

How to Hand Exams Back to Your Class

by

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When I first began teaching, more than 30 years ago, the teaching experience I dreaded more than any other was handing back graded exams. I cringed at the thought of students' howls of anguish when they saw red ink scrawled all over their exams and their less-than-stellar grades. As I anticipated their complaints about "picky" grading and unfair questions, I trembled. My palms became sweaty and I fantasized about just leaving the room, rather than arguing with students over why I couldn't give them more credit for an almost-correct answer. I waited until the very end of the period to pass back the exams. By cutting short the time to go over the exam, I thought I could minimize unpleasant confrontations and preserve some of my classroom authority.

Today, I look back at those early days and wonder, "what was I thinking?" I have changed how I approach the day after exams. Instead of anxiety over my performance, I now focus on the students' performance and use the next class to push the learning process forward. Let me share with you five rules that I follow to reduce the anxiety for my students and me when it comes to preparing, grading, and handing back exams. .

First, when I make up an exam, I also make up a very complete grading key. The key shows the correct letter or number for multiple choice answers, the correct word or phrase for short answer questions, and a fully written out and grammatically correct "best" answer for all essay-type questions. When I grade, I revise the key to take into account answers I had not anticipated, and sometimes add variations on an answer that can earn partial credit. good

Second, I pass back exams and the grading key at the start of the next class period. By starting the class with the graded exams, I emphasize the importance of exams in the learning process. I point out that I want students to understand why they

missed an answer. In the old days, students in my classes used to immediately stuff their exam into the black hole of their book bags, but not any more. Instead, understanding the rationale behind correct answers becomes the focus of that day's class, and we spend as much time as necessary to accomplish that goal. I shorten the assignment for that day and plan to spend most of the period on discussing the exam.

Third, to take the focus off me as the examiner, I have the students meet in their pre-assigned teams to go over their exams. In all my undergraduate classes, I have 4-person cooperative learning teams. By the time of the first exam, they've been together enough that they feel quite comfortable in sharing their results. I ask the students to help each other understand why they missed an answer. In almost every group, at least one of the students will have done well on a question that others missed. They eagerly take on the teaching role, explaining why "their" answer -- notice, not my answer -- was better. In those few cases where no one did well on a question, I am available to help out. However, I deliberately keep a low profile during this group work. Indeed, the students tend to ignore me as they work with each other on figuring out what they did wrong. I am always available, of course to clear up discrepancies.

Fourth, to add a positive incentive to their discussion, I tell them that at the beginning of the next class, I will give a short quiz. It contains five multiple-choice questions based on the questions that most people missed on the exam. I tell them the questions can come from any section of the exam, whether multiple choice or essay, and so they need to review the entire exam. The follow-up exam counts as one of the regular short quizzes given throughout the semester. I typically give 12 quizzes in a 14-week class, with each counting for 1 percent of a student's total grade.

Fifth, the final exam in the course is cumulative, thus creating another incentive for students to understand questions they have missed on this exam. To reinforce the idea that exams are meant to be learning experiences, I allow them to keep the exams. Formerly, I let the students see the exams in my office, but did not allow them to take them home. I was concerned about having to make up new questions every semester. However, I now believe the extra work involved in creating new questions each term is worth it, and I've also discovered that it is not very difficult to alter old questions so that they read like new ones!

By following these five rules, I've completely changed my feelings about the next class period after an exam. I frame that class period for the students as equivalent to any other class, and they take the exam review process very seriously. Because students are explaining answers to one another, my role as the test-giving authority is downplayed and a student's role as a cooperative learner is emphasized. I rarely have students coming to me with complaints about exams, and most interactions concerning exams now focus on how they can better prepare for the next exam.

Of course, this process only works if the exam itself is well constructed. I use John Ory and Katherine Ryan's excellent 1993 book, Tips for Improving Testing and Grading to ensure that my exams are valid and reliable. So, before trying out these five rules in your own class, have a look at Ory and Ryan. Oh, and I no longer use red ink to mark exams. Years ago, one of my teaching assistants convinced me that green ink was more welcoming and reassuring to students. She was right.

References

Ory, John C. and Katherine E. Ryan. 1993. Tips for Improving Testing and Grading.
Newbury Park, CA: Sage