

Marking Essays and Short Answer Questions

Getting Started

1. **Determine the criteria for grading.** If criteria have been provided by the supervising instructor, read them carefully ahead of time, clarifying any uncertainties before beginning the marking process. If criteria haven't been provided, prepare a detailed set to follow as you grade. Criteria are important to ensure consistency and fairness. As you mark, annotate your criteria, "this helps you become more efficient as you encounter the same mistakes repeatedly," providing a "record of how you handled the same error previously."
2. **Find examples of excellent, good, adequate, and poor work.** Compare them to determine the distinguishing features of each level. Make these examples your standards—review them as you go along to make sure your grading has remained consistent.
3. **Quickly group student work into excellent, good, adequate, and poor piles.** Then go back and review the answers in each group, from best to worst. This will help you establish a view of general performance in the class, become familiar with typical mistakes, and discriminate more finely for a final mark. These groupings will also make it easier to determine the fate of borderline cases.
4. **Grade one question at a time.** This will help you remain consistent and focus on the subtleties of your criteria. Marking by student rather than by question "allows for halo effects," with a "high or low mark on one question influencing your judgment on the students' answers to other questions." Finish marking all the responses to one question in a sitting so you don't have to worry about standards shifting from day to day.
5. **Shuffle the papers after marking each question** to remove any expectations based on order. Cover students' names so "you're not influenced by the performance of students on previous exams or assignments, their class participation level, or their attitudes about you or the course."
6. **Do not change your standard as you mark.** When you have finished marking, go back to the first five or ten papers you have marked and then mark them again. This may help compensate for the tendency for marking to get harsher towards the end.
7. **Know your limits.** Decide ahead of time how long you will spend on each question or paper. Try not to mark in blocks of time longer than two hours to avoid burning out.

Adapted from "Fast and Equitable Grading," Centre for Teaching Excellence, University of Waterloo, and "Examination Essay Marking Guide for Tutors" by Carol Johnston, Teaching and Learning Unit, Faculty of Economics and Commerce, University of Melbourne.

Providing Feedback

Leaving comments on student essays can require a complex balancing act. Taking the time to draft extensive comments can slow the marking process to a crawl, while as generic, perfunctory comments can be worse than no comments at all. The perfect comments provide encouragement and guidance, demonstrating to students how to improve their writing for the future.

When providing feedback, avoid over-commenting on every weakness in a paper, or focusing heavily on small errors. This can demoralize students as well as distract them from addressing major issues with their work. Instead, comment “primarily on patterns and representative strengths and weaknesses.” This will help “strike a balance between making students wonder whether anyone actually read their paper and overwhelming them with ink” (Walk, 2000).

Try to keep comments organized and prioritized. One way of doing this would be to create a bulleted list with the most important issues listed first. Make sure your handwriting is legible and keep your tone respectful. Scribbled comments in red ink are mostly likely to incur student ire rather than thoughtfulness (Walk, 2000).

Most importantly, focus on specific and meaningful feedback, and don’t focus only on what’s wrong—positive comments are not just encouraging, they also show students what works and what they should use again (Walk, 2000).

When providing feedback on a student writing:

1. **Briefly say something positive.** Positive feedback motivates the student and opens the channels of communication. Possible comments at the end of the paper:

- "I like what you say about ----."
- "You introduce your subject well."
- "You understand what X says about ----."
- "You have gone beyond the requirements by ----."
- "You have correctly summarized X's position on ----."
- "You argue here [You try to argue] that ----."

Note that even the last comment is positive because it tells students that you've heard them. Note too that each of these comments addresses the substance of the paper. Many students need to be told what they've done right, so that they can build on their strengths. As you read along, add positive comments in the margins: "good point," "well argued," "perceptive," "yes," "interesting," etc.

2. **Identify the main problem,** if there is one, or, at most, the two main problems. You may frame your response as a statement or a question. Possibilities for the end of the paper:

- "You do not respond to [this part of] the question [the instructions]"; then specify.
- "You summarize X, but you haven't taken a position of your own on this argument."
- "What is your evidence for ----?"
- "I'm not convinced you understand what X means by [is saying about] ----."
You can also be more explicit and tell the student what she or he missed.
- "But you have not covered [addressed the issue of] ----."
- "Your analysis of ---- is not clear to me." You can also tell the student why.
- "How would you explain the inconsistency [contradiction] in ----?"
- "I find this argument [discussion, passage] hard to follow because...."

As you read along, add questions and comments in the margins: "for example?" "evidence?" "What do you mean here?" "Can you make this point clearer"?

3. **If the paper has major problems** or problems that you cannot easily define, ask the writer to see you after class or in a short conference. Concentrate on helping the student understand (1) what you expect in a response paper (2) how to read and analyze the material (3) how to present the evidence (4) how to argue effectively.

Adapted from “Responding To Response Papers” by Sue Lonoff

Criteria

Clear criteria will help speed the marking process, as well as ensure consistency. A sample set of criteria for marking an essay, adapted from the Department of Sociology at Lancaster University (Johnston), is shown below:

Outstanding

- The introduction is outstanding, clearly and appropriately framing the essay as a whole.
- Extensive and relevant literature has been creatively chosen, and outlined and located in an appropriate context. There are no significant omissions, and the essential points of the sources are brought out and related to reveal an outstanding overall grasp of the topic in question and an excellent command of both the detail and the subtlety of the arguments.
- The relevant arguments are related together in a clear manner which achieves a convincing overall analysis and synthesis and also reveals elements of originality.
- The essay is outstandingly organized, achieving an excellent balance between context, research, discussion, analysis and synthesis. The English, including style and spelling is excellent.

Very Good

- The introduction is good, clearly and appropriately framing the essay as a whole.
- The most important literature has been outlined and located in an appropriate context. There are no significant omissions, and the essential points of the sources are brought out and related to reveal a good general overall grasp of the topic in question combined with a good command of the detail and the subtlety of the arguments.
- The relevant arguments are related together in a clear manner which achieves a good overall analysis and synthesis without being original.
- The essay is well organized, achieving a good balance between context, research, discussion, analysis and synthesis. The English, including style and spelling, is good.

Good

- The introduction is adequate, providing a reasonable frame for the essay as a whole.
- The major literature has been outlined and put in an adequate context. The major points of those sources are reasonably brought out and related in a way which reveals some grasp of the topic in question. There is some grasp of the detail and the subtlety of the arguments.
- The relevant arguments are related together in an adequate manner, and there is some degree of analysis and synthesis but no originality.

- The essay is adequately organized achieving some balance between context, research, discussion and synthesis. The English, including style and spelling, is satisfactory

Satisfactory

- The introduction is weak, providing only a limited frame for the essay as a whole.
- Some relevant literature is outlined, but this outline is patchy, unclear and/or not located in an adequate context. Some major points of the literature is brought out, but there are significant gaps, misunderstandings, and/or little grasp of detail or subtlety.
- The relevant arguments are related together in a manner that is weak and does not achieve a reasonable synthesis, and the essay is poorly organized, with inadequate balance between context, research, discussion, analysis and synthesis.
- The English, including style and spelling is adequate

High Fail

- The introduction is very weak, barely providing a frame for the essay as a whole.
- There is some mention of relevant literature, but this outline is very patchy, unclear, and/or very inadequately placed in context. A few points from the literature are brought out, but there are major gaps, misunderstandings, and no grasp of detail or subtlety.
- The relevant arguments are not properly related together and, to the extent they are, this is done in a manner that is weak, with no analysis or synthesis. The essay is very poorly organized, with no proper balance between context, research, discussion, analysis and synthesis.
- The English, including style and spelling, is very poor

Low Fail

- The essay has a weak introduction, providing little or no frame for the essay as a whole.
- There is little mention of relevant literature, and any outline of these is highly restricted, unclear, and/or with no sense of context.
- The relevant arguments are scarcely related together, and there is no proper analysis and synthesis. The essay is disorganized, with no balance between context, research, discussion, and synthesis.
- The English, including style and spelling, is unacceptable.

Work Cited

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