

# Grading Overload: 12 Time-Saving Assessment Strategies

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There's a faculty meeting tomorrow, a parent-teacher conference the next day, you have to prep your materials for that project next week, and – almost forgot – you still haven't graded the assignments from two weeks ago, plus a new stack of papers walks in with today's students. And somewhere in all of this you might actually want to see your family or catch a movie while it's still in the theater.

Sound familiar? Don't despair – try these tips to avoid grading overload:

## **Change Your Perspective**

It's easy to get into the mindset of "It has to be graded or it doesn't count. It has to be thoroughly assessed or I'm cheating my students." But is that really true? Sometimes students are "cheated" because the teacher is so burned out from grading that she just passes out a worksheet and collapses at her desk instead of really teaching. Remember: grades are a tool – the means, not the end. There are ways to provide assessment without grades, and there are times student work doesn't need to be assessed.

## **Don't Try to Grade Everything**

Students need practice in order to master a skill. On some assignments, just check for completion. Don't weigh the assignment heavily and give points based on whether or not the student finished it. This can actually help some students who work hard but struggle to understand the content – they can get 100% for a change!

## **Shift Your Focus – grade elements of an assignment, not the whole thing**

This works well for complex assignments that occur repeatedly – writing assignments in English/Language Arts or lab reports in Science. You can't grade these on "completion," but choose one or two things to focus on in each assignment. Maybe it's the first lab report of the year, so you assess on format (did they follow the format?) and hypothesis (did they come up with a good one? How do they explain it?), and the rest is "practice for next time." In English, maybe one essay you focus on transitions between paragraphs; another essay you grade on the proper use of prepositions, and a third you focus on adjectives and adverbs.

This is better for students anyway. Have you ever spent ages marking every mistake on a paper, only to have the student throw it away, complaining, "I'll never get this right!" By strategically focusing on specific areas, the student has a better opportunity to improve her skills over time.

### **Peer Grade**

Assign students to work together in pairs or small groups to evaluate each other's work. This is a terrific step for in-progress assignments or a change of pace for homework evaluation. Ask students to fill out a form with their peer assessment – that way you can quickly review the peer grades and catch anything that is glaringly wrong.

### **Use Rubrics**

Yes, it takes time to create one, but Rubistar or Teachnology offer many standardized rubrics you can start with. Once you've created the rubric, it can simplify the grading process, especially for more straightforward assessment elements like punctuation, spelling, or formatting issues.

### **Schedule Assignments Carefully**

This requires advance planning, but it can really save your sanity. Think about your life and your schedule – what other assignments do you have coming in from other courses/subjects? – before you assign a big project or a long essay.

Try to break things up: if all your English students write an essay a week, then have Period 1 essays due on Tuesdays and Period 2 essays due on Thursdays. If you know your freshmen history students will do their research papers in March, schedule your sophomore history papers to be due in April. Of course you can't always manage this – the end of the semester will be crazy, no matter what you do – but on some assignments it's worth a try.

### **“Grade” Things as a Class**

This takes up class time, but may be worth it for some topics. Imagine this: you teach a new concept and assign homework so students can practice. The next day, you collect the assignment and have students start on something new. When you finally get around to assessing the homework that night, you realize the whole class missed a key component and you need to re-teach the entire lesson. If you grade the assignment as a class, you could have discovered the problem earlier, which would be better for your students and your sanity.

### **Use an Online Grading System**

It's hard to give up on a system you've stuck with for years, but if the grading paperwork feels overwhelming, it may be time to try something new. Programs like [Engrade](#), [MyGradebook.com](#), and [JupiterGrades](#) allow you to access your grades from home and communicate with students and parents via email or instant message. Some programs allow you to weigh your grading categories in advance, so 100% on a homework assignment automatically counts less than 100% on a semester exam. It may take practice to get used to the program, but once you start, you'll be surprised at how much time it can save.

### **Provide Verbal Feedback**

Build in student conference time periodically to help students on big projects or to give feedback on frequently used assignments, like lab reports or essays. Get the class working on something – SSR

time, finishing a worksheet, or researching information for a project – and then call up students one at a time.

Look over the student's work, identify one or two things he is doing well, and one or two things he needs to work on. Invite him to ask questions, then ask him to return to his seat. Once you get the process going, you can "check in" with a student in 3-5 minutes. Every student gets some one-on-one interaction with you and gets to hear you say something positive about her work. You won't be able to do this all the time, but even once a semester can help.

### **Build in Grading Time to Your Schedule**

For many teachers, grading just piles up because they don't make the time to get it done. Choose a set time each week when you can make some headway on your piles of papers. Maybe you can eat lunch in your room one day a week and do it then? Stay afterschool for an hour one day, but don't schedule conferences during that time? Make your spouse watch the kids while you go to a coffee bar on Saturday morning and finish a stack of papers? Every teacher's schedule is different, but setting aside a specific time can keep the piles from getting too overwhelming.

### **Give Group Assignments and Group Grades**

Many teachers resist group assignments because it's too difficult to evaluate each individual student's work. But not every assignment needs an individual grade.

If groups are too chaotic for your classroom, what about a pairs assignment? Assign students to write a paragraph or essay in pairs, and set up your stronger writers with your weaker writers. It gives the weaker writers a model to emulate and you get half as many papers to grade.

### **Got a Bunch of Grading To Do? Reward Yourself Afterward**

There's no way to avoid it: sometimes you will just have a mountain of papers to grade. Usually, you know when those times are coming, because a big project is due or a grading period ends. Build in a break – something to look forward to as you slog your way through the papers. Maybe it's a "date" with your spouse or an afterschool outing with your fellow teachers. Some teachers make a tradition out of it – the "Grades Are In" celebratory dinner with colleagues. Or just pencil in some downtime – a long walk or a chance to read a novel that you aren't teaching. Whatever appeals to you, make it a part of your schedule and take it just as seriously as getting in those grades. You'll be a happier person and a better teacher because of it.