

Grading Comments by Paul J. Croce, History and American Studies, Stetson University
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What is Education?: In my experience, there are two major approaches to education, and these shape different approaches to grading. Of course, it is artificial to separate these out so starkly, but looking at the distinction can be clarifying:

1. Education for Knowledge Acquisition: facts are important, and so the goal is to get the right answer. The educated person is learned.
2. Education for Interpretation: questions are important, and so the goal is depth of understanding. The educated person is skilled, or in other words, has learned how to learn.

Both approaches are important, but I frankly emphasize the second, without excluding the first. So for example, learning facts will help in the formulation of good questions and in gaining understanding. I don't think of them as alternative paths, but as stages, with the first leading to the second—ideally.

On Grading: I have detected two approaches:

1. I find that most students and some teachers approach grading as an *authority* relation: the teacher is judging the quality as expressed in the grade, and the student is either pleased or upset at the judge's ruling. The teacher is the enemy on the other side of the desk. Further dialog is usually only about the disappointments, and it tends to focus on the grade. If a student has this approach, even if the professor provides comments, they are irrelevant compared to The Judgment embodied in The Grade.
2. I regard grading (and teaching in general) as a relationship on the model of a *coach* with an athlete: I do not perform the event, but I give suggestions, with praise and critiques, about how to do it better. The teacher is the student's advocate. With this approach, grades are secondary compared to the comments (which show the teacher advocating for improvement). Comments are the diagnoses of writing (in professions other than teaching, such comments are called Consultant's Reports, and come with a large fee!), but improvement only comes if you read them and use their suggestions for your future writing.

Because my coaching approach may be unfamiliar for some students, let me explain its purposes. My approach to grading builds upon my view of education: I ask essay questions that, first, require use of information, and then students should formulate an argument in their essays evaluating that information with an interpretive point of view. Facts are important, but especially in relation to understanding. If a student is used to or expecting the first approach to grading (and to education in general), seeing comments on a paper may seem strange or even insulting. Some may be tempted to ignore the comments, and focus only on the grade; and these students will gravitate to teachers who grade without comments. While this may be more comfortable, it neglects the possibilities for *improvement*—even on good papers.

One student, commenting on an earlier draft of this posting, noted that I am talking about education for *enrichment*, where most seek education for *reward* (grades, degree, path to career)—and by implication this comment on my “Grading Comments” amounted to this: Good luck trying to persuade students to think beyond education for reward! I am not aiming to promote enrichment *instead of* reward, but enrichment as *foundation for* the rewards of education, sturdy steps toward better grades and success in life in general.

Before Turning in Writing. Here are some simple steps for improvement:

1. Use class time to facilitate thinking skills, and use notetaking and writing to practice them.

2. Be aware that someone will read your work carefully (your teachers now, and later, people who will scrutinize your work to see if you should get projects approved, a raise, or a promotion). Make yourself clear, and that lets you put your best foot forward.
3. Write a draft. This way, you can be your own editor of your own work before someone else edits it for you—in red! (or the worst “red” mark of all: ignoring because the reader could not follow your point).

Writing Issues: for a more comprehensive overview of writing problems and solutions, see the Writing Guide on the American Studies Web page. Here are a few FEIs (Frequently Encountered Issues), with increasing degrees of significance:

1. Mechanics of writing. The goal is to persuade, and misuse of these interrupts that:
 - a. Punctuation. These are tools of connection, which contribute to flow and explanations:
 - Semi-Colons* connect two sentences because they are related;
 - commas* connect two phrases within a sentence, phrases with a significant relationship between them;
 - Colons* connect an explanatory phrase to a preceding sentence: what follows can make the phrase or sentence more clear;
 - Dashes* are used around a particularly significant—or eye-popping—phrase; and
 - Hypens* are used to connect two words to make them one (for example, electronic-mail or e-mail, or a period of time when used as an adjective: twentieth-century attitudes).
 Here you can test yourself:
 - i. Find the examples of the types of punctuation described in paragraph a. *within paragraph a. itself.*
 - ii. Are you satisfied with this statement without correction in its punctuation?: What a store! Drive through window—it’s so convenient, it’s even open late; how do they make profits this way?
 - iii. How would you punctuate this sentence?: A woman without her man is nothing.
 - b. For flow of writing: use *connecting words* within and between sentences, and write *transitions* between paragraphs
2. Expository Writing
 - a. Point of view: this emerges in your theme, starting with your choice of title; it should play a large role in your introduction and conclusion; and it often spills into your choice of words
 - b. Explanation: when mentioning something, follow through until it is clear; often this involves not just *telling* something, but also *showing* (how so, or why did that happen, or what were the implications?)
3. Content: Each course has its own content. Even with an emphasis on interpretation, assemble the facts you need to make your case: from reading, from class (including listening, discussing, and asking questions), and in your review of what you have learned.

Even if the approach of this teacher is not what you are used to, I maintain that this interpretive approach will cultivate the thinking skills you will need to succeed later in life—no matter your major, no matter which profession you enter, no matter which other paths you take in life. As your coach, I am dedicated to helping you along the way.

Do good work—and keep making it better and better....