



**ELON**  
UNIVERSITY

CENTER FOR  
**Writing**  
**Excellence**

## Commenting & Grading

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### Main Takeaway

Commenting and grading serve different yet equally important functions in writing instruction. Commenting on drafts offers formative feedback that helps students improve their work through revision. In contrast, grading final submissions provides a summative assessment of how well students met the expectations outlined in the assignment.

To support resilient writing instruction, instructors should provide detailed written evaluation criteria when introducing a project. These criteria give students a clear “roadmap” of what they’re expected to learn and how to succeed in the specific writing context. Well-defined evaluation guidelines also streamline both feedback and grading, making these processes more efficient for instructors.

Digital draft submissions enable flexible instruction, allowing teachers to comment on and grade student work regardless of whether the class is meeting in person, online, or in a hybrid format.

### Effective Commenting Strategies for Revision

The primary purpose of commenting is to guide students through the revision process. To do so effectively:

- Avoid spending time on drafts that are clearly incomplete or hastily written.
- Use the evaluation criteria to identify and prioritize major areas for improvement.
- Save time by addressing common issues in class-wide comments—through oral discussion, video, or a shared written document.
- Use minimal marking: highlight one or two representative grammar errors and indicate that others exist, rather than correcting every mistake.
- Encourage student responsibility: offer guidance without rewriting or editing for them.

## Hierarchical Strategy for Commenting on Drafts

When responding to student drafts, focus your comments to guide meaningful revision without overwhelming the writer. Use this hierarchical strategy to prioritize your feedback:

1. **Focus on a Few Key Issues**  
Limit your comments to the most pressing problems. Choose just a few areas you want the student to revise.
2. **Assess Basic Alignment**  
Does the draft fulfill the core requirements of the assignment? If not, return it without comments and ask the student to resubmit a more complete or on-topic draft.
3. **Check for a Clear Focus or Purpose**  
Does the draft respond to a meaningful question or problem? Is there a discernible thesis or guiding argument?
4. **Evaluate the Quality of Thinking**  
How strong or original are the ideas or arguments? Is the reasoning sound and well-developed?
5. **Review Organizational Structure**  
Is the draft logically and clearly organized? Does it guide the reader effectively?
6. **Assess Information Flow**  
Does the draft balance old and new information to build understanding? Are transitions and connections between ideas clear?
7. **Identify Surface-Level Issues**  
Are there significant grammar, punctuation, or spelling errors? Use minimal marking; note patterns rather than correcting every instance.
8. **Note Stylistic Concerns**  
Are there awkward phrasings, repetitive structures, or tone inconsistencies? Refer to stylistic principles (e.g., those suggested by John Bean) where appropriate.

## Grading as Evaluation

Grading serves as a summative judgment of how well students have met the expectations of an assignment and helps maintain the standards of your discipline or profession.

- For **informal or exploratory writing**, use simplified grading approaches such as:
  - o Credit/No credit
  - o A basic point scale (e.g., 1–5)
- For **formal or high-stakes assignments**, apply detailed grading criteria or rubrics:
  - o Ensure transparency by sharing these expectations with students when the assignment is introduced.
  - o Use the criteria consistently to guide both your grading and your feedback.