How to Harness the Power of Grading Templates
by Paul Dougan

*F*ive-to-six-hundred essays—as a full-time writing instructor, that's how many I grade per semester. Intimidating? Sure, but I've found a solution that not only saves me time but improves my paper responses: grading/feedback sheets, sometimes known as grading templates. Here's how to devise and use one and the reasons you'll want to.

First, for any writing assignment—especially a regular, semesterly one—you usually have clear expectations of what you'll grade on. So, build a form, based on those expectations, that will measure writing skills.

Sections

I suggest using three basic categories: organization, style, and content. My "organization" section may open with an overall judgment of that criterion ("strong, good, average, weak") and then beneath that have several brief subsections covering specific organizational matters: hook, thesis, blueprint sentence, topic sentences, paragraph unity, transitions, etc.

After years of grading, I have a repertoire of responses for each item. For example, "Thesis" for an argumentative-essay assignment includes "Debatable?" "Clearly and precisely worded?" "Easy to spot?" and "No discernible thesis;" the first three are followed by "Yes" and "No." Other items have a rating scale and often a series of numbers so I may indicate a problem paragraph. I underline or circle where appropriate.

I find my feedback is more efficient if I don't try to have a set response for every content problem. Some writing programs have a numbered list of logical fallacies so one may simply write a number to indicate a fallacy, but I prefer to simply circle the number of the paragraph(s) in question and write my comment. For me, content has so many potential problems, they can't all be anticipated. But, be flexible; see what works for you.

Surface errors

My surface error section opens with an overall evaluation and follows with a list of common style problems: Sentence-stop errors; Fragments; Misspellings; Pronoun use: Agreement, Vagueness, Sexism, etc. This allows me to focus on specific grammar and punctuation problems and to identify patterns—crucial to controlling surface errors.

For assignments with less emphasis on style matters, I use only an overall-evaluation line. Finally, each template has a blank for the essay's grade.

Benefits

Templates save time because instead of repeatedly writing out the same comment, you often simply underline a preprinted comment and circle a number or numbers. For simpler assignments, summaries or placement and exit essays, templates cut my grading time in half; for more complex assignments, such as argumentative pieces, the time saved is less but still noteworthy.

So, the time you'll spend creating a template is well worth it. But templates aren't just faster: they're better. First, they force you to be more consistent: you methodically work through the same criteria for every paper.

Second, they help clarify your assignment expectations: if you pass your template out with the assignment, students can better see what you'll grade them on (remind them, though, that each section on the template may not be weighted equally).

Third, they give your grading more legitimacy: students are less likely to assume a grade is entirely subjective. Grading templates can be successfully used by any teacher who gives writing assignments.

They'll save you time; improve the consistency of your feedback; help students understand your assignment, and make your grades more credible. See the next page for a template you can adapt to your needs or print and use.

Paper Critique, Feedback, and Grade Sheet

Student: _____

Class: _____

Grade: _____

Paper Section.   Evaluation noted with a *Yes, or No.* circled or the appropriate comment otherwise indicated.
Note: *When *NA is circled it means the section is not applicable to this assignment.*

1. Introduction: *NA* Author's name noted? *Yes , No.*   Piece's title noted? *Yes, No.*
Summary (There should be a sentence or two): *None, Fine, Too Much.*

2. Thesis: *NA* Thesis is quoted? *Yes, No.* Correctly identified? *Yes, No.* (That's the blueprint) Clearly
evaluated? *Yes, No.* Judgment adequately explained? *Yes, No.* Discuss precision of wording ? *Yes, No.*
Discuss conciseness ? *Yes, No.* Do judgment, explanation match? *Yes, No.*
Thesis section is neglected? *Yes, No.*

3. Organization: *NA* Clearly evaluated? *Yes, No.* Judgment adequately explained? *Yes, No.*
Do judgment and explanation match? *Yes, No.* Enough subpoints covered? *Yes, No.* (Add discussion of:
hook/blueprint/blueprint-body match/paragraph unity/topic sentences/transitions/sequence/conclusion/
other: Enough examples given to illustrate judgments? *Strong, Average, Weak.*

4. Logic/persuasiveness: *NA* Clearly evaluated? *Yes, No.* Judgment adequately explained/ section
adequately developed? *Strong, Good, Average, Weak*. Has writer explained whether cons have been raised
and addressed? *Yes, Could be better; No.* Do judgment, explanation match? *Yes, No.* Enough examples
given to illustrate judgments? *Strong, Average, Weak.*

5. Style: *NA* Clearly evaluated? *Yes, No.* Judgment adequately explained? *Yes, No.*
Enough examples given to illustrate judgments? *Strong, Average, Weak.*

6. Sources/documentation: *NA* Clearly evaluated? *Yes, No.* Judgment adequately explained? *Yes, No.*
Enough subpoints covered? *Yes, No.* (Add discussion of: In-text citations/integration of sources/
number of sources/types of sources/works-cited page/quality of research/other:) Enough examples
given to illustrate judgments? *Strong, Average, Weak.*

6. Body organization: *NA Strong, Good, Average, Weak.*
Use of clear topic sentences noting both criterion and evaluation: *1, 2, 3, 4, 5.*
Paragraph unity: *1, 2, 3, 4, 5.*   Transitions: *1, 2, 3, 4, 5.*

7. Conclusion: *NA* Overall judgment clearly stated? *Yes, Could be better, No.*
Does overall judgment match smaller judgments? *Yes, Too high, Too low.*
Surface error: *Strong, Good, Average, Weak, Atrocious.*

8. Reviewer Comments: _____

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