First Time Up

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GRADING, ATTENDANCE, AND OTHER PAINS-IN-THE-BUTT

Teaching in the age of litigation sometimes becomes a defensive game. We have to establish rules and policies not for the one hundred students each year who act like reasonable, civil human beings but for the one per year (or decade) who acts like a bad lawyer on steroids, tries to get away with dereliction in your class, and then searches your syllabus with a magnifier to find the loophole that permits loutish behavior.

So in grading and other crucial issues, we need to prepare for the worst. While that may be a depressing task, it helps us not to worry about the worst for the rest of the semester. We can lean on a good syllabus. Constructed with care and a certain degree of paranoia, syllabi help us through difficult times.

In our syllabi and elsewhere, we need to be proactive and open about our grading and other policies, rather than downplay our role and pretend we’re not the gate-keepers, the grade-givers. It helps no one to be dishonest with ourselves or our students about the place of grades in our classes. As Elbow says, “The more I try to soft-pedal assessment, the more mysterious it will seem to students and the more likely they will be preoccupied and superstitious about it” (“Embracing” 153). We may want to eliminate grades from our courses, but we have to be realistic about how we compute them and how they affect our students. “You can tell students anything you want about ‘taking responsibility’ and ‘thinking for yourself,’” Jerry Farber says, but “the grading system you employ—a middle finger extended before them—is always more eloquent still” (274).

RANDOM GRADING TIPS

Grading is a hugely complex subject. If you want to dig deeply into that complexity, try Tobin’s chapter “What We Really Think About When We Think About Grades” (57-74). If you give yourself a hard time because you find yourself so conflicted when grading, read Tobin’s “Thirteen things that I think about when I give grades that teachers are not supposed to think about when we give grades” (65-66). I wouldn’t trust anyone who said grading was easy.
Figure 5

An Attempt to Explain My Paper Grading Approach

Grading papers is a complex and somewhat mysterious process, even to people who do it often. As I read a final draft, my grade estimate gets swayed subtly by a large number of factors, some of which I’ve listed here. The qualities above the line pull a paper up toward an A, while the qualities below (and, usually, the opposite of the “good” qualities, e.g. “lack of clear focus”) pull the grade down toward D.

- A well-developed and well-supported thesis or point
- Insight
- Interesting information
- Unique or unusual ideas or perspectives
- Humor
- Successful metaphors
- Telling details
- Effective organization
- Lively language
- Clear focus
- Good use of quotations
- Originality
- Challenge
- Distinctive personal voice
- Thought—writer’s and reader’s

- Spelling and proofreading problems
- Wordiness
- Grammatical errors
- Confusion
- Logic problems
- Oversimplification
- Fog
- Punctuation quirks, especially run-ons and fragments

To avoid having this section take over the whole book, I will assume that you don’t have control over the entire grading system and the question “To grade or not to grade?” is moot. These “tips” cover aspects of grading I feel fairly confident about. The next section, “Grading Dialogues,” digs into thornier issues about which reasonable people disagree.

Listen to What Others Have to Say

I’ve never met a writing teacher who enjoyed grading or who had discovered the perfect way to do it. So many of us keep trying new approaches. For your first semester, you’ll probably want to use the grading methods most popular at your school, but when you get a breather, you may want to ask around and/or do some reading about alternatives. When you’re gnashing your teeth about grading, it’s comforting to know that old timers do that too—I go through what my wife calls “the week of sighs” at the end of the semester when I have to come up with final grades. Read Elbow on “Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking” or James D. Williams on peer-based holistic grading (317-328) or Stephen Tchudi’s book on alternative grading methods. You may find a method that appeals to your personality and fits your situation.
Grading, Attendance, and Other Pains-in-the-Butt

Figure 6
Brock’s Grade Book

Names: Wait until the third or fourth class meeting to write students’ names in your grade book. Otherwise, you’ll have cross-outs and names out of order. Take the time to write the names clearly and include nicknames. In a couple of years, when a former student asks you for a recommendation, you’ll need all the precise, memory-jogging help you can get. Use the whole gradebook page; if you can give each student two or three lines, all the better.

Attendance: If you quietly record attendance at the beginning of every class, you won’t need to remind students that it matters to you. Note lateness, too, in this column.

Participation: As soon as possible after class, note everyone who contributed for that day, so you have a relatively objective basis for participation grades.

Grades: Obviously every time you give a grade for a paper or presentation, it needs to go in your book. If you grade two versions of the same paper, will you cross out one and squeeze the other in, or record them in separate columns?

Paper Content: Even if you keep a separate log of each paper and its strengths and weaknesses, record each paper’s contents in shorthand in your gradebook.

Participation Estimate: At the end of the semester, before I add up the times a student has participated, I jot down my general sense of how that student has contributed. I don’t like basing the participation grade solely on my memory of who talked on what days. I may forget to note participation on days when a particular student speaks up, or the student may carry a discussion one day and then be silent for a week, and I want to leave room to reward participation quality, not just quantity.

Participation Number: Make sure all crucial grade calculations appear in your gradebook, in case you need to go back months later and reconstruct a grade.
Here, add up the student's participation checkmarks (and perhaps subtract participation minuses if the student was disruptive).

*Participation Grade:* I reconcile the last two columns and come up with an overall participation grade *(my version of checks and balances).* At the top of this column, and every other column that has a direct bearing on the final grade, put the percentage that this number contributes to the final grade.

*Total Points:* If you give points for each assignment, you’ll need a column in which to total the points before you convert them to a letter grade. Even when I’ve given everything a letter grade, I usually convert all the grades to numbers so I can easily compare students’ overall performance.

*Brownie Points:* As objective as we might want to be, every teacher is affected by factors that are difficult to put into numbers—attitude, effort, and improvement, for instance. I sum up such factors, as well as attendance, in this column.

*Final Grade:* Make sure you label this column clearly. It’s embarrassing to return to last year’s grades and not be able to tell instantly which is the crucial one.

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**Use Pencil**

It erases. Read over and correct your comments before you turn the papers back. You don’t want to sound as foolish as the professor who wrote on a student paper, “proffreading is important.” Also, we don’t want to add to the generations of student writers who have been turned off by teachers’ “bleeding” on their papers in red ink.

**Keep Tabs**

Keep as much information on students as you can. Either in a grade-book, on a computer, or on a sheet you construct for the purpose, list all the students in the class and keep track of things like

- the subject, length, and grade of each paper
- attendance
- participation
- lateness (to class or with papers)
- a few strengths and major weaknesses of the papers
- number, type, and effectiveness of all revisions
- grades, even those estimates you may be forced to give orally
After you teach for a few semesters, you’ll know which bits of information you actually make use of, and you can stop gathering the worthless stuff. Having data to support our grading and classroom management decisions can make us feel confident and reduce worries about grade gripes.

Don’t Estimate

Students will want you to take a quick look—or even a long look—at a paper and give them an estimated grade; after a discussion of a draft’s strengths and weaknesses, they’ll ask, as they stand up, “So what grade would you give this?” Don’t fall for it. I always regret giving out estimates. Say “At least a D” or “It’ll pass” if you want. I wouldn’t be surprised to find that “reading to respond” and “grading” use two different parts of the brain; they’re two different functions, two different approaches to a paper. When I’m reading a draft to respond to, I’m trying to find what works, what can be built on, and I often ignore the obvious problems. But when grading, I can’t ignore those problems.

Don’t Make Spot Decisions about Grades

Students sometimes challenge grades on papers or for the whole course and want you to reconsider the grade on the spot. In the pressure of the moment, it’s easy to say “Ok, I’ll raise it,” or to give a blanket “No.” I’ve made mistakes in both directions. Saying that you’ll reread the paper(s) and reconsider the grade almost always mollifies the student. I find that when I’m uncomfortable with a grade, I spend so much time rethinking it that I want to reread the paper to become sure enough of the grade that I’ll stop losing sleep over it.

Beware of Responding Defensively

I know this one intimately because I’m still very susceptible to it myself. If you worry too much about students’ challenging the grades they get on their papers, you will concentrate your reading and probably your response on the reasons the grade isn’t higher—the paper’s shortcomings. But it’s bad pedagogy to mention more than two or three weaknesses in your response, and you always want to mix the criticism with praise. If you have reason to believe that the student may challenge the grade, keep a record for yourself (i.e., not on the paper) of the 101 other reasons it didn’t earn an A, and bring it out only if you have to.

Grade Both Relatively and Absolutely

Don’t imagine you’ll find the one perfect, “objective” grade, but work toward a grade you feel comfortable with. “Don’t be objective; be fair,”
Murray counsels. Your own standards and priorities will evolve, and, to encourage that process while you’re grading your first sets of papers, you might want to start sketching out your own particular way of grading.

I like to have a sense of absolute standards—the paper I’m giving a B-minus would be mediocre no matter where I encountered it, no matter who judged it. But after I’ve developed preliminary grades based on my sense of the paper’s absolute worth, I often put all the papers in piles from A’s to D’s and then skim through, asking if these three A-minuses have equivalent strengths and weaknesses and whether the errorless bullshitting argument truly deserves more credit than the heartfelt but barely literate personal essay.

You’ll also eventually need to calibrate your grades against others’ and make sure your average isn’t radically different from everyone else’s. Your writing program may hold such calibration sessions during staff meetings or orientations, when everyone will grade and discuss a few papers. But for the time being, be content to work on internal consistency.

**Be Flexible in Responding to Grammar**

I used to refuse to give above a C-plus to any final draft that contained a sentence fragment or a comma splice. At the time, I felt a bit righteous about having “high standards,” but I now think I punished some good writers unfairly. Is “unimaginative research, no idea, and excellent polish” necessarily better than “good research, interesting idea, and poor grammar”? Such uncertainty has led me to favor holistic grading—a grade applied to the whole interacting mishmash of factors—rather than attempt to break the process down into individually graded parts. You can’t ignore grammar errors—at least not many, not at the college level—and yet you have to avoid turning into a grammar cop. In the large grey area between those extremes, most of us feel our way toward a grading intuition. We need to keep monitoring our reaction to mechanics and make sure we’re not just reenacting what our own teachers did to us.

**Grade a Paper’s Risk or Degree of Difficulty**

Sometime in your first semester, you’re likely to encounter a paper that seems flawless—tight, polished, errorless writing that fulfills the assignment—but says nothing, goes nowhere. There’s nothing “wrong” with it, so you have trouble not giving it an A, but how can you give it a top mark when others in the class have done so much more with their papers?
To head off such problems, I always include a “degree of difficulty” or “risk” factor in my assignment descriptions or grading rubric. Students have no problem with the concept (most have watched Olympic diving or gymnastics), but they may never have encountered it in a writing class. I usually mention a couple of examples to get the idea across—should a flawlessly written paper describing how to bake a cake from a mix get the same grade as a flawed but provocative essay that sets forth an original peace plan for the Middle East? Make sure you talk about this issue before students choose their topics, so they don’t automatically fixate on the simplest and most manageable topic.

Don’t Get Caught in the Time Trap

Teachers tend to be sensitive, sympathetic souls, and we don’t want to treat our students the way some professionals treat us, with a minimum of time and attention. With that mind set we end up agonizing and guilt-tripping ourselves whenever we ponder not rereading the fifth draft quite as carefully or not writing another two-page note to a student who didn’t learn from the last one.

It’s very easy to overwhelm students’ capacity to accept and use even positive, constructive criticism. Two good sentences about a paper’s key strength and key weakness may be more helpful than two pages, and the student will almost certainly greet them with more enthusiasm. Similarly, very few people have the strength to look at every marginal comment and correction on a well-marked-up paper. And students value a quick response at least as much as they value an accurate grade or a sensitive comment.

So what does this mean in terms of hours and minutes? How long should it take you to grade a batch of five-page papers? I’ve never seen a study that asked that question, so I can only guess. If you’re just grading, no comments, I think you could handle six to twelve papers per hour. Grading and writing comments takes me twenty minutes per paper minimum—and often much longer. But remember, no one else has any way of gauging the time you spend on a paper. So there’s nothing wrong with skimming a paper that you’ve already read and coming up with a quick grade.

Separate the Personal from the Academic

If you give students control over the subjects they choose to write about (something I strongly advocate), you’ll inevitably face a heart-wrenching paper about death, desire, or divorce and you may find yourself saying, “I know this incident forever changed your life, but—as a paper—it’s a D.” If
I have a chance to communicate with a student about such a paper before I have to grade it, I ask, “Do you want just to talk about this subject, or do you want to deal with this as a paper?” Often the student volunteers that it isn’t much of a paper but he or she just needed to write about it. If the student asks to deal with it as a paper, you can talk about coherence and transitions without feeling callous.

If I don’t have a chance to give feedback, I may refuse to grade the paper, giving the student credit for it but saying, “It would demean this subject to criticize this paper.” In almost every case, the student wants, first, to have the importance of the subject recognized. Once you do that successfully, you can discuss grading issues with less trauma.

**Accept Grading’s Subjectivity**

The subjectivity of responses to writing and the lack of universally accepted and assessable goals and standards worry both students and teachers. Students complain, “She just didn’t like my style,” and teachers worry, “How can I justify giving this one a B-minus and that one a C-plus?”

Some schools seek to avoid the subjectivity of grading by using exit exams or having teachers grade other teachers’ students. I’m not going to discuss those options because there’s little chance that you will have any choice about whom you grade. I mistrust such systems because they treat our subjectivity, the humanness of the bond between comp teacher and student, as a problem rather than an opportunity, a weakness to be avoided rather than a strength to be exploited.

To my mind, the relationship between student writer and writing teacher resembles all the other important writing relationships a writer must deal with—student/professor, writer/editor, employee/boss. We write almost nothing for a general, objective, faceless audience. Instead, we write for multiple audiences—usually ourselves and maybe some idealized “general audience”—but most particularly for the one person who will pass judgment or take action on the piece of writing.

So rather than being an ivory-tower anomaly, the writing teacher/student relationship resembles all writing relationships, with one important difference—the writing student can learn about writing relationships in a way that an employee is unlikely to learn from a boss, or a writer from an editor. The writing student can plumb the teacher’s priorities and standards, negotiate form and content, and learn from all the interactions between writer and audience, interactions which, outside of the writing class, tend to be hidden from view. The student may find it irritating to have to conform to the teacher’s eccentricities, but doing so will prepare
the student for the eccentricities of other important audiences in other “discourse communities” less likely than the writing teacher to have reasons for their biases and to be willing and able to articulate them.

Therefore, my advice to those worried about their subjectivity is to engage students in a discussion of the subjectivity of audiences—they will almost certainly have stories about Teacher X demanding one thing and Teacher Y something quite different. Help students see that the two teachers did not want opposite or contradictory elements in a paper; they probably both worked from a similar list of “elements of good writing.” That one might put “creativity” at the top of the list and the other “polished surface” should neither surprise nor disturb us. Discuss the complexities of writing for multiple audiences and be as clear and open as possible about what you as a teacher look for in papers. If you’re a stickler about spelling, format, or comma splices, say so. I believe that just about any grading emphasis can be justified if the teacher explains the emphasis to students. As former NCTE president Victor Villanueva (2002) says,

Grading is based on a Platonic sense that we know good texts when we see them. This is every bit as subjective as students accuse it of being. A teacher must establish his or her criteria and subjective quirks from the outset and remain consistent. (100)

Don’t be embarrassed about your subjective reactions to students. Recognize that the personal, subjective bond you develop with students allows you to personalize your pedagogy, to be more human and less like a Scantron, and to help students study and understand the kind of writing relationship that will probably never be as transparent for them again. (See “In Defense of Subjective Grading” in Appendix D.)

GRADING DIALOGUES

I’m setting up the next section of this chapter as a dialogue between two voices because these issues are complex, and I don’t want to pretend that there’s a right way to handle them. Every teacher reaches a slightly different point of stability within these dialogues. But I will mention my own default way of handling these situations, in case you don’t have time at the moment to bother with the complexities and want something approximating an answer right now.

Should we grade improvement and effort?

Yes.
• If we don’t grade improvement and effort, only English majors may get top grades.

• Students who improve but still don’t receive good grades get discouraged.

• We should encourage advancements in process, skills, and attitudes, not just ability to complete assignments well.

No.

• It’s almost impossible to judge how one student’s effort compares to another’s, and gauging improvement is almost as difficult.

• It’s a shame to discourage untalented writers, but it’s even worse to punish writers just because they wrote well before the semester began.

• We can and should analyze and work to improve writers’ processes, but ultimately the best measure of the process is the product, and it would be crazy to punish a good writer for having created a product in an unconventional way, even if “unconventional” here means “seemingly without effort or improvement.”

Default: Grade the product, but make students aware that effort and improvement affect the “fudge factor.”

Should we maintain the same writing standards throughout the semester instead of raising the bar higher as writers improve?

Yes. Standards should be consistent throughout.

• Students need to deal with a realistic assessment of their abilities. Realism may discourage some, but it may light motivational fires under others. An early A may give some students the false impression that they can just cruise through the semester.

• While it may be psychologically difficult for both student and teacher to face a low grade in September, it’s more important to feel in December the satisfaction of improvement.

• I wouldn’t want to explain to a student that a paper that earned an A in September gets only a B-minus in December.

• You can avoid discouraging students by not grading early papers, or by grading them and emphasizing the chances for revising the grade upward.
No. Grade easy at first.

- High early grades make students enjoy writing more and increase the likelihood that they will put time and energy into it.
- The worst thing we can do to struggling writers (about 98% of the population) is give them a grade early in the semester that says “you can’t do this.”
- Grading easy at first doesn’t mean you’re a pushover for the course. There’s plenty of time in a grading period to raise the bar.
- We can start off lenient in specific ways—like not counting off for mechanical errors—and then get tougher as time goes on.

Default: Work for consistency.

Should we grade class participation?

Yes. And we should let students know what we’re grading and why participation is so crucial to their learning:

- Students can often learn as much from other students as from the teacher; a silent student receives but doesn’t give.
- When students ask questions and get answers, or make statements and get feedback, they tend to remember the whole discussion much better than if they just listen.
- A relatively small composition class may provide the best chance that normally shy students will ever have to change their image; if they leave college still timid about speaking in public, they may find themselves too often sitting silently in corners.
- People who assert themselves in class get practice which should help them assert themselves in their writing and education.

No. We shouldn’t grade participation because

- We’re all liable to see and count some kinds of participation and miss others, like small-group work.
- We should encourage multiple forms of participation, possibly including shared journals, that could substitute for traditional discussion participation.
- Some terminally shy students would be so stressed by a participation requirement that they might drop the class.
• We’re not teaching public speaking. You get those classes in the Communication department.

Default: I grade participation, but it can also fit easily in the “fudge factor” category.

Should we take and grade attendance?
Yes.

• In an ideal world, students would come because they’re fascinated, but the lure of the Game Cube is always going to beat us out.
• Absences change the class dynamic; if the group gets too small, the teacher and the remaining students have to work hard to keep the energy level up.
• Every English class is at least partially about process and methods, not about facts that can be memorized and tested. Not counting attendance makes as little sense as not counting an exam.
• In any course, students learn how to be “good students,” a step toward being “good employees.” We don’t do students any favors by making college a “no fault” zone where you show up when you feel like it.

No.

• Grading attendance is high school stuff, an insult to both teachers and students.
• Some students argue that if they do the required paperwork for the class, there’s no justification for their having to sit there as well.
• Grading attendance gets us into the sticky moral and practical territory of judging whether a grandparent’s funeral is a better excuse than a faulty alarm clock or strep throat.
• We should make each day interesting enough, and important enough to the overall course, so students don’t have to be coerced to come.

Default: Make attendance part of your “fudge factor” and/or outline a vague but potentially severe missed-classes penalty in your syllabus, like my “missing more than 3 classes will lower your final grade.” And I would
add to that “or being frequently late.” Tardy students are more disruptive than absent ones because they make you wonder whether you should start the class again or fill them in. Other students notice if you tolerate lateness, and the problem can become an epidemic.

Should we grade everything?

Yes.

• Because many students pay attention only to graded assignments, any serious assignment has to carry a grade.

• The more information we can give students about our grading priorities and standards, the better. And the more grades they get, the more they know about how they’re doing, the less surprised they’ll be at the end.

• It usually takes less time to come up with a grade than to write comments, and a grade may communicate more.

No.

• Why spend the time, when students hate being battered by grades anyway? And responding without a grade is much easier on the teacher psychologically.

• Students need to accept that writing has intrinsic value even without a grade attached.

• Usually we can make the ungraded material into necessary steps leading to the graded material.

Default: For homework or journals, just record who did it. Grade everything else that’s not officially designated “rough draft,” but don’t feel you have to come up with letters or numbers. “Check,” “plus,” and “minus” are useful as well, and for papers that can be revised, let students know that the grades can be revised as well.

Should we grade drafts as well as the final paper?

Yes.

• If you don’t grade early drafts, students won’t take them seriously.

• A grade is the one unambiguous part of your response. Good teachers always find something to praise in a draft, but students may misconstrue that praise to mean “an A for sure.”
• Students get antsy if they don’t get grades until the end of the semester.

No.

• We shouldn’t let grades interfere with learning until absolutely necessary.

• We can give students the option of having their drafts graded; most won’t take it.

• Grading is much more stressful than responding; why start that stress early?

Default: Grade an early draft, but do it quickly, grade low, and make it count only 1/4 of the paper’s total grade.

_Do we grade the person?_ Consider life history, effort, enthusiasm, and improvement, unavoidable drains on the student’s energy, the effect the grade might have on the student’s motivation and future?

Yes.

• To be fair, we must look at background and previous experience to judge a student’s work in the class.

• We shouldn’t be slaves to numbers, denying a student the crucial A because the numbers don’t quite justify it. Often, ignoring the arithmetic is the most fair, humane, and pedagogically sound thing to do.

• Grades don’t measure anything perfectly and always have political elements and political effects. So we don’t _make_ a grade political by, for instance, giving a break to a good student who needs a certain GPA to get a scholarship. We just change the political equation slightly.

No.

• We can’t possibly grade “the person” fairly. We know the life stories of some students and nothing about others. How can we determine which lives deserve breaks?

• Giving extra points for particularly helpful or enthusiastic students brings elements into the grading mix not listed in the syllabus. And it encourages students to be suck-ups.
• In the long run, doing students favors with grades does not help them. You might be tempted to give a break to particularly good writers, but they need to learn the lesson of deadlines the same as anyone else. For her own good, the brilliant procrastinator may need to get the B she really earned instead of the A that many teachers would give her by bending the rules.

Default: Be able to justify any grade with calculations, but if your gut gives you a strong message about a student’s grade, fudge the numbers a little so the calculations agree with your instinct.

Should we worry about grade inflation?

Yes.

• Grade inflation punishes the outstanding students. If mediocrity gets an A, brilliance goes unrewarded. We need to remind both ourselves and our students that most universities define C as average or competent work—no real problems but no outstanding features either.

• The administration—“they”—might care. I’ve had wonderful colleagues who routinely gave everyone A’s and went on to live productive lives. But I never knew how seriously to take their students’ enthusiastic evaluations.

• It can be embarrassing when the press gets hold of the stuff that passes, or gets an “A,” in our classes. A “B” should mean something.

No.

• We want to encourage revision by grading final drafts, and revision inevitably leads to higher grades.

• Any college student should be capable of turning C-plus writing into B work over the course of a semester, and we don’t want to punish everyone in a class just because many of them did the necessary work.

• A writing teacher can encourage with a high grade and save the constructive criticism for comments.

Default: Don’t worry about grade inflation now. Try to make sure you give a range of grades on the first paper, and at some point you’ll need
to do some cross-grading with others to make sure your grades aren’t too far from your school’s norm.

**COVER YOUR ASS**

We write mostly, I fear, to cover our butts, to provide documentation or support in case of future challenges, whether lawsuits from customers or dunning notes from the boss. You may be getting a Master’s in English because you want to write novels or critical theory, but you will actually devote much of your keyboard time to more mundane writing tasks performed primarily to prove that you did it. And, sorry, I’m not going to encourage you to fight city hall and ignore all that “busywork.” On the contrary, since I aim to help you worry less about your teaching, I encourage you to CYA in as many ways as possible at the beginning, then perhaps reduce the paper volume as you become more experienced and more adept at solving problems spontaneously. So how do you CYA?

**What to Get in Writing**

**Syllabus**

I detailed in Chapter 2 and earlier in this chapter the things I put in every syllabus. As you make up yours, do some soul-searching and figure out what rules really matter to you. Anything you don’t get into the syllabus will be hard to enforce later. Do you feel strongly about attendance, tardiness, deadlines, offensive language, plagiarism, participation, group work? Put your feelings and requirements in writing. You can always back off and bend later if you want.

**Assignments**

Whether or not you make assignment descriptions part of the syllabus, for your sake you need to put these things in writing: dates (of first drafts and revisions), page limits, format requirements, content requirements. Assume nothing. Yes, you’d think that anyone writing a “response to literature” paper would know that they’re supposed to talk about some literature, but . . . . Unless your students are much better than mine, you will never create an assignment description clear enough and thorough enough to make sense to everyone. But if you put the crucial parts of the assignment in writing, you’ll at least be able to point to them when a student says, “But you never told me . . .”
Plagiarism Statements

When I began teaching, discussions about student plagiarism involved mostly shame and pleas for mercy. Now, perhaps because plagiarism has become so commonplace at the highest levels, students may respond to a plagiarism charge with “So?” or “You didn’t tell me that was wrong” or “Talk to my lawyer.”

This kind of attitude means every writing teacher must have a clear and detailed definition of plagiarism in the syllabus. But for many teachers, that isn’t enough. When, in the process of prosecuting a plagiarism case, the questions arise, “Did the student know what the word ‘plagiarism’ means?” and “Did the student promise not to plagiarize?,” teachers may need written proof that they can answer “yes” to both. Some of my colleagues include fill-in-the-blank plagiarism statements in their course packets and require that students sign and turn in a statement with every paper. Others have students read a definition of plagiarism, or go through plagiarism exercises (many publishers now provide them on book-related websites), or sign a blanket statement indicating their understanding and promising not to plagiarize throughout the semester.

Doing such things will seem to be a time-wasting pain early in the semester. But if your students do cheat, you’ll be very glad you put in the effort. Your institution probably has established ways of dealing with plagiarism. Find out. (See Chapter 9 for more on plagiarism.)

Changes

Very few students will complain if you push back a paper due date, but you probably need to document and perhaps even get students’ signatures on other substantial changes in requirements, assignments, grading, and deadlines.

Special Exceptions and Excuses

I generally believe what students tell me; I don’t want to investigate whether their grandmother really did die or make a traumatic situation more difficult by asking for a doctor’s note confirming the “procedure.” But you should make clear in your syllabus that anyone who expects to be excused for absences—primarily for athletic events and other school-sanctioned activities—should present you with a written schedule of when they will be gone. And you might want to make a form for them to sign each time they’re going to be absent, indicating why they will be gone,
taking responsibility for making up the work, and stating when they will turn in any assignments that will come due while they’re away. (Many teachers will accept such “missed” assignments only if they’re turned in before the student leaves for the activity.) You might teach for years without ever seeing much value in such forms, but then you may run into an athlete who uses the “I’ve got practice” excuse to miss class after class.

When you make exceptions, try to do so in writing—perhaps by emailing the student and sending a copy to yourself. You won’t remember by the end of the semester whether you excused the student for one day (as you think you did) or indefinitely, as the student claims.

What to Document

Besides creating your own paperwork to try to prevent—or give yourself the best defense against—student complaints, you should get in the habit of keeping copies of all relevant documents whenever a problem seems to be brewing. That means, when dealing with possible plagiarism, keeping a copy of the original paper, any sources you turn up, any plagiarism statements the student has read or signed, emails or notes you or the student writes.

Plagiarism probably creates the greatest need, but other issues should be documented as well. Keep notes on all inappropriate comments, especially sexual ones, and save any letters or notes that students send you. Sexual harassment is not dead on campus, and it can be very frustrating to know you’ve been harassed but not to have all the evidence because at first the harassing comments seemed trivial. Many campus disability or equal opportunity offices now insist that students be given special accommodations only if they present the teacher with signed paperwork from those offices. No one wants individual teachers trying to judge whether a learning disability or medical problem justifies exemptions or accommodations.

Require students to put any official business in writing as well. “Asking a student to write a one-page explanation of why a paper deserves a higher grade is a technique that both discourages shallow challenges and encourages introspection and analysis” (Wilkerson 11), and the same holds true for most complaints. You can defuse some tense moments with students by insisting that the discussion shift to paper.

What Not to Sign

Especially during the first few weeks, students will crowd your desk after class wanting you to sign things, principally add and drop forms.
While I can’t see any harm in letting someone drop—it’s not our job to argue with students about priorities or remind them they can’t complete their major without our course—be very wary of signing anyone into your class. At some schools, the teacher has complete control of the roll; at others, like my own, the computer has control, and if I—or students—try to bypass the computer’s control with a signature, the computer will ignore me and double-book the opening in my class. So this is another good time for “let me get back to you.” Ask someone how the system works.

What to Tell the Boss

As a writing administrator, I would like to think that my colleagues trust me and see me as a problem-solver, not a problem-creator. But I know that the teachers on my staff don’t want to bother me with trivia and hesitate to mention to me problems that might put them in a bad light. Administrators certainly appreciate teachers who can handle their own problems, but at the same time, they don’t like learning about a student’s unhappiness when a parent or the university’s lawyer calls. So part of CYA is FYI—sending copies of memos and emails to your immediate boss when you think there’s any chance that the boss might eventually become involved in the situation. That means making copies for your boss of any correspondence involving grade disputes, plagiarism, or other cheating; responses to students’ claims of discrimination or unfairness; documentation of students’ disruptive or unruly behavior; and other special cases.

Any time you talk to a veteran writing teacher, think about expanding this chapter, adding the tips that you glean from the conversation. But don’t accept uncritically the advice offered. Teaching is a system of interrelated issues, and the DNA of that system is you. The system is and should be a reflection of you. So you may not know if a piece of advice will work for you until you try it out or think through how it fits with the rest of your practice and philosophy.