

Grade Less. Smile More.

STRATEGIES TO COMBAT GRADE-GRUBBING

“By the time I graduated from college, I had mastered all of the grade-grubbing techniques: Arguing that a correct answer had been misinterpreted. Blaming ambiguity in the wording of the question. Finding a rare counter-example in a true/false situation. Disparaging the apparent arbitrariness of the partial credit guidelines. Questioning the wisdom of the assignment itself” (Ruben, 2018).

A critical part of the teacher-student relationship is assessment. Your students should have confidence that you will be as professional, objective and fair as possible when assigning grades. Students need to be confident that grades will never be used to punish them for their opinions, for instance, but rather will only be used to assess their mastery of the course content.

This means that the students you like the best and the students you like the least must always be on equal footing when it comes to your grading. A grading rubric is good insurance against knee-jerk reactions to the subject of, or opinions in, a student’s essay, for example.

However, even when you adhere to best practices in grading, you can expect to find grubs in your academic garden.

In his 2014 essay “Down With Grade Grubbing Weasels,” John Warner writes, “Anyone who has taught a college course has experienced the full range of student approaches to nudging their semester result upward. They come in all shapes and sizes – the abject supplicant looking for a Hail Mary, the grotesquely entitled who believe your course has undervalued their genius, and the outright threatening who are more than willing to take their complaint up the administrative chain.”

Similarly, *Chronicle Vitae* columnist David Gooblar shared this memory in a 2017 piece: “Five days after the semester ended — to be precise, about 15 minutes after I updated the final grades for my courses — the emails started coming in, like clockwork. I’m sure you get them too: the earnest and pleading requests (sometimes polite, sometimes not) for better grades.”

Learn to Cut Your Grading Time in Half



You've implemented every strategy in the book in order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of your grading. Your days as a hard ass prof. are behind you. Your blood pressure and stress levels have never been lower. Then comes the grade-grubbing.

Let's be clear: your students are entitled to ask how their grades were calculated and assigned. The math is the math, but as the instructor, you have to be prepared for those questions. After all, a large part of your job revolves around being open to questions and questioning about every aspect of the course content. It just makes sense that the same openness would apply to the assessment process.

By no means does being "open to questions" imply you should permit any student to threaten, brow-beat or question your expertise and authority.

There are strategies you can use at every point in the semester to lessen grade-grubbing (Warner, 2014):

1. Outline grading expectations in the syllabus and/or FAQ page.
2. In your syllabus, explain clearly what constitutes an A, B, C, etc...
3. Leave room for questioning.
4. Talk very little about grades; focus on completion and mastery.
5. Make an appointment to see or video conference with every student at some point during the semester. Discuss grades.

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6. Conduct exit interviews with students at the end of the semester to discuss their grades and your grading policies.

The 48/96 and 24/7 Policies

Students must wait 48 hours before they come talk to you about a grade on an assignment, and must do so within 96 hours, or the grade will not be changed. For students with full schedules, allow them to make an appointment within that 96-hour window to be kept at a later date. Be flexible, but be consistent. You can also use a 24/7 policy. Your students are required to wait 24 hours after receiving a grade before discussing it with you, and then they have 7 days to question it. After that, the grade is final.

Use Math

In your course, decide whether to round grades up or down. Whichever policy you set, make it clear to your students and never veer from that policy. For example, if in your class 89.9999 is a B+, while 90 is an A-, put that in your course description and display in it on your course website FAQ page. This will show your students that you intend to be a fair and equitable grader and that you will adhere to measureable standards.

Avoid Grade-Grubbing Conflicts

Student anxiety about grades has many unpleasant causes and regrettable effects. Make sure that every student's concerns are treated with dignity and respect even if you find yourself confronted in class, or if you feel impatient with the request (Thompson, et. al. 2011). One of the most serious side-effects associated with grade-grubbing manifests itself when the student's efforts to get a higher grade devolve into a conflict between the student and the instructor. Avoiding these kinds of conflicts is critical and requires understanding and skill.

Remember that unless you're teaching students over 25-years-old, a student's brain—specifically the frontal cortex—is not yet fully developed. The frontal cortex is called the “control panel” of the brain. It controls cognitive skills in humans, including emotional