

Grids enable me to evaluate writing but still take emphasis away from that single letter grade--that single quantitative verdict that gives students no substantive feedback about what they did well or badly. With grids (as I use them) there is still a “bottom line” overall verdict, but it is less important because (a) it is surrounded by numerous other judgments on substantive issues; (b) it only has three rough levels and so doesn’t try to distinguish performances and students into so many invidious pigeon holes. Here’s an example of a common, garden-variety grid:

_____	Strong	OK	Weak
_____			Content, insights, thinking
_____			Organization, structure, guiding the reader
_____			Language: sentences, wording, voice
_____			Mechanics: spelling, grammar, punctuation, PROOFREADING
_____			Overall

One can use four levels (e.g., poor, fair, good, excellent), but a grid with three levels is much quicker and easier and still far more useful than a standard grade. With three levels you don’t have to stop and try to calculate a judgment on every criterion; you just have to wait for criteria to catch your attention by being notably strong or notably weak.

Here are my main reasons for using grids:

- Conventional grades don’t give students any useful, substantive feedback; they are nothing but a marker on a yea/boo meter. Grids tell students about what they did well and badly and about what they should try to work on in revising or in future essays.
- The “overall grade” on a grid has only three rough levels. Conventional grades, with their eight to ten levels are more difficult to decide on and they are less trustworthy. 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. Grades undermine the learning atmosphere I’m trying to create. (“What do you mean B-, my paper was clearly a B.” Do we really want our teaching undermined by this kind of argument?) Students often think more about the grade than about the writing or the material, and they often feel that their main goal is “pleasing me” rather than learning.
- Speed. On important papers, grids permit us to ask for both a good draft and then a revision. We can give our main energies to responding on the draft (probably using a grid with additional comments); and then for the revision, just read it through quickly and check off boxes on a grid.
- I can use whatever criteria I want--and change them according to what I want to emphasize on this particular assignment. I get better papers when I tell them in my assignment itself what criteria I will use in evaluating. Some examples of criteria: understanding of key concepts; application of principles to new situations; analysis of data; research from new sources; close observation; giving good arguments, reasons, and examples; making the writing

appropriate to the audience; voice; clarity; correctness; good revising; &c &c &c. I like to use plain everyday language for my criteria instead of technical terms--"talking turkey" to students about what I am looking for.

- The comments that most help students, I believe, are those which give a sense of what is happening to me as a reader as I read their words--"movies of the reader's mind." Students often lack any sense of a reader reading their words--only of a judge. Instead of telling them exactly what is wrong and suggesting how to fix it, I try to give them a sense of my reactions and ask them to decide how they want to make improvements. This is the kind of thinking that makes them better writers. But when I give nothing but movies of my mind, students often get anxious: "But how good was my writing?? What is my grade??" I find that grids satisfy the students' hunger for evaluation without emphasizing that single, misleading, unhelpful number. Grids thus help them be more willing to listen to my "readerly" comments about how I was reacting to their writing.

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 it's also easy to use them when commenting on a computer (I can type much faster than I can write by hand). As I start my comments on a set of papers I make a tiny file with the criteria I want to emphasize in this assignment. (Usually I can adapt a file I already have.) Then as I write each student's comment, I "import" that grid-file. Using the computer, I can, if I have time, write a few words or even a short comment about one or more criteria. Sometimes I write a full comment in addition.