Responding to Student Papers

The WAC program recommends the following guidelines for responding to student writing. These practices can assist you in providing feedback that will help students improve their papers and engage with writing as a process. In addition, they are meant to streamline the grading process so that you do not feel you must spend time correcting every small error a student makes. When possible, we also recommend allowing students the opportunity for revisions.

1. All pens down! Read text without making any marks or comments.

2. Read the piece aloud.

3. Describe text: Make one non-judgmental, descriptive observation. It should be something we would all agree on (e.g., he or she has written four paragraphs; he or she makes references to other texts).

4. Note one thing the writer does well.

5. Identify an idea you found provocative or interesting that you would like the writer to think about further.

6. Identify one or two patterns of error.

7. Compose a comment for the student that will promote revision and move the paper forward. Write the comment in the form of a letter to the student, addressing him or her by name.
Rubrics

Using a grading rubric can help you hone in on the learning outcomes you hope to see as the result of a particular assignment as well as better articulate those expectations to students. In addition, rubrics can help clarify the grading process. Below are some sample rubrics faculty members use; you may adapt them for your own course.

Rubric 1: Six Criteria for Good Writing

In an effort to eliminate the mystery behind the grading of written work, I will be reading and evaluating your essays according to the six criteria below. These criteria are an effort to define concrete goals for you to achieve in your written work. They will help you to understand that writing a paper is more than offering your instructor a point of view that he or she "wants." Rather, writing a paper is a process as intricate as proving a mathematical theorem or a philosophical argument. The way that you go about building your argument is as important as what your argument actually is. These six criteria should help you to see the elements that go into making that argument an effective one. I will rate each of the criteria on a scale of one to five, with five being the highest. The score that results from this rating will then translate into a letter grade as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Grade Point</th>
<th>Letter Grade</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>29–30</td>
<td>3.80–4.00</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27–28</td>
<td>3.50–3.70</td>
<td>A−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25–26</td>
<td>3.20–3.40</td>
<td>B+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23–24</td>
<td>2.90–3.10</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21–22</td>
<td>2.60–2.80</td>
<td>B−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19–20</td>
<td>2.30–2.50</td>
<td>C+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17–18</td>
<td>2.00–2.20</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15–16</td>
<td>1.70–1.90</td>
<td>C−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13–14</td>
<td>1.40–1.60</td>
<td>D+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11–12</td>
<td>1.10–1.30</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>09–10</td>
<td>0.80–1.00</td>
<td>D−</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>00–08</td>
<td>0.00–0.70</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Responsiveness
Your paper must respond appropriately to the assignment. It must show that you have understood that the assignment asks you to write both according to the topics assigned and a formal, argumentative essay, with a thesis statement, concrete example, quotes, analysis and a thought-provoking conclusion.

2. Thesis
Does your paper have a clear conceptual argument, or thesis, to it, a claim that says clearly what your argument is? Is that thesis/claim specific and clear to your readers? Does it appear in the first paragraph of your paper? Is your thesis/claim complex enough so that it is not already self-evident? Will it make your audience care? Does your thesis/claim have authority behind it? Is it assertive and sure of itself?

3. Focus
Does the rest of your paper focus clearly on the argument you laid out in your thesis? Have you followed the logic required by your conceptual thesis, excluding what is irrelevant? Do you make clear what the different parts of your paper have to do with each other and with your thesis/claim? Does the paper make good organizational sense? A well-focused paper will follow clearly first from the thesis and then from one idea to the next. It will avoid unclear digressions, and its different parts will all be relevant to the thesis/claim.

4. Fullness
First, have you established your argument fully in your introduction? Is that first paragraph a solid basis for your ideas about the argument you want to present? Throughout the paper, do you give your arguments enough time? Do you say enough, staying with each point long enough to convince your readers that you know what you are talking about, without simply reiterating your thesis statement with different words in each paragraph? Do you develop your ideas logically so that your argument can be followed, and so that your readers will grant you authority for what you say? Do you follow up quotations from the text with analysis so that your readers will understand why that quotation was integral to your argument?

5. Specifics
First, do you make your argument in terms that are as specific as possible? Do you give examples and details so that your readers can actually see what you mean? Do you quote sufficiently from your text, providing quotations as concrete evidence for your argument? Are the grounds you give and the text you quote relevant to the point you are trying to make? And second, are there enough road signs — transitions and connections — so your readers know where you are going?
6. Presentation
How well have you edited your paper? Are there spelling errors, awkward sentences or punctuation problems? Does your style fit your purpose? Is the voice clear? Is your diction (word choice) appropriate? Is your prose clear and smooth? Are your sentences varied in style and length? Is your reader going to be able to read your essay without being distracted by spelling errors, typos and misplaced punctuation?

*From Six Criteria for Good Writing (adapted from the Department of English, Hunter College)*

Rubric 2: Holistic Grading

Superior (A)
A superior paper consistently does all or almost all of the following:

- **Thesis:** Has an easily identifiable, plausible and original argument. Limits the thesis to a scope appropriate for the nature of the assignment and the evidence presented. Explains the significance of the argument.

- **Structure:** Has a structure that is evident and understandable, and that relates logically to the argument, which is developed throughout the paper. Transitions well between points or sections.

- **Evidence:** Is based upon primary and secondary source evidence. Is integrated and analyzed, not simply stated. Demonstrates an understanding of the limitations of its evidence.

- **Analysis:** Is persuasively argued. Identifies and explains counter-arguments or alternative theories. Demonstrates an understanding of the limitations of the evidence. Ties in to broad themes, ideas or areas of analysis.

- **Knowledge:** Demonstrates superior understanding of subject matter. Displays nuance in relating particular facts to broader context.

- **Mechanics:** Sentence structure, grammar and diction are excellent. Correct use of punctuation and citation style. Minimal errors.
Good (B)
A good paper does most or many of the following:

- Thesis: Has a promising if not fully realized thesis, with some insight or originality.
- Structure: Generally clearly structured. Wanders or includes related (but not entirely relevant) arguments. Has unclear transitions but is well organized at the level of the paragraph.
- Use of evidence: Deploys evidence to support most points. Sources chosen are generally relevant and quotes are well integrated into sentences though not always analyzed to their fullest potential.
- Analysis: Acknowledges and explains counter-arguments, even if they are not always fully dispatched. May not fully understand the limitations of the argument being made or completely grasp its importance.
- Knowledge: Demonstrates understanding of the subject matter and relates facts to broader context. Makes connections to broader themes.
- Mechanics: Sentence structure, grammar and diction are strong despite occasional lapses; punctuation and citation style often used correctly. Only minor errors.

Acceptable (C)
An acceptable paper does most or many of the following:

- Thesis: Has a thesis that is vague or unclear, unoriginal or slight.
- Structure: Lacks focus, with weak transitions. Primary argument is repeated without development.
- Use of evidence: Evidence is used, but points often lack supporting evidence, or evidence used inappropriately (often because there may be no clear point). Quotes may be poorly integrated into sentences. Quotes appear often without analysis or analysis offers nothing beyond the quote.
- Analysis: May not address counter-arguments or deals with them hastily. Overstates the evidence in support of its argument. Misses connections to important broader themes and ideas.
- Knowledge: Demonstrates superficial knowledge of the subject, without insight into general themes.
- Mechanics: Poor structure, grammar and diction. Errors in punctuation, citation style and spelling.
Poor (D)
A poor paper consistently does all or almost all of the following:

- Thesis: Difficult to identify, restates obvious point, or is a ridiculous assertion.
- Structure: Unclear, often because thesis is weak or non-existent. Transitions confusing and unclear. Ideas do not flow, usually because there is little argument organizing the paper.
- Use of evidence: Very few or very weak examples. General failure to support statements, or evidence seems to support no statement. Quotes not integrated into sentences. Very little attempt to relate evidence to argument.
- Analysis: Simplistic view of topic; little effort to grasp alternative views. No understanding of limitations of argument or evidence.
- Knowledge: Does not identify general themes or attempt to link to them.
- Mechanics: Big problems in sentence structure, grammar and diction. Frequent major errors in citation style, punctuation and spelling. Run-on sentences and other disorganization.

Holistic Grading Rubric (adapted from Paul Halsall, Fordham University)
# Rubric 3: Analytic Grading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Poor</th>
<th>Needs Improvement</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Excellent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thesis</strong></td>
<td>No overarching argument can be discerned.</td>
<td>Is confusing, contradictory or underdeveloped. Does not fit well with the scope of the assignment. Significance is unclear.</td>
<td>Exists and is comprehensible, if underdeveloped in places. May be overly broad or unoriginal. Significance is discussed.</td>
<td>Is original, creative, provocative and insightful. Is appropriate to the assignment’s scale. Significance is clearly explained.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evidence</strong></td>
<td>Either no evidence is provided, or there are numerous factual mistakes, omissions or oversimplifications. Author vastly overstates significance of evidence.</td>
<td>Relies on few sources. Not enough evidence is provided to support author’s argument, or evidence is incomplete, incorrect or oversimplified. Limitations of evidence are not well understood.</td>
<td>A number of different types of sources is used to support arguments. Provides necessary evidence to convince reader of most aspects of the main argument. Importance of evidence sometimes assumed.</td>
<td>A wide range of sources is used in creative ways to support arguments. Smoothly integrates broader knowledge to explain evidence. Student demonstrates the limitations of different types of evidence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Organization</strong></td>
<td>Essay has no clear organizational pattern.</td>
<td>Exists at the sentence level. Paragraphs lack clear direction, and the logic of the paper as a whole is obscure. Argument does not build. Introduction and conclusion are boring, banal or repetitive.</td>
<td>Exists at the paragraph level. The argument may not build as the paper moves. Fails to eclipse the high school five-paragraph essay. Introduction and conclusion are heavy-handed.</td>
<td>Supports the argument, which builds throughout the paper. Paragraphs and subsections of the paper are linked. Paper proceeds with a logic. Introduction draws the reader in;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Analytic Grading Rubric (created by Peter Pihos, University of Pennsylvania)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Efforts at analysis are largely not fruitful. Author acknowledges some of the most obvious counter-evidence and alternative explanations. There is little or no attempt made to respond to them.</th>
<th>Does not add much new insight into the subject. Author fully acknowledges counter-evidence or alternative interpretations but does not effectively neutralize them.</th>
<th>Is persuasively argued. Identifies and explains counter-arguments or alternative theories. Demonstrates an understanding of the limitations of the evidence. Ties into broad themes and ideas.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>Demonstrates some knowledge of the subject matter but has trouble integrating it into the paper.</td>
<td>Demonstrates basic knowledge of the field and the key questions, events and themes that shape on the paper.</td>
<td>Demonstrates knowledge of the field and relates paper to broader events, themes and arguments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mechanics and Style</td>
<td>Writing is confusing, in part because of errors in spelling, grammar, diction and usage. Employs hackneyed rhetoric and shopworn metaphors.</td>
<td>Writing is generally clear and comprehensible, although it may contain minor errors of grammar, spelling, diction or usage. Lacks original voice and draws on commonly used metaphors.</td>
<td>Writing is clear and concise. Good grammar, spelling, diction and usage all contribute to the paper’s success. Stylistic innovations, rhetoric and use of metaphors all further conceptual understanding.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Conclusion:** The conclusion does not simply summarize.