

University of Houston Teaching Conference 2012  
*Writing Fellow Panel: Plotting the Course*

**MAKING THE GRADE**

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Perhaps no topic is as subjective and idiosyncratic as grading. It's the 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 my general rubric:

<p style="text-align:center"><b><u>A</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Succeeds in all elements of the assignment</li><li>• Excels in at least one element</li><li>• Contains clear and elegant prose</li></ul>
<p style="text-align:center"><b><u>B</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Succeeds in most or all elements of the assignment</li><li>• Contains mostly clear prose</li></ul>
<p style="text-align:center"><b><u>C</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Attempts to accomplish all elements of the assignment</li><li>• Contains mostly sensible prose (though some effort might be required to decipher meaning)</li></ul>
<p style="text-align:center"><b><u>D</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fails in one or more elements of the assignment</li><li>• Contains nonsensical prose</li></ul>
<p style="text-align:center"><b><u>F</u></b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Fails in all elements of the assignment, including possibly length</li><li>• Contains large sections of nonsensical prose</li></ul>

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. In fall 2012, the average mark on my first essay was a C+, then a B-, then a B. At the end of the semester, grade boosters like reading quizzes, participation and revision portfolios are 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.