

When students ask to have a grade changed or contest an answer, act carefully. Give yourself time for further investigation in order to help you prepare a fair and equitable response. You should note that UW policy states that "no instructor may change a grade that he or she has turned into the Registrar. Grades cannot be changed after a degree has been granted." See UW Policy Director on Grades, Honors, and Scholarship for more information.

If a student comes to you to contest a grade it may be helpful to have the student submit their request in writing, requiring the student to reflect on and justify their request, and also providing you with documentation should you be asked to explain your decision at a later point. Finally, document your interactions with disgruntled students as promptly as possible so you have accurate notes for a subsequent discussion.

## **Information for TAs: Assessing Student Learning**

- Develop a sense of your academic standards early on in the quarter in collaboration with your supervising faculty member and fellow TAs (if applicable).
- Be consistent throughout the quarter. If you are working with other TAs plan to meet and talk about grading criteria and approaches. This will ensure reliability and consistency across the entire scope of the lecture class. If, for example, your grades are skewed at the high or low end, or are not in line with your colleagues, meet with your colleagues to discuss what your questions or assignments are designed to evaluate. Comparing grades on a set of essays can be one of the most productive ways of arriving at a common language and standard for assessment.
- If a student contests a grade, consider who responsible for decisions about grade changes. Act carefully and in consultation with your supervising faculty member or TA coordinator.

## General Resources

If you are interested in exploring the topic of assessment more thoroughly, the following external sites may be helpful to you:

- [How to Evaluate Students](#), Stanford Teaching Commons
- [Assessment](#), Center for Teaching, Vanderbilt University
- [Assessment](#), Center for Teaching and Learning, UT Austin

## Bibliography

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- Svinicki, M. D., & McKeachie, W. J. (2011). The ABCs of assigning grades. In *McKeachie's teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers* (pp. 125-136). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.