

Grids help me evaluate writing, but they pull emphasis away from single letter grades—single quantitative verdicts that give students no substantive feedback about *what* they did well or badly. With grids there is still a “bottom line” overall one-dimensional verdict, but it is less important because: (a) it is surrounded by numerous other judgments on substantive issues; (b) it has only three rough levels of quality. Here’s an example of a garden-variety grid:

Weak OK Strong

Content, insights, thinking
 Organization, structure, guiding the reader
 Language: sentences, wording, voice
 Mechanics: spelling, grammar, punctuation, proofreading
 Overall

I change the criteria depending on the assignment or what I want to emphasize. (Some examples: understanding of key concepts; application of concepts to new situations; effective examples; research; documentation; skill in revising; audience awareness; voice. It helps to use plain language for criteria and to tell the criteria in advance as part of the assignment.)

I could use four levels of quality (poor, fair, good, excellent), but three levels is quicker and easier. Yet the multidimensional grid as a whole has many more distinctions than a standard grade and thus it gives students far more feedback. And because there are only three levels for each criterion, I don’t have to work to figure out verdicts: after I read, I just hold each criterion in mind and see if the paper seems **notably strong** or **notably weak** in that dimension.

Reasons for using grids:

- Conventional grades don’t give substantive feedback. They are just points on a yea/boo meter. Grids tell students about what they did well and badly and about what to work on in revising or future essays.
- The more levels of quality we use, the more discriminations we have to make, and the more chances we have to be wrong or to have an argument. (“What do you mean B-, my paper was clearly a B.”) Do we really want our teaching undermined by this kind of argument?
- Grids help me assign a good draft and then a revision. I give my main response time to the draft (perhaps based on the grid with additional comments), and then nothing but checked boxes for the the revision.
- Grids are a helpful balance for the kind of commenting that that I like most. That is, I like to give “movies of my mind” as I am reading—a record of my reactions. Students often have no feeling for a *reader reading* their words--only a judge. But students get anxious when I give nothing *but* movies of my mind: “But how *good* was my writing?? What is my *grade*??” Grids satisfy the students’ hunger for quantitative evaluation without emphasizing that single, misleading, unhelpful number. Grids make them more willing to listen to my “readerly” comments about what was happening to me as I was reading.

It is easy to put a grid on a half-sheet of paper and make photocopies for each assignment--and check off boxes and perhaps write some comments on these sheets by hand. But I use my computer for grids. I make a tiny file with the criteria I want to emphasize for this assignment (often adapting a file I already have). Then as I write each student’s comment, I “import” that grid-file. This way I can, if I have time, write a few words or even a short comment about one or more criteria. When it’s a draft for revision, I write a full comment in addition.