

15 WHAT ARE WE BEING GRADED ON?

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OVERVIEW

Grades are an (often) unmentioned but all-powerful force in the writing classroom. We know that grades mean a great deal to students, motivating many of their decisions in the classroom.* But because grading is uncomfortable and inexact work, we rarely discuss it openly in class — a silence that can leave students in the dark about the standards toward which they should write. This essay is a guide to that imprecision; it seeks to lay out for students the different considerations that go into a grading policy so that they can read assignments and rubrics with a more discerning eye. In showing students the many ways that grading standards shift across writing situations, this essay will help students adjust to new and even unclear sets of standards as well as equip students to assess their own writing on terms other than grades.

I've heard from students over the years about papers they'd been proud of that got bad grades. Usually, these stories involve a lot of time and energy that a student invested in the paper, learning quite a lot along the way and creating something better than they thought they could when they started — only for that work to not be rewarded with a good grade. When I ask my students why they might have gotten the bad grade, they usually say something to the effect of “I didn't write what they were looking for.”

After hearing a few of these stories, I decided to try to do something about it. As the writing teacher, I figured that it was my job to help my students understand what their instructors were looking for, which meant showing them what a teacher thinks about when grading writing. To do

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this, I decided that we would take a day out of each of our units, right before papers were due, to write our grading rubric as a class. This process would supposedly help students think through the different issues that teachers come across when grading papers, so that they didn't end up with so many grading miscommunications—and it would leave everyone perfectly clear on the standards for that particular essay. Since we were having the conversation at the end of the writing process, we would have a common understanding of what constituted quality for that particular assignment based on what we covered in class. We would quickly arrive at a happy consensus.

It only took two papers for this idea to completely implode. For that second assignment, my students wrote responses to music albums. Each student picked an album they liked and wrote an essay that extended its meaning or put it in a new perspective. It was a vague prompt — my hope was that we would get a bunch of different kinds of papers and everyone would see that each writer in the class had a different writing approach. Even though parts of that assignment idea still hold up, one student from that class explains why these different approaches caused a problem when it came to grading: “I think the main issue with a student-designed rubric was that it wasn't exactly clear what we were supposed to focus on in our writing....There was a lack of direction with the essay that came from the lack of rubric, it was very challenging to write an essay on a vague prompt without a rubric.” Based on this student's report, I can see that the students knew that designing the rubric would eventually require us to reach some standards — and writing the paper without knowing the standards would mean that there was a chance that they would do it wrong.

That's exactly what happened. On rubric day, we ended up with a bunch of writing-related words up on the whiteboard (“Style!” “Purpose!” “Audience!” “Organization!”), but no consensus around what counted as success in any of those categories. The different approaches the students took made it impossible to assess everyone's writing fairly under one definition of these words. Some definitions were too narrow, like “a well-organized paper talks about the artist's background first, and then this album specifically,” which is not necessarily true. If someone wrote about how the album makes them feel, then the artist's background may not be important. It would be unfair to grade that essay under that definition. On the other side of the spectrum, the definition could also get too broad, like “A well-organized paper is easy to understand.” How do we judge that? What's easy for one reader to understand might not be easy for another,

which could lead to students to be surprised by a bad grade when they thought that their paper was easy to follow.

We went in circles like this for a long time and eventually threw out the idea of the class-designed rubric. The student who first proposed we change our approach explained that “Introducing [the rubric] after my paper was almost complete meant many different interpretations could take place in both writing style, organization, and key aspects of the paper, [which] made me feel lost and incorrect in the way my paper was written.” She wanted to change our strategy to avoid these kinds of feelings. I did, too; anyone who read her paper would tell you that it was great — definitely not incorrect. She helped me realize that having everyone advocate for a definition of something like organization or style meant that I was actually inviting them to *impose* that definition on everyone else, just like the professors giving students those bad grades had done. We ended up caught between two equally bad options: come up with clear, narrow definitions that would fail to recognize the quality of some essays in the class, or come up with criteria that are so broad (such as “the organization of the paper makes sense”) that they don’t actually guide the writing or grading process.

This class session turned out to exemplify the complex issue at the heart of grading writing: In order to assess something, you have to define it and have a list of criteria you use to execute your judgment, but writing is complex and often defies that easy categorization. If a teacher’s definition of good writing is rather particular, or is somehow unclear to you, then high-quality writing that does not match that definition is liable to get a bad score. This issue is the subject of this essay: I am going to focus on the reason why different definitions of writing are perfectly natural, even if they do make grading complicated. With that knowledge, we can approach some solutions — methods for reading expectations critically, as well as some ways that both teachers and students can leverage the judgment of writing in a way to make it more inclusive and helpful for your learning. I don’t mean to imply that writing for a grade is the best way to grow as a writer, or that it is good that grades can have such a strong influence on writing (I don’t think that it is — but that’s a conversation for another time). My goal with this essay is to explain *why* the grading of writing happens a certain way, so that you can decide how, when, or why you choose to meet these expectations.

DEFINING “GOOD WRITING”

I write every day. I write academic essays, grocery lists, journal entries, text messages to my friends, among many other things. The metric I use to assess “good writing” in each of these situations changes dramatically — a well-written grocery list helps me move through the store efficiently, whereas a well-written journal entry helps me process my thoughts and feelings about the day. (If I’m feeling sad, listing off vegetables is not going to help me feel better.) “Good writing” looks different in every situation, which means that there is no definition of “good writing” that applies to every situation.

Sure, you might say, but when we’re talking about writing in school, we’re not talking about grocery lists and journal entries. We’re talking about academic writing. That’s true, but not all academic writing is the same. Academic writing in history is different from English, or biology, or political science. Even within one academic discipline, or even one genre *within* that discipline, there are many different measures of success. Anne Herrington, a writing teacher and researcher, once did a study focusing on how college engineering students and instructors interpreted the same assignment. Her results show us that a genre — in this case, the lab report — can be interpreted in different, equally valid ways. Herrington explains that, for that assignment, “the students perceived their audience as quite knowledgeable of detail, theory, and technical terms while the faculty perceived the audience as less knowledgeable, particularly of details and theory” (345-6). The two groups imagined the assignment’s intended audience differently, which led to the students writing in a way that did not match the instructors’ expectations. They would leave out information that they assumed that their audience already had, while instructors were reading the papers trying to figure out why the very same information was missing. Because the two sides understood the premise of the assignment in different ways, students were unable to meet their instructors’ expectations even though they might have done the assignment perfectly according to their own understanding of it. This means that matching someone’s definition of good writing means making sure that you understand the writing situation in similar ways.

“Writing situation” can mean a lot of different things. We don’t quite have space in this essay to get into all of the complexities of a writing situation, but there are three ideas here that you might find helpful when thinking about grading specifically. You might recognize two of them (reader preferences and reader/writer relationships) from the rhetorical situation

that may be part of your composition course. The other concept (genre) is also related to the rhetorical situation; a genre is a typical way of responding to a common rhetorical situation.

1. Let's start with genres. If your writing situation is "I need to express gratitude," then you'll write a thank-you note. There are certain conventions that you're supposed to meet in order to signal to your reader that you're participating in the thank-you note genre (starting with "Dear," telling them that you are grateful, explaining why their gift or favor was meaningful to you). If you succeed, your reader will recognize your writing as a thank-you note (because they also know the rules and conventions of the genre), and feel appreciated.
2. A situation could also involve the preferences of a particular reader. If I give my friend in her twenties a handwritten thank-you card for dropping off a book at my house, she might think that it's strangely old-fashioned. I could have sent her a text. But, if I wanted to send a thank-you card to my elderly neighbor, who does not text or email, I would have to write my note by hand and drop it off at her house. This doesn't have much to do with my own writing preferences, but with what my reader needs or wants.
3. Still, thank-you notes do not all look the same because the relationship between giver and receiver will affect what is said — the thank-you note you write for your favorite high school teacher that expresses gratitude for years of mentorship will be different from the thank-you note you write to your uncle for feeding your cat while you were away for the weekend. One is an expression of emotional or intellectual gratitude, the other is an indication that a favor did not go unnoticed. A different tone is probably warranted.

So, genres, relationships, and individual reader preferences all help us come to an understanding of what "good writing" ought to look like in a given circumstance. What does this have to do with grades? Well, in college, you're likely to meet many different writing situations as you go from assignment to assignment and class to class. The writing situations embedded in each of these assignments will be different, but not always obviously so. It's then important to do some detective work in figuring out a) what the situation is and b) what the expectations are for that situation. This is a complex process, but here are some quick strategies you can use to get to know the different writing situations you'll come across in college.

LEARNING GENRES

- When you get feedback on an assignment, don't put it away. Make a feedback log with three parts:
 1. I was trying to do *X*.
 2. My instructor said that this was good/bad for reason *Y*.
 3. Next time I will try *Z*.

Framing feedback in terms of what you were trying to do will help you be successful when you encounter similar situations in the future — and be sure to catalogue the good things your instructors say, too!

- Think about what you're *not* supposed to do in a given situation. While this might feel restrictive, it will help you figure out which writing strategies actually are available to you. Something like “I'm *not* supposed to write a five-paragraph essay for this ten-page paper” starts you in a place of figuring out a new organizational strategy (Reiff and Bawarshi 329).
- Ask for models. If you're not sure about what a particular genre should look like, ask your instructor for an example. Don't copy the model directly; use it as a way to get an idea for what sort of approach you should be after.

LEARNING RELATIONSHIPS

- Most academic assignments have some kind of framing — your instructor wants you to occupy a certain role and write to a particular audience. On an assignment sheet you might read “make a case to a general audience,” which should signal that you should explain key terms that a layperson might not understand, or spend some time telling them why a particular issue is important. You also might read something like “imagine you work at a company and a supervisor has asked you for a report,” which should signal that you should write your report toward that company's needs, rather than about the topic in general. Always write to the audience indicated on the assignment, even if it feels artificial (Hinton 22).
- If there is no stated relationship on an assignment sheet, that does not mean that there isn't one. Feel free to ask your instructor “what

kind of audience are we writing for?” which will often give you a hint about how to approach your writing.

- Think of yourself as contributing to an ongoing conversation about the topic. Even though it’s tempting to just think of yourself as a student writing for a grade, if you instead start to think of yourself as answering a question *with* your instructor, rather than *for* your instructor, you can feel more like an insider. This can lead to deeper engagement with the work. (McCarthy 256-7).

LEARNING PREFERENCES

- Look for clues in assignment sheets and syllabi about what good writing might be, but ask questions about slippery words such as “clear,” “well-written,” or “academic.”
- Early in a course, if you’re unsure about expectations, submit a draft of a piece for feedback. Ask specifically about whether what you have written meets the instructor’s expectations.
- Check the syllabus to see if there are any grade expectations articulated there, or any particular formatting/structural requirements.

DEFINITIONS AND EXCLUSION

Sometimes, it can be a challenge to make sense of the instructor’s preferences. Certain things might seem really important to this instructor that, to you, don’t seem important at all. Of course, there will be instructors who will be very clear about what they expect, and why. But, for those situations where it’s less obvious, let’s turn to James Paul Gee, a well-respected linguist, who has a useful way of thinking about this issue.

Gee uses the word *discourse* to refer to a “saying-doing-being-valuing-believing combination” (6), meaning a Discourse is a way of understanding and talking about the world. A Discourse can include members of an academic discipline (like history or chemistry), or players of a particular sport (say, basketball), or musicians in a particular genre (such as country). At the very core of a Discourse is a belief system: maybe the academic discipline values a certain kind of knowledge, or the basketball players have a certain ethic of how to play the game. This means that, as you work your way into specific academic disciplines, you’re really learning the beliefs and values of that Discourse. These belief systems are often invisible, but they form the foundation of your belonging.

To someone grading your writing, determining whether or not something is done correctly is then often a question of whether or not it fits in with the expectations and value systems of a Discourse. But, because it's hard to tell whether someone shares a belief system with you just by glancing at the way they talk or write, people sometimes rely on "superficial features" to see who belongs to their Discourse and who doesn't. Superficial features are things that rest on the surface of writing or speaking that somehow reveal the writer as not belonging in the Discourse (Gee 11). For the basketball players, superficial features might involve using certain terminology to describe a play. For the country musicians, it might be having a singing voice with twang. Examples of superficial features in academic writing might involve punctuation, formatting, sentence structure, vocabulary, or even the structure of a piece. Missing these qualities could certainly be perceived as a mistake, but none indicate that the person in question doesn't believe in the *values* of an academic discipline, basketball, or country music. It just looks that way to an insider.

This is what makes it possible to miss the expectations of an assignment without knowing it: you might write something in a way that is perfectly acceptable to the Discourses that are familiar to you, but don't belong to the one that you're becoming part of by taking the class. It might be the case that you understand the values of the Discourses, but your superficial features give you away as a newcomer. It's worth paying attention to this distinction in your own classes: is the grading scale assessing the part of the Discourse that is about beliefs and values, or the part that is about superficial features? If it is focusing on superficial features, which ones?

WHAT TO DO WITH GRADING

It might feel like all of this is irrelevant to you as a student. Teachers are the ones who set the grading criteria, and only rarely do they bring students into this process. All of this is true. At the same time, it is important for you to know why the grading of writing is such unstable business. This background will let you ask the right questions that allow you to do well in the face of the many different assessment systems you'll face in college. Plenty of people will say "writing is subjective and there's no one way to grade it," but that's only part of the issue. The real issue is the very specific *way* that writing is subjective — the way that conflicting definitions of good writing can mark someone as an outsider to a community. Going into a college writing situation with this information makes it more possible for you to understand what, exactly, you're being graded on.

It's also possible to use the imperfection of grading to pull different kinds of meaning and validation out of your writing projects. We now know that an instructor's grading scale is only one way to measure a writing project, which means that you can also try to assign your own markers of quality. Maybe you've always organized your paper in one particular way and you decide to try a new strategy. A grade might not recognize the success that you have in trying this new method, but that does not mean it wasn't important or helpful in your development as a writer. Working with the limitations of grading gives you the space to assess your writing on your own terms, a process that can help you improve as a writer over time. After all, you're the only one who is tracking your growth from one class to the next. You also might decide that pursuing the grade is not the most important thing to you — that there are other things that you want to do or say with your writing that your instructor might not be actively looking for.

There's another reason why it's important to recognize that all writing assessment deals with narrow definitions of "good writing." Even though you don't spend your nights and weekends grading stacks of student writing, you assess writing (and speaking) all the time. You can immediately recognize when someone is an outsider to your Discourse — maybe you play a sport and can easily tell when someone is inexperienced, or you can identify someone who isn't from your city because they mispronounce a street name. The immediate reaction, most of the time, is to label this person as an outsider, which makes it difficult for that person to contribute to the group with any credibility (even if they believe in its values). This is just like what happens when you get a bad grade on a project because of some formatting rule that you didn't know about — you labelled yourself as an outsider to the discourse.

In plenty of situations, this kind of judgment around language happens because of differences in language, dialect, and accent — factors that are often (but not always) traceable to race, nationality, and class. For example, I remember a teacher telling my whole sixth-grade class to never say "ax" instead of "ask," because it seems unprofessional. It's important to point out that "ax" is a pronunciation that is grounded in Black American speech (McWhorter) and is not "unprofessional" in and of itself. It is merely *la-beled* unprofessional — graded that way — by people who have been told that it doesn't fit. It's another superficial feature.

None of this is to say that the superficial features are necessarily bad. These communal ways of speaking evolved for a reason: they help get across complicated ideas quickly and they help bind a group together. (If

you're playing basketball, it's much easier to shout "box out" than it is to say "you there, please block the opposing player from getting near the basket for a rebound.") The problem arises when superficial features are used as a way of keeping people from participating in a community without good reason — especially when the communities in question, like the academic community, or the community of a given workplace, have a lot to offer to people who are included. When these exclusionary judgments are made on a large scale because of understandings of language assessment that are dependent on these superficial features, they can make racism, xenophobia, and classism worse. To learn more about how this happens, see Alvarez et al. in this volume of *Writing Spaces*. The only way to undo that is to pay closer attention to the way that we judge the way people express themselves, and bring attention to how those judgments are taught to new generations in schools. To do this, it might be helpful to take up some reflective activities around race and language (see Grayson, also this volume).

I propose that we channel frustrations with the limited definitions of good writing that we encounter in school toward developing more generous definitions of good writing and speaking in everyday life. A lot of the time, when I tell people that I think that we should grade the writing of students on whether or not they have exciting ideas that speak to the values of a Discourse, rather than the superficial features, someone usually responds: "Sure, but then when that person applies for a job and they're still making mistakes on superficial features, they'll never get hired." I believe that this is only true because we make it true — because we choose to continue to judge writing in this way. This is where you come in: I think that people who make mistakes on Standard Edited Academic English are only excluded because that's the way most people were told to judge writing and speaking in schools and other professional settings. If, instead, we had a population of people who knew to interpret people's differences in language as interesting and productive, then we could begin to chip away at the way day-to-day language assessment facilitates exclusion from those spaces. Just as we need a critical mass of teachers to see student writing as valuable even if it has not yet mastered (or actively rejects) these superficial features, we need a large group of generous readers and listeners in everyday life. Cristina Sánchez-Martín's article in this volume of *Writing Spaces* shares many more ideas on how we can develop this more generous approach to our language.

When it comes to the academic community, it's also important to think about how writing instructors can grade differently so that we do not replicate these exclusionary systems. The good news is that many teachers

are already doing this. Asao Inoue, for example, has written many articles about his labor-based grading contract, a grading scheme that assesses how much *time* a student spends on a project. The goal of this method is to separate grading from a student's knowledge of a dominant academic discourse that they were not raised speaking, which diminishes the role of racially-driven judgments in his class (61). Maja Wilson takes a different approach, saying that an individual teacher's opinions aren't "a problem to be solved," in grading because all writing is read by people with opinions. For her, this means a focus on narrative feedback, in which teachers focus their energy on what students are trying to do, rather than comparing to an ideal (45). These efforts from teachers, along with work that you can do in accepting and celebrating differences in Discourses, can help make our schools and the rest of our world a more inclusive place.

CONCLUSION

We went on a bit of a journey. We started with a problem that happened in my class: in trying to bring students into the rubric-designing process, I ended up inviting a flurry of different possible ways to assess one particular assignment, none of which would be fair to every student in my class. We found that this happened because assessing writing means defining good writing, which sometimes is done in narrow, Discourse-specific ways. We then explored some ways that you can take up that conversation yourself and covered more generous ways that writing can be assessed both in schools and everyday life.

How does this affect your day-to-day writing in school? Apart from trying to start conversations about how writing is assessed in your classes, this perspective on the narrowness of standards helps us think about writing in school differently. A lot of the time, it's easy to think that you are writing to a vast standard of "good writing" that remains the same across every class. With the knowledge that writing is assessed differently in every situation, you can approach each assignment as its own entity with its own complex relationship between speaker, audience, genre, and subject. Asking "how is 'good writing' defined according to this assignment?" will help set you up to be more nimble as you move from one situation to the next.

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TEACHER RESOURCES FOR WHAT ARE WE BEING GRADED ON?

OVERVIEW

Writing teachers know that grading is fraught with questions about what writing is in the first place. This essay takes the position that students should be aware of this complexity so that they can redefine the grading of writing as not the application of static standards but instead something that changes from one situation to the next. In the big picture, this understanding of grading helps students understand more about writing itself. The essay also gives students practical tips on how to interpret grading standards, and offers some new ways to think about how their writing is graded.

To do so, this essay relies on an illustrative anecdote from my own teaching where a failure to define clear standards led to an unfair grading situation. It then moves to contextualize that example within the notion of situational writing, and uses James Paul Gee's theory of Discourse to explain how students may be marked as outsiders when writing in college.

TEACHING STRATEGIES

Because of its multiple purposes (its practical advice and its broader theoretical basis), this essay can be helpful at various points in the semester. The essay may help in the beginning, when students are just acclimating to college and are unsure of what will be expected of them — this essay might give them a useful framework for interpreting the many assignments that will come their way.

It also might be a helpful essay to give out in conjunction with the first writing assignment of the semester. It can help students read the assignment sheet or rubric closely, and you can invite the class to construct definitions of certain words (“clear,” “original,” “well-organized”) in an attempt to build consensus around the standards for an assignment. One method may be to assign students to investigate particular components of your rubric in small groups, and allowing groups to present to each other about what they think constitutes success in each of these categories, which invites you to enter a productive conversation with your students about your own expectations.

If assigning this essay early in the semester, it might be worth bringing the feedback log to class as an in-class assignment. Students could keep the feedback log privately in a writing notebook, documenting the responses that you or their peers had to the choices that they made. You could also assign the feedback log as small-group work, where students can discuss what they learned from the feedback, or come up with some new strategies for achieving their goals.

This essay also may fit near the end of the semester, when students are working on high-stakes final projects in your class (or in other classes) and may want to know how to navigate expectations. You might ask students to compare different evaluative terms across different assignments in your class or in other classes that they have taken so that they can practice identifying these slippery terms in the future.

This piece may be helpful for a teacher revising their own syllabi or rubrics. Some teachers may rely on the abstract terms that are mentioned in this piece (like organization, or purpose) and doing a deep dive on how those words can get picked up by students could help a teacher clarify how they are using those words in their materials. It also presents an opportunity to consider the role of surface-level features in grading — there isn't a problem with showing students discourse-specific language, but this piece offers a framework for reflecting on the relationship between those features and course grades.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. When reading this essay, could you think of any specific writing assignments from your past where you felt like there was a miscommunication of expectations? What happened? What was the teacher expecting, and what did you offer instead?
2. What should the writer of this essay have done with the problem he posed in the beginning? What would have been a fair way to grade all of these essays while still offering guidance on how to meet expectations?
3. Near the end of the essay, the writer suggests that you can set your own assessment standards for yourself. Think about a paper that you have coming up: what do *you* want to get out of it? How do you think you can use it to improve your writing?

4. How does hearing about the imprecision of grading methods make you feel?
5. How else can students get to know the expectations of a given writing assignment? What strategies have you used in the past?
6. Can you think of a time that your writing or speaking marked you as an outsider to a group, or where you noticed someone did not belong to a group you are part of because of the way they spoke or wrote? What was the marker of difference, and what happened?