

A Teacher Asks: How do I really grade?

The following article, by Dave Tabakow, originally appeared in the quarterly education journal *This Magazine is About Schools*. Mr. Tabakow teaches English Literature at Vanier College, an English CEGEP in Montreal. The Campus publishes *How Do I Really Grade?* with his permission.

By DAVID TABAKOW

The other day a colleague and I were sitting around the English Office feeling rather depressed, so we started talking about how we grade papers. That is, we started talking about how we really grade papers as opposed to our theories about the matter. This is a subject that teachers normally shy away from thinking about — with good reason. That way lies madness, or at least the kind of moroseness that inspired this article.

When I first started thinking about my grading, one of the more disturbing things I noticed was the way in which my perceptions change as I mark papers. I start with a certain level of insight about a particular work and, of course, judge the papers on the basis of what I know. But as I read paper after paper about the same work, naturally I pick up the insights offered in each essay.

Now no one paper may add very much to my store, but it is a safe assumption that when I have read fifteen student essays on the same subject my understanding of the work is invariably considerably greater than it was when I started grading. When I mark the sixteenth paper I am quick to notice any point from all the previous papers which is not included and to accordingly penalize the writer for his superficial understanding. By the twenty-fifth paper I know even more and things are even tougher for the writer of number twenty-six.

You see the point. The sooner I grade a paper the higher the mark is likely to be, because I don't know as much and consequently don't have as high standards at the beginning as I do later. Now you can simply tell me to be careful and to catch myself each time I fall into this pattern, but that just doesn't work.

To catch yourself requires that you monitor yourself, and as any elementary psychology text will tell you, human beings are rather poor monitors. They are even poorer than usual when they are tired, which brings me to another point.

When I decided to write about grading I kept a record of my reactions to the papers I was marking at the time. I suspected that the more papers I graded on a given day, the more harsh and irritated would become my reaction to each succeeding essay. Surprisingly enough, this doesn't seem to be what actually happened. I found that as the day progressed I had less and less reaction of any kind to the papers. After I've graded twenty essays I have no interest in anything except getting rid of the pile of papers in front of me, and the more essays I grade the fewer comments of any sort I put on them.

Actually, all my comments, especially those at the end of the essay, tend to be pretty formulaic anyway. If the paper gets a high grade, I first say something about it being good, mention one point that should have been talked about more, and again say that the paper was good.

An actual example: "In general, a good paper. I think you could have explained more the nature of Mersault's revelation that he must control his own life and how this revelation relates to Camus' views, but your paper demonstrates a good understanding of the novel."

If it is a bad essay, I'm a little more explicit about what's wrong, but I don't give any suggestions as to how to improve things. For example: "This paper is underdeveloped. It seems that you are primarily interested in why the tradition of the lottery was allowed to continue, but you really didn't get into the subject very deeply."

Perhaps even as I have presented each problem you have been able to immediately suggest a solution to it. I could eliminate the problem of grading consecutive papers on the same subject with increasing harshness by simply reading through all the papers once before I graded any of them. Similarly, the solution to the problems caused by grading too many papers the same day is to not grade too many papers the same day.

And the comments on the papers can be made more meaningful by considering each paper in more detail and expanding the scope of my remarks. All of these suggestions have merit, but if you teach you already know what's wrong with them. There just isn't time. I simply could not get my work done if I were to grade papers in anything but a cursory fashion. The idea that I

can seriously consider and evaluate 150 papers four, five or six times in half a year is ridiculous. An hour is certainly not an unreasonable amount of time to devote to an essay which has taken the student five, ten, or twenty hours to write.

Assuming a norm of 150 students, spending one hour per paper would require grading 35 to 40 hours per week in addition to all the other responsibilities of teaching. Even if this herculean task were physically possible, it would be psychologically unwise. At a certain point one would once more be back in the too-many-papers-per-day syndrome.

What's left? Shall we give fewer papers but grade them more thoroughly? At the level I teach (1st year university), students should probably write a short essay every week or two, say twenty during the year. Four or five essays are just not sufficient to teach them how to write effectively.

If all this seems pretty grim, there's worse to follow. All of the problems I have raised thus far stem from the fact that I have too many papers to grade to be able to grade them well. But as I will try to make clear, there are many disagreeable aspects to grading that would remain even if I had only one paper to grade.

I have observed that although I'm always displeased to find a long paper (more work) I very rarely give it a really low grade, and although I'm always pleased to find a short paper I very rarely give it a really high grade. I have another "rule" which I'm generally not consciously aware of. I give a "B" to anything I don't understand unless it's exceptionally poorly written, in which case I fail it, or exceptionally well written, in which case I give it an "A" and desperately look for one point I can criticize as a justification for not giving the paper an "A."

Thinking it over, I realize that by far the most important criterion of my grading is writing style. By that I mean that the smoother your transitions, the more flowing your syntax, the more urbane your diction, the higher will be your grade, almost regardless of content. I (unconsciously, of course) make the assumption that everyone who writes well understands literature well (which may even be true), and vice versa (which most certainly is not true).

Is there any connective factor in all these grading problems? It seems to me that there is. My first reaction to all papers is self-defense. I try to protect myself so that no authority can criticize me for my grading. Of course, it is always easier to justify a low mark on a short paper rather than on a long one. And it's always good to give a fairly high mark to what I don't understand, just to be on the safe side.

I think the subconsciousness mental processes at work here are revealed most clearly when I consider my reactions to writing style. No student who expresses himself poorly ever gets a good grade from me.

There is a very simple reason for this. As soon as I see sentences which are syntactically obscure or grammatically incorrect, I decide the writer is stupid and therefore I don't really pay much attention to what

he's saying since it obviously isn't going to be any good. I am afraid of the personal consequences for myself of my work, so the idea that I might give a poor mark to a good paper and have my incompetence revealed is a recurring nightmare. In fact, when a good student complains because he feels his grade on an essay was too low, I find the whole situation extremely threatening.

Now whatever else it signifies, writing ability is clearly related to general verbal ability, and, in general, people who write well are likely to also speak well. Ergo, people who write well are to be feared in any verbal encounter so it is safest not to give them low grades. On the other hand, if I give a low mark to a student who writes poorly, it is unlikely that he will be able to make a very effective case against me to the authorities. It is as simple as that.

Well, perhaps you feel that the answer to the set of problems I have posed is my personal psychotherapy. As a result of various insecurities, inadequacies, etc., I am simply not capable of the objectivity required in teaching. When I first began teaching I did, in fact, feel very strongly that this was the case. However, as time has passed my feelings have modified, because over and over again, I have been pleasantly surprised to find that my grading is much in line with everyone else's.

That is, my colleagues and I are usually in general agreement as to what grade a particular essay deserves. Now there seems to be a remarkable coincidence here if other teachers grade essentially on content and I grade on style. Either I'm a better grader than I think I am or they're worse. I suspect that it's the latter.

I suspect that every English teacher grades essentially on style. I have absolutely no way of proving this. I am only certain it is true. I am certain it is true because it seems to me that it follows from the nature of the task. The task of grading, judging someone else, is very anxiety producing. The idea that I can judge what you have learned, what took place inside your head during the last six months is an absurdity.

But there it is — A, B, C, D, or F the university demands. I suspect that secretly none of us really feel up to it, and that's reasonable enough because no one except the student himself can possibly judge the quality of what is finally an intensely personal experience. Playing God tends to make us, as I said, anxious, and to bring out feelings of insecurity and inadequacy.

So we react in some of the ways I have discussed earlier. Again I point out that all of this is usually subconscious, and the teacher knows only that the subject of grading papers is one he doesn't care to think or talk about too much.

Let us suppose that all I have been saying is true. It should be clear that without fundamental changes in the whole concept of education and the teacher's function, very little can be done to alleviate these conditions. Then what are we to do? The only suggestion that I can make is that perhaps we should tell our students the basis on which we really grade their papers. But I don't think I have the nerve to.

Refinements in grading system recommended

A proposed banning of courses with nonstandard grading procedures, brought before Senate Council March 5, has now been referred to the Committee on Studies and the Committee on Curriculum.

A motion to reconsider the

matter was defeated at the March 20 meeting of the Faculty of Arts and Science. History 100 professors Crook and Godfrey voted against the motion to reconsider. They are now building a case to present to the committees.