

“Grading Made Simple” by Angela Powell

Excerpted and adapted from [“The Cornerstone: Classroom Management That Makes Teaching More Effective, Efficient, and Enjoyable”](#).

Meaningful Assignments That Are Easy to Grade

When you need to assign a formal grade, give assignments with easily-graded formats. Multiple choice, fill in the blank, and matching are obvious examples, but there are ways to make even those formats simpler. For example, you can have students write their answers on a separate sheet of paper so you don't have to flip through the packet and find the answers that students circled or bubbled. You could also photocopy blank bubble sheets and have kids mark their answers that way. With these methods, you can reuse the same tests year after year and save on photocopies.

Another great format that can be used as an occasional treat is color-by-answer assignments. Print out simple coloring sheets from the Internet or use coloring book pages. Write problems in different areas of the picture and make a key. For example, you could write a math equation in each section (if the answer is less than 10, color it blue; 10-20, color it red), or write special terms or vocabulary words, e.g., color nouns yellow and verbs green, or color words with two syllables purple and three syllables blue. The possibilities are endless. Kids LOVE these, and you can grade each paper within seconds simply by looking to see if the colored page looks like a correct student sample.

Using Simple and Consistent Markings

Choose your color for grading and use it exclusively. I use red because it stands out well and makes it clear to parents and kids what I have written vs. what they have written (my kids often correct their own papers using blue pens). Red is the traditional teacher color, and I think that some of us as adults are kind of 'scarred' from seeing red marks on our papers as kids. However, a young child hasn't had those types of experiences and therefore there are no negative connotations for them. I also use red ink for all of my stamps, so the kids associate red with positive messages, too.

I think seeing numerous corrections can be intimidating in any color, so it's more important to focus on what types of marks you are making on the paper. Be sure to use simple, quick markings, and be consistent with them. For example, I don't make big Xs by or circle wrong answers, I just draw a slash through the problem numbers.

Try not to make more work for yourself. I once knew a teacher who wrote the correct answers next to wrong ones on EVERY student paper. That's great for the kid and parent (assuming they actually read each paper) but it took her a half an hour just to grade a set of spelling tests! Another teacher I know circles the correct answers and leaves the incorrect ones alone. This helps build student confidence and makes marks from the teacher a good thing (the more, the better!) rather than a bad thing. I love this concept, but again, I wouldn't do it for the whole class because it is too time-consuming.

Staying Organized and Current With Grading

Keeping Papers from Piling Up

Try not to let students' ungraded work sit out on your desk: until you're ready to grade, leave it in the file trays where kids turned it in. Messy piles accumulate so quickly! If you have a good filing system, it should take less than ten seconds to find any stack of ungraded student work in your filing trays. Use the ideas in Chapter 4, Avoiding the Paper Trap, so there will be no more confusion about what's already been entered into the computer grade book, what's has been graded and what hasn't, etc.

Don't let papers go ungraded for more than a week, tops. This is easier said than done! However, more than once I have been in the middle of grading a tedious math worksheet when I realized I had already tested the kids on the

material. What's the point of grading the practice class work at that point? It was too late for me to assess whether or not the kids were getting it, and because I never provided them feedback on how they did, it's possible that a number of them had used the assignment to practice incorrect strategies. It was a waste of time for me and them.

Finding Time to Grade

In the past, I've set aside certain times of the day to grade papers, such as during students' Morning Work, while the kids used math centers, or right after dismissal. Every day during the predetermined time, I tackled whatever papers the kids had created since the day before. This was a very effective way to make sure that papers never piled up. I now typically grade all papers for the week at one time (during Fun Friday). This is manageable because my students complete most of their written work in workbooks and journals which are not graded. I know other teachers who stay after school one day per week to catch up on their grading.

Taking Papers Home to Grade

Although I've never regularly taken papers home, I do have an organized file folder system for transporting and keeping track of papers that I prefer to grade at my house. Sometimes I've used three folders for each subject (class work, homework, and tests); other years I just had one folder for each subject. Additional folders can also be useful:

- **Already Graded—To Be Entered in Computer:** I kept my grades electronically and put papers in this folder until the grades were entered.
- **Already in Computer—To Be Filed:** I would empty this folder into the basket of papers for students to take home.
- **To Review/Redo With Class:** When there were a lot of errors I wanted to go over, I placed the papers in this folder.
- **Incomplete:** These would be stapled to weekly evaluations on Friday as weekend homework.
- **Make-Up Work:** I normally graded make-up work every two weeks and kept it in this folder until I was ready to correct them.
- **No Names:** I filled this file if I was going to try to find the papers' owners later—most of the time, those papers got zeros and were put in the trash.

Tips for Quickly Assigning Formal Grades

- **Use a slide chart grading aid (easy grader).**

This little device allows you to have any number of problems or questions in an assignment and calculates the grade. The easy grader prevents you from having to choose a basic number of questions for an assignment, such as 20, in order to make each question worth 5 points each. With a grading aid, having 27 or 34 questions is no problem. You can buy these for about \$5 at teacher supply stores, or do an online search and download one for free.

- **Grade an assignment on criteria for multiple subject areas.**

If you assign a reading passage with questions about living organisms, you can take reading AND science grades from the same assignment. A population graph activity may provide you with social studies AND math grades. At the top of students' papers, write the subject area and grade for each, e.g., 'Rdng- B, Sci- A'.

- **Collect grades from several workbook pages at a time.**

This is a useful strategy for grading assignments in workbooks when children aren't supposed to rip the pages out. It works best when you need the grades for documentation purposes and don't need them for information on student progress. Collect the workbooks and record grades all at once for several assignments by flipping to the page numbers that students completed. You can even have students fold down the page corners to help you find them more easily.

This process is much more efficient than collecting workbooks or journals after every single assignment. If for some reason you must do it that way, have students stack their workbooks while they're still open to the right page so you don't have to flip through them.

- **When grading multi-page assignments, grade the first page for each student, the second page for each student, and so on, rather than grading the entire test for one student at a time.**

This is an invaluable tip that I learned years back, and it has saved me countless hours. When grading one page at a time, you tend to memorize the answers, making it easier to spot errors. If there are a lot of problems on each page, write the number the student got wrong at the bottom of the page, such as -0 or -3, and then after you have graded the whole stack, go back through and count up how many each student got wrong by looking at the minus-however-many that you wrote at the bottom of the pages.

- **Use accurate student papers instead of making answer keys.**

After the first quarter of the school year, you'll have a pretty good idea about which students will have the right answers on their papers. If you don't have an answer key for an assignment, check two or three of those students' papers against each other first, and find one that is basically correct. Mark corrections for any mistakes on the paper, then use it to check all other students' work against. This is much quicker than making an answer key, and if you photocopy the child's paper, you can save it and use it for the key again the following year.

- **Make an answer key transparency.**

For lengthy assignments or those you plan to use for several years, make photocopies of bubble sheets (like those used on standardized tests—check the back of your teacher's guides) and have your students fill in the bubbles instead of writing answers on the test or blank paper. Make an answer key on a blank transparency using a permanent marker. When you are ready to grade, place the transparency over a student's paper and count how many bubbles don't match up between the student's sheet and the answer transparency. I grade my students' Scholastic Reading Inventory tests this way and can get through an entire class set (45 questions each) in less than 10 minutes.

Tips for Keeping a Grade Book and Averaging Grades

- **Give letter grades instead of percentages.**

Not every school district allows this, and not all teachers like the idea, but this will save you so much time! Essentially, instead of having to calculate the exact percentage a child earned, such as 84%, you just write "B" in your grade book. This makes it much easier to glance over your grades and see how a child is doing and also how well the class as a whole scored on a particular assignment. At the end of the marking period, average the letters out mentally, or if the grade isn't immediately clear, assign each letter a point and average it that way (A=4, B=3, C=2, D=1). If your report cards don't allow for plusses and minuses to be given, this makes even more sense. Grading isn't rocket science in elementary school—don't make your job unnecessarily difficult.

- **Only use weighted grades if your district mandates that you do so.**

Have every assignment count equally, instead of weighting tests to be equal to 50% of students' overall grades, homework as 25%, and so on. This will save you massive amounts of time at the end of the quarter.

- **Simplify the way you calculate homework grades.**

At the end of the quarter, I simply go through and count up how many assignments were missing. If there were 42 homework assignments given in a marking period and a child did not turn in 3, she gets a 39/42 and the computer

automatically translates that into a letter grade and percentage out of 100. If your district requires you to assess homework separately for report cards, then that's your grade. If your district expects homework to be included in each subject area's average, you may be able to use the same homework grade for every subject, rather than differentiate with a reading homework grade, math homework grade, etc. After all, children are either doing homework or they're not, and that choice will usually impact their grades in all subjects equally. Also, if you rarely give social studies, science, or health homework, combining all the homework assignments ensures you will have a homework grade in every subject.

- **Use a computer grade book.**

I was hesitant to start this method because I thought it would be a pain to have to record grades and then enter them in the computer, but if you back up your files, you don't have to keep a paper grade book at all! A computerized grade book allows you to pull up a child's average at any point (such as when a parent calls), and at the end of the quarter, all you have to do is print out the grades.

Grading is just the tip of the assessment iceberg! The REAL key is to gauge your kids' progress WITHOUT having to sort through a stack of papers! In Chapter 24 of [The Cornerstone book](#) ("Quick and Easy Assessment"), you'll find tips on:

***Rethinking paper and pencil work: alternative activities that will save you time and photocopies! Includes an entire page of tips on managing individual dry erase boards**

***Informal assessment methods: using benchmark students, reflection questions, a 3 Things poster, learning timeline, and exit tickets**

***A simple way to tell and track: do they REALLY understand?**

***Ways to involve students in the assessment process (each one involves less grading for you!)**

***What not to grade: 3 questions to ask yourself when determining whether or not to grade an assignment**

***What to do with work you don't grade (and why it's alright to--gasp--throw some papers away!)**