

**Center for Instructional
Development and Research**

100 Gerberding Hall
Box 351265
University of Washington
Seattle, WA 98195-1265
Phone: 206.543.6588
Fax: 206.685.1213
Email: cidr@u.washington.edu

<http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb>

Information for People who Teach
at the University of Washington

Testing and Grading in Large Classes

In this Bulletin, we describe approaches to testing and grading that are helpful in any class but may be particularly useful when faced with the challenges of assessment in large classes.

PROVIDE CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

Making expectations clear can improve the quality of student work and reduce student queries and complaints:

- Explain criteria for grading before a test and refer to it again afterwards; explain to students how they can improve.
- Explain the format of the exam before the test day. You may want to provide examples of question types in class and/or examples of acceptable and unacceptable answers.
- Prepare a list of verbs you typically use, such as “compare”, “argue” or “define”, and explain what kinds of responses you expect in each case.
- After you hand out tests, read over the directions and ask for questions to make sure students understand your expectations.

DESIGNING TESTS AND EXAMS

- Consider your learning goals for students. Do you want them to memorize aspects of content? To apply it to other contexts? To analyze, synthesize or evaluate? Design test questions to address particular learning goals. Note that objective question types, like multiple choice, can still be designed to test higher order thinking skills.
- Emphasize on tests what you emphasize in class both in terms of content and thinking skills. For example, if your test will ask students to apply course content to new contexts, make sure that you have them practice this skill in class.
- Putting easier items first on the test helps students warm up and allays anxiety.
- Include on the test the point values of different sections of the exam so that students know which portions of the exam they should spend more time on.
- One general rule of thumb for determining test length is to assume that students will take four or five times as long to complete a test as you do. Also remember to allow time for passing out and collecting exams.
- Check test questions beforehand by asking colleagues to read over them. After the test, ask students which questions were unclear and/or have the Office of Educational Assessment do an item analysis of the exam.
- Consider retaining multiple choice exam questions instead of giving them back to students so you can re-use questions for future exams.

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ASSESSING EFFICIENTLY AND EFFECTIVELY

- *Maintaining consistency when grading problems, short answers or essays*
 - Begin with clear, uncomplicated grading criteria that you have already explained to your students. As you begin grading exams, you may feel the need to adjust your criteria in the face of student performance. Identify any ways in which you may want to adjust your criteria by skimming exams quickly before you grade. If you adjust criteria that you have previously explained to students, you should always adjust in the direction of leniency.
 - Grade one question at a time across all papers.
 - Randomly reorder papers after grading one question to avoid grades being impacted by the order in which you grade.
 - Read only a modest number of exams at a time.
- *Saving time while grading*
 - Again, clearly defined criteria help focus and limit your feedback. For essay or short answer tests, attach the rubric to the back of each student's test and indicate on the rubric where students have done well and where they need to improve. If you number the criteria of the rubric, you can mark portions of the exam with the numbers of relevant criteria.
 - Rather than writing comments on each student's exam, identify key issues and strengths across papers. Go over the exam orally in class with particular emphasis on problematic areas.
 - Set yourself a time limit (and perhaps set a physical timer) to spend per exam.
- *Reducing the possibility of needing to revisit grades*
 - Make your grading criteria clear to students BEFORE the exam. You may want to give students practice exam questions ahead of time.
 - Make your policy for appealing grades explicit on your syllabus. Require any student who has a question about grades to explain it to you in writing (not over email) before you discuss it with him/her. Give students a time limit for turning in their explanations and ask them to hand in their exam with the explanation.
 - On multiple choice tests, allow students to provide a written explanation for one of their answers on a separate piece of paper. This can help alleviate student anxiety about test items that seem ambiguous to them.
 - Provide additional information about grades being returned. What were common problems? What was the high score? What was the mean score?

ADMINISTERING EXAMS

- Be proactive in forestalling cheating. Explain orally and in your syllabus what constitutes cheating and how seriously you take it. Create several versions of the exam with items ordered differently. During exams, be explicit about asking students to clear their desks, put away their phones and refrain from suspicious-looking behaviors.
- Ask students to keep exams face down until all students have received an exam.
- To facilitate passing out exams, bring a folder full of enough exams for each row in your classroom. Have TAs or student volunteers hand a folder to the first person in each row.
- When returning exams, sort into a series of alphabetized boxes and have students retrieve their papers from the appropriate box. Or position boxes around the room with one TA or undergraduate helper stationed at each "pick-up" site. Write grades on the back pages of exams so that grades won't be visible when papers are picked up.
- Do not email grades to students, post them publicly with names or student numbers attached, or leave graded student work in a public place.

For more information on large classes or testing and grading, visit CIDR's "Changing Times" website: <http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/change/index.html>

CIDR staff are available to consult with you as you develop and administer tests and exams for your course. Call us at 206-543-6588 or send a message to cidr@u.washington.edu to arrange an appointment.



Center for Instructional Development and Research

CIDR promotes excellence in teaching and learning at the University of Washington through its work with individual faculty and TAs, departments, campus-wide initiatives, and University leaders. CIDR staff are available year-round to collaborate on the design, implementation, and assessment of ways to advance teaching and learning for all students in the diverse UW community. Consultations are confidential and offered at no charge to UW faculty, TAs, and departments.

If you have questions about teaching and learning, or you would like to find out more about working with CIDR, you can call us at 543-6588, send a message to cidr@u.washington.edu, or visit our web site:

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