Grading Students Work: Open Ended Questions

What is it?

Grades reflect an evaluation of student work. They communicate performance, can be a source of student motivation, bring closure to content as you transition further in the course, and provide feedback to the learner and instructors on what they have and have not learned. Short answer or essay-based test questions can enable you to judge students’ abilities to organize, integrate, interpret content and communicate in their own words.

Why is it important?

This type of questioning can also provide the instructor an opportunity to see how well students can express their thoughts. Having clear grading criteria established can provide consistency and fairness, save time in the process, help communicate clear expectations to learners, help bring transparency on how work is graded, and help provide a road map on what and how best to teach.

How do I do it?

Develop Grading Criteria

- Consider the work/artifact: quizzes, examinations/essays, oral presentations
  - Write questions that test higher-order skills / critical thinking rather than recall
- Provide a clear rationale and policy on grading
  - Consider what components should carry the most weight/significance
  - Determine what will represent excellent work and unacceptable work with the intermediate in between
- Remember, short answer exams are easier to write but often take longer to score. They are also of lower content validity since low in number and reliability can be compromised by subjectivity risk and grading inconsistency.

Consider Grading Scales

- Letter grades with or without plus and minuses.
- Numerical scales
- Criterion-referenced vs. norm-referenced
- Self-grading and peer grading
- Partial credit permitted vs. Pass or fail
Rubrics
- Consider the following when building a rubric for a open-ended question:
  - What is the purpose?
  - What is the best way to translate the purpose into grading criteria?
  - What is the best way to factor the student development level into the criteria and standards?
  - What weight should this have?

Best Practices Process
- Prepare new exams each time you teach the course so it accurately reflects guided class instruction. Consider using older exams as practice.
- Try to emphasize broad issues, general concepts, and interrelationships when adopting this testing format.
- Construct a test grid that matches your exam questions with your objectives and intended level of Bloom's taxonomy.
- Communicate your grading policies and criteria standards in your course in advance of the assessments.
- Discuss all aspects of grading process (criteria, timing, grade disputes, etc).
- Meet with co-instructors before course begins to review grading standardized procedures and criteria to reduce inter-relator variability especially when using a rubric assessment.
- Do not use essay questions to evaluate understanding that could be easily tested with multiple choice or other selected type questions and try to reserve to the end of the exam.

Quick Tips
- Tip 1: Grade each exam question by question rather than grading all open-ended questions from a single student. Take short breaks to keep concentration up.
- Tip 2: Read the exams without looking at students’ names and shuffle papers before scoring the next question to decrease fatigue factor and possible grading bias perceptions of students. Chose to grade anonymously if using an electronic format with these capabilities.
- Tip 3: Choose examples of exams to serve as anchors or standards. Write out the correct answer yourself and determine point allocation. Decide guidelines for full and partial credit when applicable.
- Tip 4: Write brief comments on the exam of strengths and weaknesses.
- Tip 5: If time permits, read a random set of papers twice to increase reliability as a grader.
- Tip 6: Give students’ advice on how to approach an essay or short-answer test. Also consider giving them an opportunity to help develop the rubric. This increases learner engagement during the process and increases confidence and satisfaction.

More Information