

Minimal Grading

or making grading more horizontal (criteria) and less vertical (levels)
from Peter Elbow's "Grading Student Writing: Making it Simple, Clearer, Fairer"

what = the use of fewer levels than the traditional letter grade system

how = Choose the number of levels appropriate for each assignment. Choose words for the levels carefully. Include explicit criteria for each level. Begin with two levels on short assignments. Increase number of levels for more in-depth assignments. Minimal grading can be used only for some or for all writing assignments in a course.

examples of levels (without criteria):

ungraded

1 level: acceptable if turned in

2 levels: *such as* pass-fail or check-minus

3 levels: *such as* strong-satisfactory-weak or excellent-okay-no credit,

4 levels: *such as* poor-fair-good-excellent

when = commonly used on low-stakes writing-to-learn assignments
can also be used on high stakes writing (typically with more levels)

why = can be quicker and simpler for us
can reduce grade inflation ("pass" can be a high standard)
can challenge "figuring out what the professor wants" mentality
can encourage both students and professors to rethink and rename what we value in grading

watch out for

=student mystification (give explicit criteria in syllabus and assignments)

=challenge of turning minimal grades into final letter grades (Elbow suggests one solution: Successful completion of writing to learn assignments starts student off at B. High stakes assignments pull grade up or down.)

Description of minimal grading in my syllabus for Teaching Writing in Communities

Minimal grading is a grading scale that uses fewer levels than the 5-level traditional grading system (really 13 if you count pluses and minuses). A purpose of minimal grading is to cut down on teacher subjectivity in grading. While some teachers use the traditional grading system well, as a teacher, I find that fewer choices in grading help me focus on what is most important. I like a 2-level grading system for work that needs to be accomplished to help us function, such as reading and reading notebooks that help us have good classroom discussions, and a curriculum and teaching notebook that help you do your work at your placement site. For the research project, I have added the level of stellar because research and subsequent writing requires more time and student investment outside of class, and therefore leads to greater variation in quality.

Examples of minimal grading from WRI 207: Teaching Writing in Communities

Reading Notebook: A conversation between the two of us grappling with our readings, kept in an notebook we exchange, handwritten or typed. In your responses, consider the author's standpoint and what has shaped his views; analyze facets of the text that resonate with you or trouble you. Write about your own experiences learning or teaching as relevant but don't stray too far from the text. Pull in other readings from this course or elsewhere that help you deepen your understanding of the ideas. Use the text as a touchstone: example: text, experience, text, other reading, text. I will respond to your entries with my own thoughts and questions; because I'll be responding to everyone, my entries will be briefer than yours.

Purpose: To fully digest your readings, to practice writing about theory and texts prior to the more high-stakes writing about texts in your research project, to prepare all of us for a more interesting classroom discussion, to give students with introverted tendencies more even footing in a discussion.

Due: Sept. 20, Sept. 27, Oct. 4, Oct. 25, Nov. 8, Dec. 13

Solid: You bring hard copies of your responses at the beginning of the class when they are due. The text is present in your response as described above. Responses are thoughtful and legible. You may skip one response, plus you do not need to turn in a response on the day when you lead the classroom discussion

Insufficient: You bring your response late or write it during class. or The text is mentioned in passing but not dealt with substantively. or Response is illegible. or You do not turn in a response.

Final research project (following draft)

Stellar (opportunity to raise course grade of B to A): You turn the paper in on time. You make any necessary revisions and turn in the revised project by the deadline. You analyze and synthesize meaningful outside sources and experiences, moving between book and experiential knowledge. You incorporate research thoughtfully and when you write about others, you do so ethically, protecting their identity, and giving people the benefit of the doubt when analyzing their behavior. You show thoughtful choice and skillful execution of genre and voice; your paper is well-structured throughout and is grammatically and stylistically strong. Your paper builds new knowledge that could help me, members of this class, community participants, and other audiences deepen our understanding of the content of our course.

Solid: You analyze outside sources and experiences, perhaps not yet fully synthesizing knowledge from both. You incorporate research thoughtfully and when you write about others, you do so ethically, protecting their identity and giving them the benefit of the doubt when analyzing their behavior. Your paper has a solid structure, interests and challenges readers from this class or the community, and is stylistically and grammatically strong.
or You turn in a stellar paper but late—no more than 1 week late.

Insufficient: You do not grapple with readings or experience below the surface level. or You write of others unethically, revealing their identity or not giving them the benefit of the doubt. or You draw on outside sources inappropriately, not giving credit appropriately for others' ideas or misattributing information. Or your paper is poorly structured. Or your paper is grammatically or stylistically weak. or You turn in a strong or satisfactory paper but more than 1 week late—no later than the last day of class.

I will not accept a paper beyond the last day of class, and you will receive a course grade no higher than a D if you do not turn in a paper, possibly failing if your work has been lacking in other areas. If you plagiarize portions or all of your paper, I will not accept the paper, and you will receive a course grade no higher than a D.