

Making the Grade: College Teaching

By [Amy Shea](#)

College teaching doesn't come easy. If you're about to teach your first undergraduate class, take a moment to consider your own experience: What makes an effective college teacher? Then learn how to improve your college teaching today, with these tips.

As much as you'd like to think that your students are motivated by the sheer love of learning and the satisfaction that knowledge can bring, you are probably disconcertingly aware that most are primarily concerned with only one thing—the all-important grade. While many instructors find such single-minded focus on grades discouraging, grading is an important teaching tool for students and instructors alike. An objective method of evaluating student performance helps the instructor not only to better understand what students absorbed, but also his or her own success at clearly communicating course material. To ensure that you and your students get the most out of grades, keep the following points in mind:

For your students:

- **Make your expectations clear** from the first day of class. Your syllabus should clearly state how grades will be determined in the course, including the weight given to different aspects of class performance. This will enable students to plan how to devote their energy and attention over the course of the semester. For example, if you consider a final research paper to be the best reflection of what your students have learned in the course, be sure that it amounts to a significant percentage of the overall grade. Additionally, assign a value to such things as class participation and attendance that you consider important as well.
- **Fully explain assignments** so that students know how to best prepare. When the inevitable question, "Will we be tested on this?" arises, make sure your answer includes not only a "yes" or "no," but a "because . . ." Grades should reflect a student's ability to comprehend, not memorize, material. Thus, let students know both what you want to see in a test answer or essay question, and why it is important; this will help students make a connection between the facts they learn and the larger ideas you want to convey.
- **Schedule review sessions and regular office hours** so that students have ample opportunity to meet with you. If you make yourself available to your students to address individual concerns, those who are truly interested will make the time to meet with you. Those that don't can only blame themselves.

For yourself:

- **Work with an experienced professor** to gain insight into his or her grading process. In my own experience, I found it helpful to work with my advisor before giving an exam to discuss grading standards. Together, we determined criteria for what would constitute an "A" essay, and how to differentiate between a "C" and a "D." With the possible exception of a multiple-choice exam, grading is not entirely a cut-and-dried process. It's important to talk with others to gain a different perspective.

- **Avoid possible bias** when grading by making the process anonymous; never look at a student's name on a test booklet or paper before determining a grade. While you may consider yourself to be a pillar of objectivity, your prior knowledge of a student's performance—either positive or negative—may inadvertently color your reading of his or her work.
- **Be flexible and willing to question your own standards.** It's important to have high expectations of your students, but you should examine these more closely if you find a large percentage of your class is performing below average. While it may be that too many in the class are neglecting their studies, you might consider the possibility that you haven't covered the material with sufficient depth or clarity, or haven't fully explained your grading criteria. Devote some class time after exams or assignments to evaluate the class performance, and provide examples of what you consider to be an "ideal" answer or essay.