Teaching Assistant Primer: Grading Rubrics

Grading is one area of your pedagogy that will be scrutinized by every student you teach. Done correctly, smart and conscientious grading sets the pace for your course and establishes individualized challenges for the semester. You’ll get a feel for it with the first set of papers, but here is a general rubric that can be applied to a number of different subjects:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A</strong></td>
<td>Succeeds in all elements of the assignment, excels in at least one element, contains clear and elegant prose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B</strong></td>
<td>Succeeds in most or all elements of the assignment, contains mostly clear prose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C</strong></td>
<td>Satisfies all elements of the assignment, contains mostly sensible prose (though some effort might be required to decipher meaning)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>D</strong></td>
<td>Fails in one or more elements of the assignment, contains nonsensical prose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>F</strong></td>
<td>Fails in all elements of the assignment, including possibly length, contains large sections of nonsensical prose</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The lowest grades typically come at the start of the term. These are the papers most likely to be overwritten: big words and nonsensical prose trying to approximate “scholarly” writing. Give thorough feedback early, eliminate bad habits and set the individual goals for the semester.

Ideally, grades will improve over time. During one semester, the average mark on a first essay might be a C+, then a B- on the next essay, then a B. At the end of the semester, grade boosters like reading quizzes, participation and revision portfolios might be taken into account for final grades. (Unsurprisingly, pleasant surprises at the end of the term cause much less stress for the instructor and students than unpleasant ones.)

In short, the following maxims prove true: be fair; be consistent; be as transparent as possible. Manage expectations but also make clear that as much as the grade might mean to them, the skills you are teaching are invaluable—both for their schooling and for their future careers.
Below is a much more detailed rubric used by USC’s Writing Program:

**Writing Program General Evaluation Rubric**

The following rubric outlines the general criteria used to assign grades in Writing 150 courses. The + and – grades allow instructors to make finer qualitative distinctions concerning their students' ability at each grade point; A+ and F are not recognized by the University.

In general, thoughtful, critical essays are rewarded. Those which demonstrate overall organizational and argumentative/analytical skills will usually be rewarded over those which merely demonstrate sentence-level competence. Those which fail to respond to all aspects of the assignment will usually not receive a passing grade.

A WRITING will:
- Present a cogent and insightful argument/analysis. The author responds to the assigned topic in a consistently forceful manner that is not only thoughtful but also thought-provoking. The author demonstrates creativity and originality in identifying and addressing genuine and significant issues.
- Provide compelling support for the overall argument/analysis. The argument or analysis receives full (and fully convincing) support: the author includes enough judiciously-chosen materials or details to emphatically support what he or she is trying to do. When the author employs sources, he or she is critical and confident concerning their use, and employs them to further his or her own authority and point of view.
- Develop its argument or analysis with organizational clarity and logical force. The author controls the writer-reader transaction both explicitly and implicitly.
- Demonstrate sophisticated exploration of the issue(s) set forth in the assignment. The author is able to negotiate the complexities of the issue(s) raised in a provocative, controlled manner. The author fully responds to the writing task, demonstrating a mature knowledge about the subject and a judicious sense of its impact on the reader.
- Employ a style that reinforces the paper's effectiveness and advances its purpose within the context of the academic discourse community.
- Display maturity in sentence variety, grammar, spelling, and usage. Surface errors are virtually non-existent; the reader is left free to enjoy the author's style and tone and the intellectual force of the writing.

B WRITING will:
- Present a clear, principled argument/analysis. The author responds to the assigned topic in a direct, thoughtful, and often forceful manner; the paper demonstrates a strong and consistent point of view. The author demonstrates an ability to recognize and address genuine and significant issues.
- Use effective examples and reasoning to support the overall argument/analysis. The argument or analysis receives relevant support; the author includes enough well-chosen materials or details to convincingly support what he or she is trying to do. If sources are used, the author incorporates them to further his or her own authority and point of view.
- Display consistently strong overall organization, paragraph development, and logical transition. The author demonstrates a good sense of structural control: the paper's form directly contributes to its purpose; transitions are purposeful. The author directs the reader's attention through the unfolding work.
- Fully address and explore the issue(s) set forth in the assignment. The paper fully responds to the writing task and explores the complexities of the issue(s) raised. The author demonstrates reliable knowledge about the subject and good sense about its impact on the reader.
- Employ a style that is appropriate and furthers the purpose of the paper. The author has developed good control over (if not mastery of) academic discourse.
- Display strength in sentence variety, grammar, spelling, and usage. Surface errors are infrequent and inconsequential: the reader is left free to consider global matters, hardly ever distracted by surface matters. The author's meaning is always clear.
C WRITING will:

- Offer a competent if occasionally limited argument/analysis in a direct response to the assignment topic. The argument or analysis is plausible, clear, and generally consistent.
- Use appropriate examples and reasoning to support the overall argument/analysis. The argument or analysis receives credible support; the author includes enough material or detail to support what he or she is trying to do. When used, sources are reasonably well subordinated to the author's purpose.
- Display competence in overall organization, paragraph development, and logical transition, even if it occasionally exhibits organizational or argumentative/analytical weaknesses. The author demonstrates structural control (the readers know where they're being taken and why).
- Address the issue(s) set forth in the assignment. The paper responds to the writing task and recognizes the complexities of the issue(s) raised in the assignment. The author does not just go through the motions, but cares about his or her subject and its impact on the reader.
- Use a style and tone appropriate to the purpose. The language used supports the author's purpose and is appropriate within the academic community.
- Display competence in sentence variety, grammar, spelling, and usage. Occasional surface errors don't seriously detract from the paper's purpose or significantly interfere with the reader's comprehension of the essay.

D WRITING will:

- Offer a limited argument/analysis in response to the assignment, marked by several of the following weaknesses:
  - An implausible, unclear, incomplete, or inconsistent argument or analysis. The paper lacks the cogency and purpose necessary for competent college-level writing; the paper fails to exhibit careful thinking.
  - Inadequate, unconvincing, irrelevant, or derivative support. The paper accumulates (often paragraph by paragraph) derivative and/or anecdotal examples without integrating them into a focused argument/analysis. The author relies on inappropriate—or weak—examples or reasoning to support the overall discussion. If sources are used, the author may piece together writing from secondary sources without using it in the service of his or her own argument or point of view. Alternatively, the author may not include enough material or detail to support the purpose of the paper.
  - Flaws in organization, paragraph development, or logical transition. The paper lacks structural fluency: organizational flaws cause a lack of overall coherence, undermining the paper's purpose. The reader is too often puzzled by the course the paper takes, or the paper relies too exclusively on formulaic organization, thereby becoming stilted and predictable.
  - Failure to seriously or thoughtfully address the issue(s) set forth in the assignment. The paper treats the issue(s) simplistically; the argument/analysis generally overlooks the complexity of the issue(s) raised. The author doesn't care enough about the subject or the reader's expectations, and may fail to respond to all aspects of the writing task.
  - An inappropriate style or tone. The style and tone detract from the purpose and are inappropriate in terms of the academic discourse community.
  - Flaws in syntax, grammar, usage, or spelling. Mechanical errors detract from the paper's purpose or interfere with the reader's comprehension. Significant problems in wording or syntax make the writing unclear or confusing.

F WRITING will:

- Compound the weaknesses of D writing, to the point that the paper seems beyond the scope of the normal revision process: an author who has otherwise demonstrated some capability would do well to reconsider the whole enterprise from scratch. Specifically, F writing will:
  - Fail to recognize or adequately respond to the writing task.
  - Be far too general or present a vacuous discussion of the issue.
  - Rely on remarkably weak or inappropriate examples.
  - Have little controlling organization or logical coherence.
  - Have serious and extensive flaws in syntax, grammar, or usage.
Below is an example of an assignment-specific rubric, used for a graduate school personal statement assignment:

**Assignment 1: Personal Statement Rubric**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Accomplished</th>
<th>Competent</th>
<th>Beginning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Presentation and Professionalism</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Writes in clear and accessible prose</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Employs a style appropriate for the purpose</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Shows command of grammar and syntax</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Substantive Argument</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provides a coherent narrative</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Focuses the statement to achieve depth over breadth</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Grounds the piece in specifics rather than generalities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Relates the personal and particular to some larger idea or purpose</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Reflects on experience cogently and meaningfully</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Offers a unique and memorable reading experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**General Comments and Suggestions for Improvement:**

Grade: ______