Ten Tips for More Efficient and Effective Grading & Feedback

Effective grading and feedback is known to enhance student learning[1], but there often exists a misperception that efficient grading means sacrificing quality for speed. Education research shows us that good feedback practice should strengthen the students' capacity to self-regulate their own performance[2] (which not only helps them become effective lifelong learners, it means less work for you in the long run!). These tips will come in handy for both instructors and TAs, and though they are geared toward papers/essays, many can be applied to a wide variety of assignments including lab work.

The list is based on an article in Faculty Focus by Victoria Smith and Stephanie Maher Palenque: (http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/educational-assessment/ten-tips-efficient-effective-grading/).

1. One and Done: Mention the error and explain how to correct it once. If the error occurs subsequent times, highlight the word(s) or sentence and use a quick comment to draw attention to the error succinctly (e.g., "refer to Comment 1"). This method not only saves time, but it also explains and reinforces the concept to the student.

2. Bank Comments and Code Common Errors: Build a bank of comments about frequent errors students make and organize them in groups for easy access. Consider grouping comments according to module, assignment, and chapter; or grammar, content, and organization. You can also assign simple codes to these errors, then as grading proceeds, note only the code on the student assignment. When all are done, make the full list of feedback comments available to the whole class. In EOAS we have found TAs really appreciate the way this procedure increases efficiency when grading lab work, lab reports, midterms, etc.!

3. Frontload Feedback: Feedback, though often retrospective, also has a prospective element or "feedforward" – meaning instructors need to write comments students can apply to future assignments. If teaching a class in which students submit both a first draft and a final draft of their work, focus on providing more detailed feedback on the first draft. This method should help save time later and will hold the student accountable for reading and applying their first draft feedback. Also, in the final draft one can point out errors rather than explaining them again in-depth to the student. If it is evident the student has not revised his/her final draft according to first draft comments, refer students to the first draft.

4. Global Comments vs. Local Corrections: If a student's work is heading in the wrong direction in his/her first draft, comment minimally on local-level issues—grammar, format, etc.—and instead focus comments on global issues. For example, if the student writes a summary of a work, and the assignment asks for an analysis instead, then it is best to comment globally.

5. KISS (Keep It Simple for Students): When making grading a teachable moment, be sure comments do not become so convoluted and esoteric so as to impair learning. Keep the language academic, yet accessible to the student.

[1]For a 2-pager on key points relating to assessments that support student learning, see
http://www.cwsei.ubc.ca/resources/files/Assessment_That_Support_Learning.pdf

[2]Nicol, D.J. & Macfarlane-Dick, D. (2006). Formative assessment and self-regulated learning: A model and seven principles of good feedback practice. *Studies in Higher Education 31*(2): 199-218.

6. Attitude and Approach: Make student learning the primary goal. Effective feedback is a mutual process involving both student and instructor or TA (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). The students' involvement in learning is at least partially dependent on their perception of their instructor's interest and friendliness, as well as their instructor's engagement and communication about their performance and their grades.

7. Conscious Use of Comments: Effective feedback is applicable to future situations (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Comment only when there is still something the student can do to improve the grade on a live assignment, unless they can use the comment on a final product to enhance learning and the quality of a subsequent assignment.

8. Avoid Surprises: Publish or distribute rubrics well in advance of assignment due dates so that students know how their papers will be evaluated and can establish appropriate expectations for the work they will do. Students can only achieve learning goals if they understand those goals, assume some ownership of them, and assess their own progress (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006). Providing students with 'exemplars' of performance can also be effective, because they make explicit what is required and define a standard against which students can compare their work.

9. Less is More: Instructors should avoid the temptation to respond to everything that calls for adjustments or changes. Many struggling students need to focus on just a few areas or even one item at a time. It is better to target two or three areas that need to be addressed for the student's success on future papers. This can be emphasized by clearly articulated expectations and rubrics. Then, do not spend time correcting aspects that were not part of the assignment.

10. Questions for Reflection: Consider inviting reflective, critical thinking and further conversation in a productive, scholarly exchange with students – perhaps in a whole-class (or group-based) discussion. Instead of telling students what they did "wrong," ask them to rethink their approach. For example, consider using a phrase such as "What is the most interesting aspect of your essay?" Or "What would draw your attention to this topic, as a reader?" Or "What primary audience are you targeting and what will they already know?" This way, the student is not only prompted to make more thoughtful revisions, but also is given tools to use when considering how to write a hook for future essays.
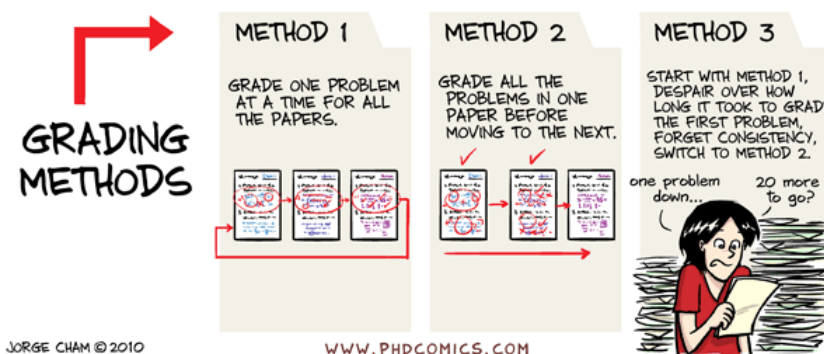
These are only a few ideas – you might have other favorite tips and tricks. To discuss your own particular situation, or to share ideas, please visit your Teaching and Learning support crew.