

DOUGLAS REEVES

ELEMENTS *of*
GRADING
— SECOND EDITION

A Guide to Effective Practice

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Introduction

STARTING THE CONVERSATION

Whether you are a teacher or an administrator, parent or student, or policymaker or academic researcher, there are four essential questions to answer on the subject of grading. As previously emphasized, the elements of grading should be FAST—fair, accurate, specific, and timely.

- How can we make grading systems fair? What we describe as proficient performance truly must be a function of performance and not gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status.
- How can we make grading systems accurate? What we ascribe to students must be a matter of judgment as well as the consequence of evidence and reason.
- How can we make grading systems specific? Telling a student he or she is “average” or a “C” does little to help students, parents, and teachers collaborate for improved learning. Students must receive detailed information about their performance so they can use the feedback to improve.
- How can we make grading systems timely? Even if grades are fair, accurate, and specific, students cannot use feedback to improve performance unless the grades are provided in a timely manner.

In this book, we consider grading practices that meet all of these criteria and discuss practical ways for teachers to save time while providing effective feedback for students.

Fairness, accuracy, specificity, and timeliness—these elements are at the heart of any grading discussion. This book not only considers how to answer these four questions but also how to conduct constructive discussions about grading policies. Perfection is impossible in grading, and therefore, our quest is not for an ultimate answer. The goal is not perfect fairness but a system less subject to bias, both unintentional and deliberate; not perfect accuracy but a more accurate system; not absolute specificity but a system that provides feedback to help students know what they must do to improve. Finally, while it's not essential for feedback to always be immediate, the prevailing practice in which grades are delivered to students far too late for them to respond is unproductive. Many teachers work very hard to give students detailed feedback, but when that feedback is provided several weeks after student performance or, worst of all, after the semester has ended, then teachers have wasted their time.

As a teacher, I hope that the ways in which I give feedback are better forty years after I taught my first class than it was after thirty, but experience has taught me that the only certainty is that I will fall short of perfection. Therefore, I do not offer a simple recipe that readers can adopt with the confidence of certain success. Instead, these pages offer information regarding:

- A collegial process for discussing some of the most contentious issues in grading
- A communicative process for bringing all stakeholders—parents, board members, the media, students, union leaders, and policymakers—into the discussion

The importance of good communication about grading policies cannot be overstated. It is not sufficient to be right—that is, to have research, logic, and moral certainty on our side of an argument. If our ultimate goal is to make grading systems more effective (improve their fairness, accuracy, specificity, and timeliness), then we must be right on the merits of an argument and successful in reasoning with people who have different points of view.

Understanding Why Grading Is So Important

For teachers and school administrators, the feedback on student performance that perhaps gains the most attention is the annual exam. In Australia, the United Kingdom, and China, national tests are the coin of the realm, the assessments that mark students, teachers, schools, and entire education systems as successes or failures. In Canada, provincial examination scores assess students, schools, administrators, and teachers. Similarly, in the United States, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 requires that each state tests students annually, although the nature and timing of those tests are decisions left to the states (Steinhauer & Rich, 2015).

Despite the political emphasis on annual tests, however, students and parents have a distinctly different focus than school personnel. Their attention is on classroom grades, report cards, and honor rolls. The question parents ask most often is not “What was your score on the exam?” but “How did you get that grade?” Moreover, grades determine academic honors and class rank, and they have a direct impact on college admissions and scholarship opportunities.

A 2008 Fairfax County Public Schools study indicates that 89 percent of colleges responding to a survey use grades to compare applicants, 39 percent require a minimum grade point average (GPA) for admissions into honors programs, and 33 percent require a minimum GPA for merit scholarships. More than half of the colleges do not recalculate grades based on the rigor or content of the course (Fairfax County Public Schools, Department of Accountability, 2008). Therefore, the grades that teachers assign can have a profound impact on students’ future opportunities. The grades that students earn in middle school often influence their eligibility for college-preparatory coursework in high school. Similarly, decisions about which students qualify for advanced courses in middle school are influenced by the grades elementary school teachers assign. Grades also are important for both emotional and financial reasons; therefore, it is completely understandable that the topic of grading is sometimes fraught with contention.