

## Exam Time: Tips to Reduce Grading Angst while Promoting Student Learning

Does this look familiar?



Let's face it; grading is probably your least favourite part of teaching. There are, however, some ways to make the process less stressful while making sure your exams are promoting student learning. Here are four tips that span the timeline from developing the exam to grading it.

### 1. Start early!

- From the beginning of your course, help students gain learning skills that are likely to result in high marks on exams and other assignments
- Use Learning Goals to direct students to the “take-home” messages from each class session. Ensure these goals are “action oriented” and facilitate ways for students to practice meeting them (see previous item).
- Think about potential exam questions as you're preparing lessons – this will help inform your Learning Goals (if it's important enough to be an exam question, it should be addressed in class!)
- Don't wait until the last minute to write your exam! Build your tests, question by question, through the term. It's great practice to keep a file of potential exam questions that you can draw from.

### 2. Write an effective exam.

Exams should *focus on the most important content, skills, and behaviours* emphasized during the course (or particular section of the course). What are the primary ideas, issues, and skills you hope students learn during a particular course/unit/module? This is what your Learning Goals are for.

Ideally, effective exams have five characteristics. They are:

- *Valid* (providing useful information about the concepts they were designed to test – i.e. no surprises),
- *Reliable* (allowing consistent measurement and discriminating between different levels of performance),
- *Recognizable* (instruction has prepared students for the assessment),
- *Realistic* (concerning time and effort required to complete the exam), and
- *Fair* (all students experience the same content and difficulties of examination tasks).

### 3. Make sure your exam questions have a “best” answer.

<p><b>For Multiple Choice Questions</b></p> <p>(For more tips on writing MC questions, see EOAS-SEI Times 5(3), 2012)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Write the correct answer immediately after you have written the question. If writing a “complete the sentence” type question, write the stem of the question and then the answer in the same sentence, making sure that the answer completes the thought begun by the stem.</li><li>2. See whether the correct answer can be “made incorrect” to become one of the four “distracter options” that you need for multiple-choice questions. Each distracter should also grammatically follow the stem. By writing the correct answer immediately as a “thought completion” process, you can avoid qualifiers and grammar mistakes that plague bad multiple-choice questions or steer students to the correct option.</li><li>3. Five-option multiple-choice items may be more likely to distinguish differences in levels of content mastery than four-option items; however, don’t shoe-horn 5 options in if it doesn’t make sense to. It is a good idea to randomly locate the correct answer in the A–E order. If the answers are numeric, put them in numerical order.</li><li>4. Go back to your Learning Goals and make sure you have covered the material in class.</li><li>5. Avoid logical complexity that is not related to the concept. I.e. test the concept, NOT the students’ ability to parse or dis-entangle your logic.</li></ol>
<p><b>For Short Answer/Essay Questions</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Write out what you would consider to be a high scoring answer, and also an average answer</li><li>2. Based on the above, <b>design a rubric</b> (come see us if you want help with this!)</li><li>3. Once you see from your rubric what you are going to give credit for, make sure that the sentences in your question spell this out for the students. For example, if you will give 100% credit only if they include two examples, three principles, or four components, include that requirement in the question stem.</li><li>4. Go back to your Learning Goals and make sure you will be covering this material during a class meeting or in the assigned readings.</li></ol>

- ✓ Ensuring that there are “best answers” will make grading much faster and fairer. It also gives you clear grounds to justify your grading to students who might ask “why didn’t I get full marks for this question?”

### 4. Schedule specific times for grading exams.

It’s easier said than done, but procrastinating increases your anxiety, reduces the available time for grading, and can lead to mistakes. Scheduling grading time into your calendar helps ensure that you are grading efficiently. For tips on more efficient and effective grading, see EOAS-SEI Times 8(1), 2015.