Assessing Essays

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Let’s make three points clear at the outset:

• the primary goals in assessing written work are to gauge the extent of student learning and to provide feedback to students – grading is a secondary goal,

• essay topics and written assignments are well-crafted when they allow students suitable scope to demonstrate their learning; and

• the learning which students are expected to demonstrate should be made clear to them.

With these thoughts in mind, we shall look at some ideas for assessing and grading students’ writing. Of course, your department will have rules and conventions, perhaps unwritten, with which you also need to be familiar.

Criteria for assessing written work

Devise a grading scheme before you start marking. It will probably consist of a checklist of essential points, with marks allotted for each point. Criteria might be: research, content, analysis, structure, syntax, literary qualities, originality. The learning aims and objectives for the subject are a useful starting point.

A grading scheme will help you to be objective and consistent.

Give some credit for good layout and presentation but don’t let these features deceive you into thinking the substance is necessarily as good as the presentation.

If a word limit has been set, establish a policy for papers which are clearly too long or too short. Make sure students know of this policy.

Remember, feedback is an important part of the learning process – your grading scheme and standards should be clear to students. After assessing each task, it is a good idea to prepare a brief handout indicating your standards and noting the performance of the class overall. Model answers sometimes help.
Assessment is not a competition in which students are supposed, if lucky, to discover exactly what you are thinking. If you give students guidance, you will get better answers – this probably means that they have learned more.

Assessing papers and providing students with feedback

It goes without saying that you should do your best to assess and return essays and other written work promptly.

Avoid your prejudices and biases towards individual students. Try to arrive at the grade and its justification impartially. You may choose to mark essays without knowing who wrote them. On the other hand, when you write comments you need to be mindful of the needs of each student. You should be asking, “What comments will best help this student?”.

Read a few essays through before you actually start marking. This helps you to set a comparative standard and may avoid your having to remark the first few papers. When assessing, ask yourself: Do they understand what they are writing about? Are they addressing and answering the question? How well do they use evidence? Check bibliographies and footnotes. Watch for plagiarism – alert students to your attitude towards it.

Do your best with your written comments to minimise the importance that students attach to grades. As far as possible, make your comments constructive. Never use sarcasm. Students have a right to expect that your comments will explain the strong and weak points of an essay and point to areas for improvement. Students appreciate a personal approach. Address comments to each student by name and sign your name.

Always write comments in pencil. Some people prefer to make notes on a separate sheet of paper before committing themselves to writing on the essay itself.

Spend some time on fluency, grammar and spelling. Remember that you are justified in assessing the quality of the communication, as well as knowledge of the subject matter. If there are particular stylistic problems, correct a page or two in detail. It will probably be distressing for a student if their whole essay is covered in corrections. Note that problems with expression can indicate misunderstanding of the topic.

Beware of your own fatigue, especially if all the essays are on the same topic. Maintain a standard of marking and avoid becoming less tolerant as you accumulate ideas on how the group is going.
If a particular essay is difficult to assess or whenever personal, language or cultural background may pose a problem, seek assistance from a colleague.

Keep a dictionary handy. Even if you are an excellent speller, after marking student essays you may begin to question your judgment!

Grading

If most students get distinctions or fail, question your assessment practices and teaching techniques. Students' marks tend to follow a normal or bell-shaped curve, with a few at the top, most in the middle, and a few at the bottom. It's up to you where you set the cut-off point for pass/fail. The place where it is usually set is with most students passing (and therefore a few getting credits, and even fewer getting distinctions) and a few failing. If most students fail an assignment, then you have not been successful in what you hoped to teach — go back over the topic again or lower your expectations. Similarly, if most students do too well, the assignments are probably not offering them enough challenge.

If you believe you have a tendency to be too generous or too 'hard' with your grading or comments, ask a colleague to mark a few of your papers — compare your standards with theirs as a means of 'moderation'.

Evaluating and improving your teaching

Keep in mind that while you are assessing essays, you are also evaluating your teaching. Assessment tasks should closely reflect the learning that the course is designed to encourage. Essays are not the best vehicles to assess some types of learning. If you aren't achieving what you want with your class, review your teaching and the nature of the assessment you have set. Seek alternative ways in which students can demonstrate appropriate learning and, ultimately, their level of attainment in the course.

References

Beattie, K.  *So now you are an academic!*  2nd ed.  South Melbourne: Union of Australian College Academics, 1992.