

GRADING AND COMMENTING—When you turn in papers, I will usually, among other things, comment on them and assign grades to them. It is tempting to make these two activities more closely related than they actually are. More precisely, **it is very tempting to assign grades to a paper and then to write comments that will justify the grades.** For example, if I give your paper a terrible grade, I need to make sure that my comments really show you just how awful your arguments are and I need to make sure that I write in corrections to a great many sentences so that it is clear just how your command of the English language dreadful is. Or, if I give your paper an A, I need to avoid making too many critical comments, lest you think that the A was a mistake or that I am the key culprit behind grade inflation. So comments become a tool to justify grades.

But this temptation ought to be resisted. **The goal of commenting ought to be to help you become a better writer, by drawing your attention to problems in your writing and letting you know which things you are doing well** (sadly, I am better at the former task than at the latter, so when you get papers back from me, feel free to add “excellent point,” “apt turn of phrase,” and the like in the margins where you think I ought to have written such comments). Helping you become a better writer is not the same goal as justifying grades. Comments made to justify grades are often not the comments that would have been most helpful to you.

So I hereby promise to try to resist the temptation to use comments as a justifying device. I shall try to comment with an eye to helping you improve your writing. This may also mean that you should read the comments differently than usual: do not read the comments expecting to find in them a justification for the grade you received.

You might expect that the comments will still match the grade in the sense that low grades will come with lots of critical comments and high grades with few and so forth. But it is not always so. Some problems are more amenable to constructive advice and detailed responses than other problems. Hence, problems of the former sort will receive more comments. But for all that, the two sorts of problems may be equally serious and factor equally into a grade. Also, I will limit the amount of criticism on any given paper, since I suspect that very little is gained by overwhelming a student with criticism (especially in cases where the same problem comes up repeatedly—there is little point in rubbing your nose in it each time). A paper with forty problems will receive no more critical comments than a paper with twenty problems, since I will stop commenting long before I get to twenty problems. **(This, incidentally, means that you should not assume that your paper will be perfect once you fix the problems to which I draw your attention.)** But, all else being equal, I intend to give the paper with forty problems a lower grade than the paper with twenty problems. So comments and grades need not match.

JUSTIFYING GRADES—Does this mean that I will give you grades without justifying them to you? Exactly. And **don't bother asking me to justify the grade**, because all I will do is start going through the problems with your paper in an attempt to convince you that, no, you really did not deserve a better grade. But here's a secret: I can list a string of problems for every student paper I have ever seen. So the fact that there were a series of problems with your paper is not really the justification for the grade. Rather, what justifies your grade is the fact that your paper falls in a certain part of the spectrum of student papers (of course, a paper's problems have something to do with its place on the spectrum). I have read enough student papers so that I can tell reasonably well where your paper falls and hence can assign it a grade on that basis. You most likely have not. And that is why, when you ask me to justify your grade, I will (truthfully enough) list the problems with your paper even though that really is no answer to your question.

BETTER GRADES—Perhaps you're thinking: "That's all well and good, but I actually care about my grades and want to know how to get better grades." Fair enough. I can help you with that without justifying grades to you. In fact, I can do that better if I comment with an eye to improving your writing rather than with an eye to justifying grades. Not worrying about justification frees me to focus on trying to provide constructive comments on the problems which I think you should focus on for revisions or future papers. Trying to address those problem areas will help you write better subsequent papers. As it happens, writing better subsequent papers is also your best strategy for improving your grades.

GRADING COSTS—So far I have mostly talked about the relationship between grading and commenting. I also want to comment briefly on grading itself. There are various reasons, which I will not go into here, for grading; there are, however, also some costs. It encourages an unhealthy focus on one's rank rather than on trying interesting projects or approaches, pursuing interesting but perhaps unconventional topics, or simply trying to do one's work as well as possible. **I will do a number of things in an attempt to minimize the costs of grading: (i) leave some assignments ungraded, (ii) give less fine-grained grades to some so that meeting a lower bar will suffice to get an A, and (iii) exclude some low grades when calculating grades for the course.** So, for example, you could tackle an interesting but difficult argument instead of playing it safe; if you end up not being able to execute it successfully, we can drop the resulting low grade. For more details on grading, see the syllabus.