FAQ: RUBRICS, GRADING, AND DEALING WITH DIFFICULT STUDENTS

Rubrics and Grading

• How should I go about making a rubric when grading?
  You should first write out a proper solution to see how you want the points distributed for the
  various steps. You should also try to anticipate some of the more common errors so that you
  stay consistent with how many points you take off. Looking at the first few exams before starting
  may help with this. The most important thing is consistency in grading. If you take off \( n \) points
  for a mistake student \( A \) made and student \( B \) does the same thing, you should be taking off \( n \)
  points for them as well. Sometimes the professor you are TAing for may have their own idea of
  how to distribute points and how harsh to be on certain mistakes, so you can consult with them
  before getting started.

Advice on Rubrics

• Problems with only one or two steps may require large point deductions for small mistakes, but
  that’s the penalty for messing up on easy questions.

• Give minimal points for a correct answer, unless the students are not required to give
  justification. Almost all points should depend on the work shown to get the answer.

• Sometimes, two students will make similar, but slightly different, mistakes on the same exam
  question. In this case, you may have to use some personal judgement on whether to deduct the
  same amount of points from both students or give one slightly more.

• Some professors use a more holistic rubric for grading (e.g., out of 5 points, a completely
  correct answer earns 5, a mostly correct answer with small mistakes earns 4, an answer with
  larger mistakes earns 3, an answer showing serious misunderstanding of the material earns 2,
  and writing down something earns 1). Only use such a rubric if the professor does as well.

Advice on Grading

• If you are allowed to choose which questions to grade on an exam, try to pick questions that are
  sequential or almost so. This will reduce time spent flipping pages (which, if you are grading 200
  or more exams, can add up).

• If you have to grade multiple problems on an exam or homework, grade all responses to one
  problem before grading any responses to the others. For examples, if you’re grading problems 1
  and 2 on an exam, grade all responses to problem 1 before starting on problem 2. This will
  improve your consistency.

• If you realize that you’ve made a mistake grading a problem, go back and correct your error on
  the exams or homework you’ve already graded.

• One strategy for grading that can be useful is to take a stack of exams and separate it into two
  piles, one with solutions to the question you’re grading that look completely correct, and the
  other with solutions that have obvious mistakes. This can make grading go much more
  smoothly, since you can expect with reasonable certainty that a given response will or will not
  contain mistakes.

• When making exams, many professors include a cover sheet where TAs can write the total
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number of points earned on each problem. If there is no cover sheet, be consistent in where
you write the point total for each problem (e.g., the top right corner of the response area).
Consistency will make adding up scores at the end go much faster.

• If you can, write comments on exams or homework when students make mistakes. Explain
where they went wrong and give the main ideas for a correct solution.

• Don’t feel bad about giving low scores.

Dealing with Difficult Students

• What do I do if a student comes asking for a grade change?
  Again, a lot depends on the professor. When meeting with them before the quarter, it is
probably a good idea to ask how they handle grade complaints. Some professors deal with this
themselves, so you can direct the student to the professor in this case. Other professors will
send the student to the TA who graded the question in order to maintain consistency. In this
case, if the question the students is complaining about is one which you graded, you can handle
this yourself. This is the advantage of having the rubric, so award points if you feel like you made
an error in sticking to the rubric. Do not get a sudden change of heart if you thought you were
too harsh when grading. As long as you were consistent (again, see rubric), then it is ok.

• What do I do if a student can’t make my office hours and wants to meet outside of class?
  In general, meeting with a student once to answer questions they have is ok. I always say they
can email me and make an appointment if they would like to do this. What you should avoid is
giving one on one time to this student weekly. If you find you are in danger of doing this, either open
up this time to an office hour for all your students, or simply direct the student to other
resources, such as the Student Math Center (SMC). If they really desire private help, then you
can always direct them to the graduate student tutor list the math department keeps on its
website.

• What do I do if a student is disruptive in class?
  By this, we mean that, for example, a student walks in 10 minutes late and made a noisy
entrance, or is constantly talking to a friend during discussion. In this situation, address the
problem immediately after discussion. Just make sure that they know that their behavior is not
acceptable, and in most cases the issue stops. The polite students will usually apologize and tell
you they didn’t realize they were being so disruptive. This is fine, everyone can move on. In other
situations, other students in the class actually help you out and tell them to stop whatever it is
they are doing to be disruptive. In the most extreme instances, feel free to talk to Professor
Radko about the issue.

• What if one student keeps asking lots of questions about an example but you want to move on?
  If the other students are also confused, then feel free to continue discussing it. The real trouble
comes when only one student doesn’t understand the example and keeps asking questions when
you feel it is more productive for the rest of the class to move on to the next example. The best
thing to do in this scenario is tell the student that they can talk with you immediately after
discussion or come to office hours to resolve the confusion.