Testing and Grading

Handing back the first graded assignment to a class should not be a traumatic occasion for teachers or students. Unfortunately, it sometimes is. Teachers feel discouraged because their students did not do well; students are angry because their grades are not what they expected. Somewhere along the way, a breakdown in communications has occurred, and, unless the problem can somehow be resolved, it will be a long, difficult semester.

Like it or not, testing and grading is an integral part of the educational process. Students have a right to know how tests fit into the overall scheme of a class. Whenever possible, the syllabus for the class should state precisely the number and kind of tests or written assignments required for the course. A conscientious teacher explains the grading criterion to the class in as much detail as possible. If grading will be calculated on a curve, explain the method thoroughly. Students are less anxious about grades if they feel from the first day that the system their teacher uses is fair and sensible.

Remind students that there are certain acceptable standards of written English to which they must comply. Students often argue that it is not fair to penalize them for their writing style in classes other than English, since all that really matters are the facts, i.e., what they say, not how they say it. By emphasizing high standards for written English early in the semester, those students with writing problems will be encouraged to seek help. Consequently, reading and grading exams will be a less difficult task for the teacher.

Tests act as a kind of broad mirror of the classwork done over the semester; exams should present no major surprises for the student who has attended class and done the readings. It should be clear to the students from their lectures and homework what materials to focus most strongly on in their study. If tests seem totally divorced from classwork, students may have little inclination to attend classes from that first test onward.

TAs must work closely with the faculty member in charge of the course. Unless both TA and faculty advisor understand each other completely and agree on the basic ground rules for testing and grading, problems will almost certainly arise. Nothing is worse

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Effective Test Design

A good test is:

a. a tortuously difficult one.
b. one that elicits few “A”s and many “F”s.
c. one that scares the weaker students away from the class.
d. all of the above.
e. none of the above.

Of course, a good test is none of the above. Although students will always see tests as trials they must endure to get through the university, teachers know that tests can serve a beneficial function if they are designed to help students demonstrate their strengths and weaknesses. Not incidentally, they also provide feedback for the faculty member on how effective their teaching has been thus far in the semester. The purpose of a test is not to trick students or to punish them. It is a form of measurement, perhaps not the best but generally the most practical in a typical classroom situation.

Designing an effective test requires thought and planning. Test design should always reflect course goals. What is the aim of the course? Is it essential that students learn a huge amount of basic information and retain a large number of facts? Or are the students meant to gain a broader, more wide-open perspective of the subject? Or is it a combination of the two? The answers to these questions will determine the kind of test you finally design: multiple choice, fill-in-the-blanks, short answers, essays, or, in many cases, a combination of all four. If you wish to test a wide range of detailed knowledge, multiple choice or fill-in-the-blanks may be the best answer. Essay questions, although not practical for some classes, do allow students more freedom in responding, giving them an opportunity to show off knowledge and demonstrate how they have synthesized diverse materials.

After composing what you consider a good exam, put it aside for a day or two and then reconsider your work. Is the wording of all the questions clear and unambiguous? Is it realistic to think that students can complete the exam in the time allotted? Have you covered all of the material you need to cover? If after reexamining the test you still feel that the exam is sound, then carefully consider and write out your “ideal” responses to all questions. This exercise is doubly useful. First, by checking your answer with the question, you can see if it truly elicits all the information you desire. If your response added more information than the questions demanded, you may wish to rewrite the question to be more inclusive. Second, this exercise will help you when grading the exams if you use your own responses as a model for student answers. Evaluate the exam again after the students have taken it. Was it too difficult or too simple? Did students misunderstand any of the questions? Do you see areas where the class as a whole missed some vital piece of information? Analyzing exams in this manner can be a valuable tool in planning strategies for the rest of the semester.

Finally, no matter how satisfied you are with the exam, there is a good chance that not all the students will feel the same way. Listen to what your students have to say. Although you may not agree with them, you will find out where your expectations and theirs did not coincide, information that you can use to your own advantage in future semesters.

TapTalk is a monthly newsletter produced by TAP, the Teaching Assistant Project, The Graduate School-New Brunswick. Letters and suggestions for articles should be directed to the editor:

Linda G. Schulze
TapTalk
25 Bishop Place, CAC
New Brunswick, N J
08903
(908) 932-7034
Testing and Cheating

Academic integrity is an issue that goes hand in hand with the issue of testing and grading because no system of testing and grading can be a fair one unless all students are reasonably assured of competing equally for grades. No student should be allowed an unfair advantage through the use of dishonest methods. Because students are often highly creative and quite skillful when it comes to cheating, it may be impossible for even the most conscientious teacher to avoid such problems entirely. It is certainly possible, however, to minimize them.

A clearly articulated policy on academic integrity should be presented to all students in all classes at the very beginning of the semester as part of the syllabus. Impress on the students the seriousness of such dishonesty and remind them that university regulations require that all cases of academic dishonesty be reported. (Refresher briefings may be in order at the class session before a test.) Let students know that you will not close your eyes to any cases of cheating. Then stand by this rule.

After making up a test, take care to keep it in a secure place. Do not leave tests lying around the office or in your departmental mailbox. Additionally, reusing tests from a previous semester is an open invitation to dishonesty; students often have access to old tests and do not hesitate to use them as study guides. The grapevine at Rutgers is fairly reliable; students know in which courses they can get by with the help of recycled tests.

Set definite rules on what students can carry into the classroom with them. Ask them to leave all other books, bags, and materials at the front or sides of the classroom. Allowing students to carry books and notebooks to the desks increases the likelihood of cheating. If students are allowed to bring calculators to the exam, decide in advance if there are to be any restrictions: are programmable calculators allowed? Will students be permitted to share calculators? Distribute the blue-books to the students yourself; students who provide their own bluebooks may be tempted to write notes in pencil somewhere in the book. Have students begin writing on page two (or six lines down on the first page—whatever you choose) to prevent them from substituting and submitting pre-written tests. In addition, put some sort of distinct mark on the bluebooks so you can be sure that books have not been smuggled in.

If possible, have students sit at every other desk so they are not tempted to take a sidelong glance at a neighbor’s answers. When planning a multiple choice or true/false test for a large class, have several versions of the test with the questions numbered differently in each to discourage casual, onsite cheating. Effective proctoring is also an important deterrent to cheating. One teacher for a few hundred students is simply not enough. Several proctors should supervise large exams, some standing in the back of the room, others circulating among the students. Although this may seem excessive, students receive the message that cheating is a risky venture.

If, in spite of all these precautions, students persist in cheating, TAs must be prepared to act swiftly and decisively. TAs should be aware of the university’s academic integrity policy (see the TA Handbook for a full description) and of the process involved; they are required to report any cases of cheating to their faculty advisor for the class or to the department chair. Although TAs naturally may hesitate to accuse students of cheating or report them to the proper authorities, they must, in the end, do what is best for the entire class not the individual student.

Have you been videotaped yet?

No! Call 932-7034, ask for Beth or Jim, and make an appointment.
Testing
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than a TA telling the students one thing while the faculty member is saying something else. Crossed signals early in the semester may complicate your relationships with the students and the faculty member for the rest of the course.

What happens if your “philosophy” of grading comes into conflict with the faculty member in charge of the course or with departmental standards? Of course, you are free to voice your opinion to the class supervisor and discuss the problems you foresee. In the end, however, you must act in concert with the faculty member; otherwise, the conflicting messages will leave students confused and, probably, angry at you.

Although many teachers despair at the students’ perennial worry—“Will we be tested on it?”—they should remember that it is a legitimate concern for the undergraduate. Grades may not be that important in the grand scheme of things but within the world of the undergraduate they loom large. Be aware of this and try to be sympathetic to their concerns.

Teaching Assistant Project
Office of the Dean
The Graduate School-New Brunswick
25 Bishop Place
New Brunswick, N.J. 08903
(908) 932-7034