

# THE TEACHING EXCHANGE

BROWN UNIVERSITY • VOLUME 8 / NUMBER 1 • SEPTEMBER 2003



---

## *Grading Rubrics: Multi-Purpose Training Tools*

In January 2003, the Sheridan Center issued a survey regarding the training of graduate TAs to all of Brown's graduate students. Two items on this four-question questionnaire focused upon the tools and methods that faculty advisors/mentors use when teaching graduate instructors how to assess and evaluate undergraduate work.<sup>1</sup> The Sheridan Center was especially interested in learning whether professors use grading rubrics as teacher-training tools.

For those readers unfamiliar with the term, a *grading rubric* is a set of written grading guidelines that an instructor uses to help gauge the quality of a student's work. Ideally, the rubric is a comprehensive, rational set of standards that defines what exactly constitutes an "A," a "B," a "C" (and so forth) on a particular assignment or set of assignments. Of course, each grading rubric is tailored to the grading system of the individual instructor who created it. Thus, the rubric of a teacher who uses pluses and minuses when grading student essays might contain written descriptions that help separate an "A-" essay from a "B+" essay; it would look different from the rubric created by a science instructor who uses a numeric point system to evaluate student lab work.

Regardless of the particular grading system an instructor uses, a grading rubric needs to do two things. First, it needs to identify different categories or groupings based

---

<sup>1</sup> The other two questions asked whether graduate students would use a variety of individual mentoring services if Brown and/or its individual academic departments offered such programs. Because grading rubrics serve as the focal point of this particular article, we will leave further discussion of mentoring to some future *Teaching Exchange*.

upon the quality of student work. Second, it needs to identify the common characteristics or traits that mark all of the pieces of work in each individual category. For instance, all of the student responses to a particular assignment that an instructor places in her “A” category (or whichever term the instructor uses to indicate superior work) should have similar strengths. These strengths most likely will be absent in assignments that the instructor deems average and gives a “C.” Conversely, a “C” paper might contain characteristic weaknesses that are absent in a “B” or and “A” paper.

Every single teacher who grades student assignments has, at one point or another, composed a set of grading standards; all instructors develop ways of differentiating student work. Unfortunately, many instructors never formalize these standards by composing written grading rubrics. Instead, the instructors simply maintain the evaluative standards in their own minds; in many instances, grading systems remain “invisible” or incomprehensible to the students whose work the systems evaluate. By distributing a written grading rubric to students, an instructor can eliminate grade-based confusion because students can easily see how their work compares to the standard. Professors can easily explain why a certain paper merited a “B” as opposed to an “A,” for instance, by pointing out what aspects of an “A” paper the given essay lacked.

In addition to helping undergraduate students better understand their grades, grading rubrics can serve another important role: faculty advisors and mentor-professors can use them when teaching graduate teaching assistants how to evaluate undergraduate work. By setting out clear grading guidelines (or, even better, formulating those guidelines along with their graduate TAs), faculty members can teach graduate instructors what to look for when grading. In the case of large classes, where several different people grade the students’ work, utilization of a grading rubric can also help ensure grading continuity.

According to the January 2004 Sheridan Center survey, grading rubrics are not used very frequently—especially as tools for teaching graduate instructors how to grade. In sum, the survey asked graduate students who have served as teaching assistants to respond to the following two questions:

- 1) Have any of the professors with whom you have worked ever given you any written grading guidelines to help you determine what grades to assign to undergraduate work? If so, please give copies of the guidelines to your Sheridan Center Graduate Student Liaison. Please feel free to remove the professor's name and course title.

- 2) Aside from any written documents you may or may not have received on the subject of grading, was information about grading imparted to you in any other way (i.e. verbal instructions, casual conversation, advice on a specific grading issue)?

(HOW MANY PEOPLE RESPONDED TO THE SURVEY? WHAT IS THE BREAKDOWN OF DEPARTMENTS?)

According to survey responses, very few professors use grading rubrics when attempting to explain their evaluation standards to their graduate teaching assistants.

HOW MANY PEOPLE SAID THAT THEY HAD BEEN GIVEN A GRADING RUBRIC?

Instead, professors tend to give their graduate TAs verbal instructions regarding grading. As with much at Brown, the amount of (not to mention quality of) instruction received by each individual graduate instructor depends upon the particular professor with whom she or he works. Some professors are wonderful about giving grading-related feedback and instruction, while others are not. Some graduate instructors feel as though they are thrust into classrooms and grading situations with little information about what their advising professor expects; they experience a “trial by fire” and learn to grade *by* grading—a situation that can prove problematic not only for graduate instructors, but also the undergraduates whose work they are evaluating.

Comments made by the graduate student liaisons highlighted the fact that Brown lacks consistent university-wide standards regarding the training of graduate instructors. In some departments (Geology for example), some TAs are given no written *or* verbal instructions regarding grading unless they specifically ask for such guidelines. In other departments (e.g., Sociology and History), some professors do use grading rubrics—both for individual assignments and for grading student performance in the course as a whole. They share these grading rubrics with their graduate TAs and, in some cases, their undergraduate students. It is important to note, though, that the use of such rubrics is by no means universal; while some professors use formalized, written-down evaluation guidelines, others do not.

GSLs from the language departments reported that graduate instructors who teach lower-level language courses usually receive lots of advice and counsel regarding grading and teaching in general; such in-depth instruction is not as common for graduate instructors who teach upper-level courses. Some of the graduate instructors in Cognitive

and Linguistic Sciences who teach lower-level statistics courses also get written grading rubrics to help in the grading process, but few other graduate instructors receive the same sort of tool. In general, the GSLs reported that colleagues who are new to teaching would like more advice, while experienced teachers are less bothered by a lack of concrete instruction.

In Anthropology, as in many other departments, mentoring (about grading as well as other matters) tends to occur on an informal basis—through casual conversations, etc.—and the graduate student liaisons from Anthropology mentioned that some of their graduate colleagues wouldn't want it any other way. These individuals like the grading autonomy that they possess. They are afraid that they would lose this freedom and flexibility if a professor was constantly looking over their shoulder to monitor their actions or if they were forced to grade according to a formal written rubric. A few graduate instructors actually dislike grading rubrics; they feel that these documents focus too much upon grades [perhaps the people who feel this way don't fully understand what a grading rubric should be and/or do—AEL].

Several interesting grading-related issues came up during this GSL meeting, and discussions ensued about how professors and departments have attempted to deal with these issues. One issue concerned the problem of grading in large classes: how do professors ensure grading continuity when they work with several TAs? Some professors pair experienced TAs with inexperienced TAs, and the graduate instructors teach their less-experienced colleagues about grading. Other professors encourage group discussions about grading among all of their TAs; sometimes the professors participate in these discussions, and other times they don't. Yet other professors have each TA grade the same questions on every single paper or exam; in this manner, each question is graded similarly for each student in the class. Finally, some professors have all their TAs grade a sample paper or two and then discuss why they assigned certain grades. In many cases, the professor also grades the sample paper(s) and then explains his or her own expectations. In so doing, the professor and graduate instructors make sure that they are "on the same page" regarding evaluation standards and thereby ensure consistency.

When asked what their graduate student colleagues need in terms of instruction on the topic of evaluation/grading, the GSLs mentioned that professors need to spend more time explaining their grading systems—not only to graduate instructors, but to undergraduates as well. Graduate students and professors need to consider why they are grading in the first place and establish a system that reinforces course goals and objectives. GSLs remarked that if grading rubrics are used, they should be flexible enough to allow for

multiple ways of solving a problem or undertaking a task. According to GSL comments, the most useful rubrics distinguish between content issues and style issues, and they contain clear definitions of what is expected in each area.

The GSLs stressed that Brown needs to identify its university-wide grading policies and standards (if such standards exist) and make them more readily accessible and available to graduate instructors. The University also needs to identify where graduate instructors should go if they have difficulties or disagreements over grading with their advising professor. (Sometimes approaching the department chair or another faculty member in the department seems useless, because faculty members usually support their fellow professors.) Finally, the GSLs encourage Brown to start inter- and intra-departmental dialogues about writing in different disciplines.

Although the GSLs suggested that the Sheridan Center could hold workshops wherein people from different departments get together to learn how to grade, they felt as though grading workshops would be most successful at the departmental level. All in all, many GSLs wished that Brown's administration would more strongly encourage individual departments to hold workshops on grading and teaching-related issues. (Note: some departments, like Math, already hold such sessions. The problem is that too few departments do so.) Some professors feel as though it is not their job to teach graduate students how to teach, and departments also are reluctant (or unable) to offer more training sessions. Therefore, in some situations, the Sheridan Center's seminars constitute the only teaching-related instruction that graduate assistants receive. While many graduate students take advantage of the Sheridan Center's offerings, the GSLs indicated a widespread desire for more instruction on the departmental level. (At the same time, the GSLs worried that even if the departments offered more, apathetic graduate students wouldn't take advantage of the opportunities unless forced to do so.)

One of the most important questions raised by GSLs at this meeting asked whether grading rubrics are meant to train graduate students, to encourage grading consistency, or both. This is a question that everyone in Brown's teaching community should consider.

[Report written and filed by AEL,

3/31/03]