

Marking - providing grades/letters/values and feedback on written assignments - is often time consuming and disliked by instructors all over the world! Grading excellent assignments can be affirming and positive experiences, but it is time consuming when assignments are poorly written, with weak sentence and paragraph structures, incorrect mechanics and unclear expression of ideas and concepts. If you have complex marking tools or are unsure what and how much to mark, you can spend more time than you need to be engaged in the grading process.

Marking can eat up as much time as you want to give it, but the results may not be any better for the extra time you have spent. Providing feedback on many written assignments can leave you exhausted and discouraged. New instructors often fall into a grading trap, where far too much of their time is spent marking. They often think they are not doing their job without lots of marking, or they want to ensure they can stand behind the mark if it is contested.

Or instructors think that spending long hours is a way to honour the work students put into their assignments or they want to provide lots of feedback to help them grow as writers. Sometimes after marked assignments have been returned, there may be some students wanting either to contest the grade, or understand why they got a particular grade, which takes up even more of the instructor's time. Schinske and Tanner's essay (2017) - [Teaching More by Grading Less \(or Differently\)](#) - points out that instructors' fear of grading can often inhibit them from trying new learning activities and being innovative in the classroom!

**Stop the insanity!** With some planning, preparation, and sound practices, marking a written assignment can go smoothly and efficiently, provide good learning opportunities for the students and good information for the instructor about the student learning (or lack of) taking place. Instructors do not need to choose between superficial and minimal grading or a complex grading system that leaves you exhausted. With the right strategies and techniques, you can give your students frequent and useful feedback, while still maintaining a healthy balance between work and personal life.

The following chart is a collection of suggestions for being a more efficient educator when marking or grading (and giving feedback) on written assignments (research papers, essays, reports, reflective pieces etc.) In the left column are short statements about inefficient practices and the right column has suggestions for a more efficient way of grading/marking written papers.

Recommended comprehensive resources on grading effectively with written assignments:

- **How to Grade Less, Grade Faster, and Be a Better Teacher of Writing** (Bates College – Maine) | [Webpage](#)
- **Responding to Student Papers Effectively and Efficiently** (University of Toronto - Ontario) | [Webpage](#)
- **Marking Efficiently for Written Assignments** (University of Alberta - Alberta) | [YouTube Video](#)
- **How to Grade Faster in 2020** (Deborah J. Cohan) | [Inside Higher Ed Article](#)
- **“How Did I Spend Two Hours Grading this Paper?!” Responding to Student Writing without Losing Your Life** (Eric LeMay, Harvard University) | [Essays on Teaching Excellence POD Network](#)

# Assignment Design and Due Dates

Inefficient Practices	Efficient Practices
<p><b>1. Assign too many assignments within a course and/or within a program area</b></p>	<p>Start with your course learning outcomes and align each outcome to one or two opportunities for students to demonstrate that outcome. If each learning outcome has one or two student opportunities, then there is no need for more assignments or assessment.</p> <p>Also look at the assignments in each term/semester to determine workload for one student in many classes. Less is more. Fewer (expertly on-point and well-designed) assignments are better than many detailed assignments. Dropping assignments means less to grade and doesn't mean the learning experience is compromised.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Check out the <a href="#"><i>Workload Estimator</i></a> from Rice University: focus on the written assignments section to get a quick idea how much work you are assigning to students.</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. Students have no examples or exemplars to know what is expected of them</b></p>	<p>Provide students with an example of a high quality, top marks example of the writing assignment either with permission from a student (name removed) or create a 'fake' exemplar. Ask them to examine the exemplar as it relates to the criteria for the assignment and identify the characteristics that make it a good example. Do the same with a B-level and a C-level exemplar. Involve groups of students discussing which might be the better written assignment vs. the poorer one. This helps students in so many ways to submit a better written paper and therefore less time to grade and provide feedback.</p>
<p><b>3. Written assignment length is too long, detailed, and too much writing is expected of students to demonstrate learning outcome</b></p>	<p>Shorten up the length of writing required for submission and thus this will be less to read, review and evaluate. Often shorter and more concise writing assignments are more challenging for students to do and can still provide adequate evidence of student demonstration of learning outcome.</p> <p>The place to start with being more efficient is redesign and rethink your assignments. In fact, having tighter/shorter assignments that are focused on one or two key criteria - and are fast to assess - is more valuable a learning experience for students and could be less work for you.</p>
<p><b>4. Focus too much on citation formats (APA, MLA format) punctuation and style</b></p>	<p>Pick one assignment per term per program or one assignment per course that you may assess citation formats in a more critical way and focus on other elements of writing the rest of the time. Or if in a multi-year program focus on citation formats later in semesters/years and use the earlier years/semesters to focus in on writing formats, style, tone, and expression of ideas.</p>

# Assignment Design and Due Dates

Inefficient Practices	Efficient Practices
<p><b>5. No statement in your course outline or first class about the purpose and plan for grading, evaluating, and providing feedback</b></p>	<p>Put a statement in your course outline and share with students the purpose and plan for providing feedback to them on their written assignments. Specifically, whether you are going to focus more on feedback than grades and give them X amount of time etc.</p>
<p><b>6. Value of written assignment is not clearly outlined and may not be aligned with learning outcomes</b></p>	<p>Often written assignments have been in a course for years or have not been challenged in terms of removal or editing. These assignments may not be seen of value to the learners or the instructors - and may not align with course learning outcomes. Any attempt at grading or marking the work is fraught with frustration because neither student nor instructor values the assignment. Ditch the assignment. There is no expectation on the NIC ACDs that you need to keep an assignment from year to year.</p>
<p><b>7. All comments, feedback and marking comes from the instructor all the time</b></p>	<p>Build metacognitive and reflective opportunities for students to provide their own self-assessment to a written assignment, submitting at same time as assignment etc. This will put the onus on them to self-assess against the criteria provide insightful comments and assessments that you can home in when grading their papers. AND/OR allow for peers to provide feedback on draft versions or the final version before it is submitted via learning how to give helpful feedback aligning with exemplars etc.</p>
<p><b>8. No draft version opportunity for peer or brief instructor review</b></p>	<p>Include a draft version in your process for either peer (students in the class providing feedback to each other based on criteria) or instructor feedback to address key topics or areas. This allows the student to have some input on making their final version more robust and likely with less issues. <a href="#"><u>Research Article Summary of Findings</u></a></p> <p><i>The assessment consisted of submitting a draft coursework essay, which was discussed and evaluated face-to-face with the course teacher before a self-reflective piece was written about the assessment process and a final essay was submitted for summative grading. We evidence that this process asserted a positive influence on the student learning experience in a number of inter-related cognitive and affective ways, impacting positively upon learning behaviour, supporting student achievement and raising student satisfaction with feedback.</i></p>
<p><b>9. Submission late in the term so no opportunity to have feedback to improve work within course</b></p>	<p>Make writing assignments with your feedback due earlier in the term so students can take that feedback and apply it. Any writing assignments due later in the term do not get feedback or intensive marking on them. Not worth your time to comment when students can't apply your feedback within the next few weeks.</p>

## Marking Plans, Schemes, Tools, and Practices

Inefficient Practices	Efficient Practices
<b>10. Write comments / feedback on ALL pages of the written assignment</b>	Read the whole written assignment but correct and line edit <i>only a few paragraphs or pages</i> . Leave the rest unmarked. Add a final comment. You can also do ' <u>minimal marking</u> ' by just putting a mark or symbol in front of all the sentences that need correcting and ask the students to follow up with corrections as part of the grade or just an expectation of passing the course. Correcting every grammar, content and written error is YOU doing the work of the student!
<b>11. Return work a significant amount of time after the students have submitted the written assignment</b>	If you are returning work to students two weeks or more then you have not been efficient with your time in giving feedback as that will mean less now to students so far removed from when they submitted the assignment. The sooner you can get things back to students with concise and direct feedback, the more effective it will be for them to improve their work and learn from your feedback.
<b>12. Start with one assignment and marking one after another</b>	Try skimming/reading ALL the written assignments first. Put into three piles (digitally this can be done by making a list and writing student names in one of three sections) - Very good/excellent (A), Good/Satisfactory (B/C) and Poor (C-/D). This is called holistic reading and it can often save a lot of time in knowing what you are going to be marking and how the whole class has done.
<b>13. Marking / grading takes hours per each assignment</b>	Set a time limit of X minutes to grade a paper (e.g., 15 - 20 minutes) and do as much as you can in that time and then stop and grade another paper. Giving a set amount of time helps you manage the workload in marking and ensures each student gets a fair amount of your time to comment and grade. Ensure your grading tools can be quickly accessed and support student learning.
<b>14. Use complex and detailed rubrics for marking written assignments</b>	Use a <u>single-point</u> (one column) rubric or a checklist. <a href="#">Article</a>   <a href="#">Details</a> Rubrics do not always save time and with the vagueness of qualifiers/descriptors per each category it becomes challenging to make an objective decision. Rubrics with many rows/categories of criteria just take a long time to go through. Focus on a couple of key elements to evaluate and ditch the complex rubrics.
<b>15. Adjust marking scheme to be the same as the weighted percentage mark</b>	DO NOT inflate or deflate your scoring schemes to align with the weighted total for the whole course. You are making more work for yourself either taking a scoring scheme up or down and creating errors in the way you are representing student learning. Use Brightspace assignments with the total points you need to score and grade the written work and then let the grade item in Grades do the conversion for you!

## Marking Plans, Schemes, Tools, and Practices

Inefficient Practices	Efficient Practices
<b>16. Grade knowing the student's name</b>	Try grading anonymously. You might save some time in not going into specific detail with one student or another. This injects a good dose of reducing some bias, but it can also save time as you are focusing more on the written assignment and not the student.
<b>17. Mark all assignments after common due date</b>	Consider staggering the due date for various groups of students so that you are not marking all at the same time and get more efficient with marking in batches over a few weeks. This 'chunking' practice also means you have fresher eyes for student work. This helps prevent the 'laundry issue' where ungraded paper pile up like dirty laundry when neglected.
<b>18. Detailed or out of date marking schemes that are adding to workload</b>	If you have a marking scheme that takes time - try revising it. Checklists are quick and fast ways to give feedback and mark a written assignment. Single point rubrics with a few items to look at can give you a quick rating opportunity with the ability to add a + or - if the work was above or below the required expectations.
<b>19. Provide only individual feedback to students</b>	Consider writing a class summary of all the common errors along with where outstanding work was done. This will prevent you from writing the same comment every time on each assignment. Saves time!
<b>20. Students email submissions or instructor downloads digital documents from a LMS</b>	Using the assignments tool in Brightspace can speed up your time by more easily managing who has submitted and who hasn't. If you specify you can have students submit document formats (e.g., PDF) that are readable within Brightspace and then you can use a simple rubric or your own marking scheme to grade and submit feedback back to students. And you can also use the audio/video to share short feedback digitally - saving oodles of time!

## Feedback Content, Focus and Practices

Inefficient Practices	Efficient Practices
<b>21. Repeatedly comment on persistent issues or errors</b>	One and done! If you see repeats of errors just mention once and put a notation beside other similar errors to indicate the same error. Don't keep wasting your time commenting on the same error!
<b>22. Comment on all the problem areas</b>	Select one to three key problem areas in a student's written assignment and ONLY comment on those. Not all the areas. This will help you cut down on time but also focus the students on key areas that they need to improve upon.
<b>23. Feedback from previous iterations of assignment is not available or shared</b>	If there is a written assignment you typically give each year, why not share some common challenges and areas of success students typically have with the assignment. You might share group feedback suggestions you gave in previous year or share samples of student work with permission.
<b>24. Weaker writing assignments require more mark up and feedback</b>	DO NOT fall into the trap of taking longer to grade weaker assignments. Just do the first few pages and then put a comment on there to tell students to come and see you.
<b>25. Provide only written feedback to students</b>	<p>Consider providing audio feedback (either through Brightspace or on your own recording device or Kaltura) to give students feedback on a written paper - either by itself or to supplement minimal written feedback. Audio feedback is faster to give and more meaningful for students than written. They are more likely to listen and learn from audio feedback than written feedback. <a href="#">Research Paper Findings</a></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Audio feedback was perceived to be more effective than text-based feedback for conveying nuance</i></li> <li>• <i>Audio feedback was associated with feelings of increased involvement and enhanced learning community interactions</i></li> <li>• <i>Audio feedback was associated with increased retention of content</i></li> <li>• <i>Audio feedback was associated with the perception that the instructor cared more about the student.</i></li> <li>• <i>Document analysis revealed that students were three times more likely to apply content for which audio commenting was provided in class projects than was the case for content for which text-based commenting was provided.</i></li> <li>• <i>Audio commenting was also found to significantly increase the level at which students applied such content</i></li> </ul>
<b>26. Use unique and customized feedback comments to students</b>	Create a comment bank! Put your most frequently used comments in a Word or Excel document and copy and paste!

## Feedback Content, Focus and Practices

Inefficient Practices	Efficient Practices
<b>27. Provide a grade with the feedback</b>	Anytime you provide a grade/letter/number/total score with feedback you spend time on something that deters students from accessing your written or audio feedback. Try delaying a grade or score on a paper or move to a more holistic assessment method that asks students to weigh in on their grades via exemplars, clear guidelines around what makes for a good writing example in X year or Y course.
<b>28. Comments are long or take a long time to write</b>	Reduce your comment wording. Try learning to write shorter phrases like "Needs development," "Needs a clear focus," "Needs a 'so what,'" or "Lacks required sources." This strategy has the added bonus of adding a level of consistency to your grading. You may also have shortcut terms or phrases you can give to students in a legend. OR just say "see me briefly" and set up a quick meeting to go over something that would have taken you much too long to write.
<b>29. Spend time doing math</b>	DO NOT do the math and spend time with conversions, calculators, or ways of figuring out what a score will be converted to a percentage or to a weighted amount of the final grade. Put your work into Brightspace grades and let the computer (and grades set up) do the work for you!
<b>30. Comments not with any order or structure</b>	<p>Try sticking to these components when you comment on student work and keep feedback short and focused! Keep the language academic in nature yet accessible to students.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on higher-order concepts and those that are aligned with the learning outcomes of the course.</li> <li>• Always begin with a positive statement.</li> <li>• Organize your comments so that there is purpose in what you are saying and not scattered feedback.</li> <li>• Be specific by giving an example or pointing directly to something written.</li> <li>• Reinforce the positive anytime you see good work.</li> <li>• Outline the areas not done well and share why or point to a common list of comments with solutions.</li> <li>• Give recommendations for improvement.</li> <li>• Avoid over-commenting. Do not repeat the same feedback over and over. Once is enough.</li> <li>• Make your comments as legible and straightforward as possible.</li> <li>• End comment should summarize your assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the written assignment.</li> </ul>

Credits for ideas, information, and resources:

- [Grading Strategies, Centre for Teaching and Learning, Western University](#)
- [Responding to Student Papers Effectively and Efficiently, Writing at the University of Toronto](#)
- [Effective Efficient Grading and Commenting, Rich Slatta, NC State University](#)
- [FSE Teaching Academy, FSE Teaching College, University of Manchester](#)
- [10 Tips for Grading Essays Quickly and Efficiently, Unwritten Histories Blog](#)