20 WAYS TO CUT YOUR GRADING TIME IN HALF

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CULT OF PEDAGOGY

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MY PERSONAL GRADING ROCK BOTTOM

I have always been too embarrassed to tell this story. It was my third year of teaching and I was behind on grading. Five folders bulging with quizzes, make-up work, essays...I was looking at a solid weekend of nothing but grading.

At my dining room table that Saturday morning, I sorted the papers into piles. I picked up a stack of worksheets from first period and prepared a column in my grade book to record the scores. I uncapped my pen, sighed, and stared at the first worksheet. Then I thought, *Wait. These are just worksheets. From three weeks ago. No one has asked for them. I bet they don't even remember these. What if I just...*

I stood, gathered that pile of worksheets and the ones from my four other class periods, walked over to the recycling bin, and dropped them in. One hundred and twenty papers, gone in an instant. Yes, I still graded the other stuff: the quizzes, the essays...but those worksheets were no longer my problem. I felt kind of guilty.

But mostly I felt *free*.

Chances are, you've been where I was that day. Maybe you didn't solve the problem the way I did, but I'll bet you considered it. Well, there's a better way. Lots of better ways, actually. In the following pages you'll find 20 really smart ideas you can mix and match to cut back on the time you spend grading and get those piles of paper under control.

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SECTION 1

DON'T GRADE EVERYTHING

While throwing student work away is not recommended, it's a good idea to limit what you actually assign a grade. It's important for students to get lots of practice, and to get credit for their effort, but not *everything* needs careful grading. (One technique you might try as a substitute for graded work is Reciprocal Learning.)

Here are some ways to grade more selectively:

(1) PICK JUST ONE

Have students do several similar assignments in a row (journal entries, short constructed responses, geometry proofs, bell-ringers) keeping them in a folder that's stored in class. Then have the student choose the one that best represents their ability to turn in for a grade (or they can circle it, highlight it, or mark it with a post-it).

(2) SPOT-CHECK ITEMS

Let students know ahead of time that for some assignments, you will look over the whole thing for completion, but will choose only a few items to look at carefully and grade for correctness. So for a page of twenty math exercises, you could decide ahead of time that number 3, 7, 15, and 19 are representative of the skills you're looking for, so you only mark those on every paper. Of course, you will not tell students ahead of time which items you'll choose; they will find out later, and their "score" will be whatever percentage of those four items is correct.

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(3) SPOT-CHECK STUDENTS

Collect everyone's assignments and scan them all for completion (and to identify struggling students who might need more help), but each time, pull a small number (4-5) of student papers to grade closely. Keep track of the students who get close inspection, and do it for a different group each time until you've gotten to everyone.

(4) START SAYING "PRACTICE" AND "FEEDBACK"

Maybe a change in vocabulary is all you need. Instead of calling every task an *assignment*, start calling more of them *practice*, where the focus is on getting better. Likewise, instead of promising to give every task a *grade* or *score*, give some *feedback*, telling students what they are doing well and where they need improvement, rather than always providing a score. When a gymnast is learning a new move, she doesn't go back to her coach after every attempt for a score—there's a learning period, a trial-and-error stage that's just about practice and feedback. If that's not already built into your instructional routine, give it a try.

(5) NARROW YOUR FOCUS

For longer, more complex assignments, only assess a few skills at a time. This is especially helpful for essays or other writing tasks, where students are synthesizing a lot of different skills. Tell students you will focus on organization and idea development the first time around, and ignore things like grammar and word choice. After students revise from the first round, you can always check other things later.

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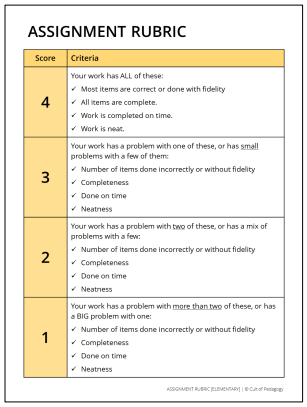
(6) BATCH SCORE WITH HOLISTIC RUBRICS

Instead of grading every single assignment one at a time, put student work into larger batches and grade each student's work holistically, giving one broad score for accuracy, completeness, punctuality, and neatness over a one- or two-week period. This allows you to stop nitpicking and evaluate work habits as a whole.

Although it's still important to assess student understanding of concepts right away, much of this can be done during class time or by informally scanning work as it comes in. When it's time to actually mark papers and record scores, batch scoring can save a ton of time. Download my free assignment rubrics to get started (click either image to go to the download page).

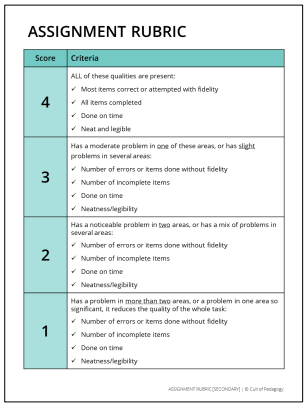


ASSIGNMENT RUBRIC

Score	Criteria
4	Your work has ALL of these: ✓ Most items are correct or done with fidelity ✓ All items are complete. ✓ Work is completed on time. ✓ Work is neat.
3	Your work has a problem with one of these, or has small problems with a few of them: ✓ Number of items done incorrectly or without fidelity ✓ Completeness ✓ Done on time ✓ Neatness
2	Your work has a problem with two of these, or has a mix of problems with a few: ✓ Number of items done incorrectly or without fidelity ✓ Completeness ✓ Done on time ✓ Neatness
1	Your work has a problem with more than two of these, or has a BIG problem with one: ✓ Number of items done incorrectly or without fidelity ✓ Completeness ✓ Done on time ✓ Neatness

ASSIGNMENT RUBRIC [ELEMENTARY] | © Cult of Pedagogy

Elementary



ASSIGNMENT RUBRIC

Score	Criteria
4	ALL of these qualities are present: ✓ Most items correct or attempted with fidelity ✓ All items completed ✓ Done on time ✓ Neat and legible
3	Has a moderate problem in one of these areas, or has slight problems in several areas: ✓ Number of errors or items done without fidelity ✓ Number of incomplete items ✓ Done on time ✓ Neatness/legibility
2	Has a noticeable problem in two areas, or has a mix of problems in several areas: ✓ Number of errors or items done without fidelity ✓ Number of incomplete items ✓ Done on time ✓ Neatness/legibility
1	Has a problem in more than two areas, or a problem in one area so significant, it reduces the quality of the whole task: ✓ Number of errors or items done without fidelity ✓ Number of incomplete items ✓ Done on time ✓ Neatness/legibility

ASSIGNMENT RUBRIC [SECONDARY] | © Cult of Pedagogy

Secondary/College

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SECTION 2

INVOLVE STUDENTS

Your expertise is necessary to make the tough decisions about whether students' work is being done well, but sometimes, students can score their own work. Not only does this save you time, it helps them become more independent learners.

(7) GRADE PAPERS AS A CLASS

This one's a classic, but it's worth mentioning: When students finish a task, especially one with cut-and-dried answers, it's fine to go over the answers as a class and have students mark their own papers. It provides instant feedback and allows students to ask questions. To add individual accountability, circulate around the room, informally checking student papers for accuracy.

(8) GIVE AWAY THE ANSWERS

For class work, consider simply providing students with an answer key, holding them accountable for doing the work *before* checking the answers. This obviously requires a shift away from traditional classroom practices: Instead of trying to guess the right answer just to get the right answer, the goal becomes figuring out if you can reach it, and being able to explain how you got there. Following this type of work with an activity like My Favorite No would further deepen student learning.

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(9) ANSWER STATIONS FOR TESTS AND QUIZZES

This isn't a HUGE time-saver, but it's an easy way to give feedback: On test days, set up an answer station in a tucked-away part of the classroom (so test-takers can't see it), where the answer key is provided along with a colored marking pen. When a student is ready to hand their quiz in, send him to the answer station alone, holding only his test, and let him mark incorrect answers. This offers immediate feedback and keeps students from wondering how they did.

For essay questions, provide a general summary of what you're looking for, but grade the response yourself. And of course, double-check student corrections for accuracy.

(10) THREE BEFORE ME

Instead of having students turn in their work directly to you, put them into groups of about four and have them peer-review each other's work first. The goal here is to have students catch each other's mistakes and help each other improve the work before it comes to you.

This would work best on the kind of assignment where students give different responses from one another, rather than tasks where all students provide the same exact answers, so that other group members are providing feedback, rather than just giving each other "the answers."

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SECTION 3

STREAMLINE

It might be that you don't actually have as much grading as you think; you just need to find different, more efficient ways to approach it.

(11) GRADE-AS-THEY-GO*

Start grading assignments while students are still working on them: Move around the room, placing a check mark beside any items that are done correctly, and circle those that are incorrect. When papers are handed in, you can ignore everything with a check mark—your work is part-way done!

(12) COLLECTED WORKS

If students do repetitive daily work, instead of taking up five separate items from each student per week, have students keep "running" assignments all on one paper (or a stapled set), then collect and grade them all at once.

(13) SHORTHAND YOUR FEEDBACK

Teachers waste hours of time repeating the same comments on paper after paper: "run-on sentence," "not clear," "Can you elaborate?" Whenever possible, find ways to put your comments into some kind of shorthand, and teach your students how to interpret them. Take a look at my video on Rubric Codes for a great example of how this can be done.

*Thanks to my reader, Marlana Evans, for this idea!

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(14) AUTOMATE YOUR FEEDBACK

Build a nice long repertoire of phrases you can use to provide feedback to students. This will cut way back on the time it takes to think of something unique for each student. Angela Watson's fabulous list of feedback comments for student writing is a fantastic resource for this.

(15) FIVE-AT-A-TIME

When you have a multi-page document to grade, especially one that can be checked quickly for correctness, don't go through each packet one at a time! Grade five (or more) simultaneously: Lay the papers side by side and grade all the page 1's at a time. Record the number missed at the bottom of the page, then turn all packets to page 2 and repeat. When you get to the end of the packets, just go through and add up the scores from the bottom.

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(16) MARK, COMMENT, RECORD, AND REFLECT SEPARATELY

Grading student work actually has four separate components: There's the *marking* of correct and incorrect responses, *commenting* on the quality of work, *recording* scores in your grade book, and *reflecting* on student progress for the purpose of planning for differentiation, re-teaching, or enrichment. Trying to do all four at the same time can make grading drag on and on. Next time, try running through that stack once just to mark incorrect items, then again to comment, and so on. See if this picks up the pace.

(17) GROUPS AND PAIRS

If you can occasionally assign some tasks to small groups or pairs, you will literally cut the amount of grading you have to do by half or more. Ideally, these kinds of tasks will be the type where students work together to practice a skill or come to consensus on a challenging problem.

Keep in mind that group tasks should probably receive a small number of points compared with individual assignments, or not be part of a student's grade at all, because individual student effort and input may be unbalanced. If individual grades are necessary, you might opt to observe individuals during the activity for active participation, then look at the group's written product as a way to formatively assess understanding.

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SECTION 4

GET TECHY

Some excellent, affordable tech tools have emerged in recent years that can really speed up your grading.

(18) GOOGLE FORMS QUIZZES

If your class has access to Google Apps, you can now create quizzes with Google Forms. These quizzes can be auto-graded for any items that have a correct answer (multiple-choice, true/false), and you can also hand-grade other items, such as short-answer questions...it's even possible to combine both types in one quiz. Learn more HERE.

(19) QUICK SCANNERS

Several tools, like GradeCam, ZipGrade, and Plickers, allow teachers to score student responses with nothing more than a smartphone or tablet. Although these are mostly useful on forced-answer types of questions (like multiple choice), they would be a time-saving addition to a balanced mix of assessment strategies.

(20) SCREENCASTING

If you're grading a digital assignment or project where you need to give detailed feedback, such as a piece of student writing turned in online, you can use screencasting tools to record yourself going through the piece and talking about various aspects of it. When you're done recording, just send students a link to the video. Two good tools for this are Screencastify and Screencast-O-Matic.

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BONUS

WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS

A lot of what I've shared here are proactive strategies you can use to prevent grading and paper overload. But what if you're already way behind? Already overwhelmed? Sometimes you just need ideas to help you dig out of the hole you're in. Here are two.

REWARD YOURSELF

Break up the work into small, manageable chunks. At first it might be only three papers at a time. Then find small ways to reward yourself after completing each set of three. The rewards can be small, too, like allowing yourself to do the thing you want to procrastinate with (2 minutes on Facebook, eat a Hershey's kiss, move the laundry from the washer to the dryer...that's right...because when you have papers to grade, laundry actually starts to look fun!). Then start working and rewarding.

CATCH-UP DAY

You don't *have* to take a sick day or show movies in class to get caught up. If your administration will allow it, plan a "catch-up day" with your students. Let them know you need some down time to get caught up on grading, and have them organize their binders, sort out the files on their tablets or laptops, catch up on make-up work, do homework, or read or write silently. You can give them a participation grade if that helps keep them quiet!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jennifer Gonzalez is the creator of **Cult of Pedagogy**, a website that has been helping teachers crush it in the classroom since 2013. She has over 10 years of classroom experience at the middle school and college level and is a National Board Certified Teacher in Early Adolescence/ English Language Arts.

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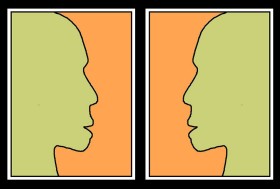

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