Teaching Assistant Primer: The Emotional Work of Grading

Grading is an intellectual task, but like all intellectual tasks, it has emotional and social components. The primary task of this document is to encourage you to take those parts of the grading experience seriously — or, rather, to encourage you to give yourself time and space to adjust to the emotional challenges as well as the intellectual ones.

This document is necessarily incomplete. But we hope the fact of it is an indication that USC aims to support you as you develop your own emotional relationship to grading.

1: Authority

For many people the experience of grading a paper can be a particularly intense encounter with the strange experience of being an intellectual authority. No matter how strong your rubric, the experience of grading is necessarily somewhat subjective. Depending on your own experiences of being graded, becoming comfortable with your subjective authority may be different for you. Here are some things you may want to think about.

- Find ways to use the authority of your collaborating professor to strengthen, rather than undermine, your authority with your own students.
- Remember that rigor is not the same thing as authority.
- Articulating BEFORE you grade a paper the qualities you are looking for (in a rubric) can help you be more confident in the specific experiences of grading.
- Remember that you have been chosen as TA because your department trusts your expertise. Your authority is not something you need to prove in the act of grading; it is something you already have. You gained it through the hard work you did to earn this position.
- Students will question your grades. It happens to everyone and there is no one right way to navigate those negotiations. Having clear documents (a rubric or other criteria) can make these exchanges less fraught.

2: Time

The first years TAing are, for many people, the most demanding part of their graduate careers. Balancing grading with other commitments is a challenge for all professors, at all levels, but for TAs the pressures of grading (because your authority is tied to the course’s professor, who is often also supervising you) can be even higher.

- There is no equal balance between the time you put into grading and your feedback’s value to your students. Spending more time does not mean you did a “better” (which is to say, pedagogically more effective) job.
- Weeks that you are grading will be busy. But even on those weeks, you have to maintain other commitments, including to yourself.
• It can be tempting to use grading as an excuse to not focus on your other intellectual labor. A long-term goal is to find ways that your teaching and scholarship support each other, rather than take from each other.

• Clear communication with your supervising professor about time management will be helpful to you. Take your graduate school experience as a chance to learn from many different professors their strategies for balancing intense workloads.

3: Institutions

Grading places you in relation to institutional authority. This will be the case throughout your career: when you grade, your standards sit next to those of your field, your department or program, and your university. In most cases, there is not complete alignment between all these standards and many pedagogical differences arise out of navigating those misalignments.

• Your students will have different kinds of familiarity with institutional standards of expression. There are many differently valid ways to balance a commitment to those standards with a commitment to student equity.

• Institutions change and evolve. Differences you experience between your standards and your institution’s can be opportunities for you to constructively shape the norms put in place around you.

• Institutions are made up of people; most people who work in universities are there because of their care about students and their commitment to learning. Find and build relationships that help you understand how to navigate structures and advocate for yourself and what you believe.

4: Relationships

You are grading a paper, but the paper will be received by a person — a person who is your student, and whom you will have come to know. There are many ways your relationships with your students might shape your experience of grading them.

• Anonymity — a model of blind review — is compelling but difficult to achieve. It’s worth considering how much you think your knowledge of the student — their effort, their improvement — should shape the grade they receive or the feedback you give.

• As much as possible, emphasize to your student that your feedback is about their paper, not about them or their potential.

• Giving overall feedback to a class when you pass back papers — explaining directly your strategies, your overall observations about the group, how what you’ve noticed will effect your teaching — can help students feel less isolated and more supported.

• If you are worried your knowledge of a student might skew your grade, don’t hesitate to ask a peer or your supervising professor to give a second opinion.

• There is not one way to grade that will be the most valuable for all the students you wish to support. Being clear about what you are hoping to achieve in the approach you are taking will help build trust with your students.