

## Tips for Grading Essay and Short Problem Questions

1. Decide in advance if you will award points for the elements **present** in an answer, or deduct points for elements **missing** in an answer. In other words, do you start from "no points" and work up, or do you start from the top and work down? Cognitively, these two orientations to assigning points to answers are quite different and can lead to different results when grading. Starting from "no points" and working up tends to lead to more *conservative* grading; conversely, starting at the top and working down tends to lead to more *lenient* grading. In practice, what this means is that the same instructor can grade the same answer using both methods and not end up with the same score (i.e., the approaches tend not to "meet" in the middle!). Therefore, it is a good idea to decide in advance which approach you are going to use and to **BE CONSISTENT WHILE YOU GRADE!**
2. Generate a set of criteria for how you will assign points to the questions **prior** to grading them. Breaking the question down into its component parts and determining how many points you will assign to each part will help you clarify how to evaluate the answers you receive. This will also help prevent the dreaded "drifting" of your standards as you grade. (Students inevitably compare both grades and answers, and if they find inconsistencies, you can bet they will be beating down the door to your office to talk to you about it.) If possible, plan how you will score the answers as you write the questions--what is it that you're looking for in a particular question? This process will help you to more precisely word each question for your students, which gives them a better opportunity to demonstrate what they know.
3. You may want (if you have the time) to skim through a few exams before you finalize your scoring criteria, in order to make sure you aren't making the criteria too stringent or too lenient. It will also help you gauge what the likely mistakes are going to be in students' answers. It's important to keep in mind that, when you encounter the same mistake for the fiftieth time, it's only the first time that particular student made the mistake. Try not to take it out on the student in your scoring! Also, if many students are making the same mistake, you may want to spend some class time discussing where the students are having problems with the material.
4. Try to grade all of the answers to one question at a time. In other words, if you have a five-item quiz, grade all the answers to question #1 before moving on to grade all the answers to question #2, and so on. This strategy also helps you to guard against the "dreaded drift" of standards. It also helps you to go back and compare answers when you're not sure about how many points to assign to a particular answer.
5. If you have sufficient time, try to indicate where points were lost in students' answers. In lieu of this, construct a scoring key to indicate how points were assigned to answers and make this key available to the students. This provides the students with feedback which helps them to determine what material they have and have not yet mastered. It has the added benefit of reducing the flow of students determined to haggle over points.
6. When a student leaves an answer blank, write *no ans.* or *XXX* out the blank space. This prevents students from filling in the answer at a later date and then coming to see you about the "mistake" you made in grading their exams/quizzes.