Grading for learning: Guidelines for supporting student success

What if students could see grades as a means to understand how well they are reaching their learning goals rather than obsessing about points and percentages and grades? What would it take to de-mystify the whole grading process and involve students in a focused approach to learning?

These questions form the core of the movement toward standards-based grading—also known as evidence-based grading. The movement is rooted in the understanding that meeting high education standards should no longer be limited to select groups of students; rather, educators should make it their goal to help all students become successful, self-directed learners.

For grading practices to support that goal, educators must shift from traditional grading practices to those that:

- align with standards and
- support learning.

Based on a premise that the primary purpose of grades should be communication, not competition, author Ken O'Connor offers eight guidelines for grading practices that support learning and encourage student success.

Guideline 1: Relate grading practices to learning goals (i.e. standards)

Grading procedures should align with stated learning goals (which also could be called standards, learning results, expectations, or outcomes). This alignment is direct and, ideally, a grade is determined and reported for each learning goal with no overall grade. Where teachers are re-

quired to determine single-subject grades, the contribution of each learning goal to the final grade should be clear and direct. Teachers' record keeping, therefore, must be based on learning goals, and not assessment methods.

Guideline 2: Use clearly described criterion-referenced performance standards

This guideline supports learning and encourages student success by ensuring that grades depend on clear, public per-

> ❝The time has come to de-emphasize traditional grades and to demystify the entire grading process. We need to focus instead on the process of learning and the progress of the individual student.❞
>
> KAY BURKE
> *The Mindful School: How to assess thoughtful outcomes,* K-College (1993)

formance standards that are understood by teachers, students, and parents. Performance standards should be consistently applied by teachers—especially those teaching the same grade level or course.

Rather than using points and percentages, teachers would assign grades based on clearly described, criterion-referenced (or absolute) performance standards.

Grades would derive from clear descriptions of a limited number of performance levels (2-7), and ideally would be supported by exemplars or models. This guideline also prohibits the assignment of grades based on students' relative skills compared to other students. In other words: no bell curves!

Guideline 3: Limit the valued attributes included in grades to individual achievement

For grades to clearly and consistently communicate the achievement status of students, grades must be based only on achievement on learning goals. Grades should not be used to reward or punish students for behaviors; this means teachers shouldn't provide extra credit and/or bonus questions and shouldn't use mark penalties for inappropriate behaviors such as late submission of assessment evidence. While important, behaviors such as effort, participation, attitude, or others should be reported separately in a different format. In addition, a student's grades should be based on their individual achievement—not combined with that of other students.

Guideline 4: Sample student performance—do not include all scores in grades

This guideline requires teachers to have a clear understanding of the purpose of each assessment and the need for a variety of assessment strategies. It requires teachers to understand the difference between the formative assessment process and summative assessment and the appropriate use of evidence each

assessment purpose provides. Grades should derive primarily from scores for learning goals on summative assessments. Assessment used formatively —to provide feedback on "how is the learning going?"—should never be included directly in grades.

Guideline 5: Grade in pencil—keep records so they can be updated easily

Learning is an ongoing process; what matters is how much learning occurs, not when it occurs. This guideline acknowledges that we take courses to learn, and what we did not know at the beginning should not be held against us. This guideline also respects that individual students learn at different rates and do not always perform at their real level on their first attempt, at a set time, or on one method of assessment.

Grades should be determined by the student's most consistent level of achievement, with emphasis on more recent evidence. "Grade in pencil" should not be taken literally, but it should describe the teacher's mindset about grading; they should prepare to easily change or update grades as students provide evidence of higher levels of achievement.

Guideline 6: Determine, don't just calculate, grades

For grades to be accurate, grading must be an exercise in professional judgment rather than a mechanical, numerical exercise. That means teachers need to question the widely used, but seriously flawed, practice of simply averaging marks to arrive at final grades. (This guideline is especially critical for teachers who ignore or cannot implement Guidelines 2 and 5.) If they must crunch numbers, teachers

should reject the use of the average and consider the following:

- The advantages of using level scores, instead of percentages or points
- The use of logic rules based on grades for standards to determine subject grades
- The effect of various ways of calculating central tendency
- The effect of extreme marks, especially zeros
- Whether assessment tasks and/or learning goals should be weighted
- The effect of mark distribution
- The use of "incompletes"

Guideline 7: Use quality assessment(s) and properly recorded evidence of achievement

Marks and grades are accurate and meaningful when—and only when— they are based on quality assessment and carefully recorded results. Thus,

it is essential that teachers know, understand, and apply the conditions of quality when they plan and implement classroom assessment.
The practical implications are these:

- Teachers need to be aware of and apply each condition of quality assessment (clear purpose(s), clear and appropriate targets, and sound design).
- Schools/districts should have assessment policies that affirm a commitment to quality assessment.
- Teachers need to keep records on paper or on the computer—not just in their heads.

Guideline 8: Discuss and involve students in assessment, including grading, throughout the teaching/learning process

When students know how they will be assessed—and especially when they have been involved in assessment decisions— the likelihood of student success is increased greatly. This means that teachers need to communicate in age appropriate ways about how teachers will assess their academic achievement, including how they will determine grades.

Students also need to be involved in the assessment process—through self-assessment, reflection, and goal setting. It is critical that students see assessment not as something that is done to them separate and apart from instruction. Rather, they must see assessment as something that is done with and for them as an integral part of the learning process.
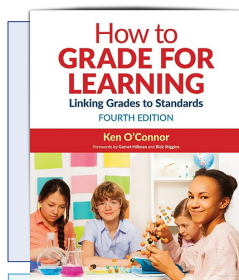
The ideas in this Learning Point were adapted with permission from *How to Grade for Learning: Linking Grades to Standards* (Fourth Edition, Corwin 2018) by Ken O'Connor.

Learn more about the book and the author at www.oconnorgrading.com

Glossary

Grade(s) or grading—The number or letter reported at the end of a period of time as a summary statement of student performance

Mark(s) or marking and score(s) or scoring—The number, letter, or words placed on any single student assessment (test, performance task, etc.)