TEACHING ASSISTANT’S Guide to Grading Papers

The information below was adapted from the UVic TA Manual (the full version can be found at http://www.uvic.ca/learningandteaching/ on the Resource Database) and in the publication Grading Student Writing also accessible from our Resource Database. Not all suggestions below may be applicable in all departments on campus. Please use the information as a guide only.

Grading
- Grading is a very important communication tool between the students and the instructor.
- This section focuses mainly on the marking of papers, but much of the information can be applied to essay questions. Where there is a difference it will be noted.
- Because grades are so important, you should make every effort to be fair and consistent.
- You can begin by talking with the course coordinator because it is he or she who is ultimately responsible for setting the marking standards in the course.
- The course director should also let you know the form of the grades. Most will ask for a percentage mark, some will ask for a letter grade. The conversion scale from percentage to letter grades varies between departments so be sure you know your department's scale.

Preparation
- Preparation for marking begins early in the course by communicating expectations to the students. Explain the format that you wish:
  - Do papers have to be double-spaced or typed?
  - Should they have special cover pages?
  - How many references should the paper have?
  - What referencing format should be followed?
  - Also explain what you are expecting in terms of content and how much emphasis you are placing on writing style and content.
- Students should be encouraged to consult you for information on approaches to a thesis, sources and resources.
- **Marking rubrics**: Rubrics are very useful tools to help maintain consistency and fairness in your grading. They can be made available to students prior to the assignment so that they know what an "A" paper looks like, what a "B" paper looks like etc. You may choose to design a rubric with the students - this gives them a personal ownership and a deeper understanding of the expectations. Using a rubric is an easy way to clarify to a student why they received the grade they did. Rubrics make marking papers efficient as you spend less time debating whether a paper is an A or A- because the criteria can be made very specific.

How to Begin

TA Guide Sheets
Learning and Teaching Centre
University of Victoria
There are three methods of reading and marking which you may want to consider:

- The first method which is typically used for marking exam essay questions is based on a model answer to the question. Make a list of points which should be made in answering each question and attach values to each point.

- The second approach is more holistic and is typical of marking research papers. The paper is read completely and a grade is assigned according to the success of the student at addressing the significant points. Essentially, one should examine style (how it is said) and content (what is said). Points in style include basic grammar and spelling. Style also includes sentence and paragraph structure, vocabulary, and organization. Organization includes a strong thesis, the introduction, conclusion, and a logical organization of the points to be argued. Points in content include a familiarity with the material, the incorporation of examples to illustrate or support the argument, and identification and analysis of the issues. A good paper should be strong in all points.

- The third and more structured approach is to mark according to a formula based on certain specified percentages for content, style, presentation etc....It is advisable to separate the papers by topic or question to be answered and mark the common themes together. This method assures more reliability or consistency in judgment, better enables you to keep the important points in mind, and make a comparison of sources.

Feedback Comments

- Comments provide the necessary feedback for learning. They should address the strengths and weaknesses of the paper and offer suggestions for improvement. The criticism should be constructive and accompanied by positive feedback.

Assigning Grades

- After you have assigned a mark, you may want to pile the papers according to the A's, B's, etc. and quickly review each pile. This will assure you that you have been consistent with the grade assigned to a particular quality.

- You should put the grade on the last page of the paper or add a separate page of comments. A student's grade is not for public consumption.

Returning Papers

- Normally, all written work is to be returned to students with the exception of final exams.

- It should be returned in such a fashion that does not allow another student access to the comments or marks. This means that you are not allowed to leave a pile unattended for the students to pick up at random.