

# Self-Grading in Philosophy Courses

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*\*\*NB: This is very much a work in progress. I haven't done any formal research on this kind of system, so I welcome comments and/or additional examples of how this kind of system can be (or has been) implemented.\*\**

## 1 The Goal

The goal of self-grading is to improve student learning. Self-grading does this in several ways:

**It encourages students to revisit and continue to think about their work after turning it in.** *This is so important! Many students never look at their assignments again, and don't pay much attention to comments other than the grade.*

**It helps students identify for themselves the things that they don't understand as they come up.** *Students learn better if they are identifying gaps in their understanding as they go instead of waiting until, e.g. they review for an exam or are trying to write a final paper.*

**It encourages students to understand the grading rubric for the assignment and to ask questions if they do not.** *This helps students be confident that the grading for the course is fair and non-arbitrary. Students learn better when they are confident in this way.*

**It allows the professor to give students more frequent and more difficult assignments, and ensures that students take those assignments seriously, without increasing the overall stress level of the course.** *This is especially helpful in classes where you are pushing students' comfort level, e.g. in a philosophy of quantum mechanics class where you are teaching physics to humanities students, or an upper-level seminar where students need to be able to comprehend and respond to really difficult readings.*

Self-grading may or may not decrease the amount of work the professor has to put into grading; it depends how it is implemented. My sense is that insofar as student self-grading makes the professor's life easier it is because it requires the professor to have crystal-clear grading rubrics, which make grading faster and reduces student complaints about the grading process. But rubrics can (and surely should) be used independently of self-grading.

## 2 The Basic Idea

Self-grading involves several steps:

- Students are given an assignment and a grading rubric for the assignment.
- Students complete and submit their assignment.

- Students are given a way of evaluating their assignments. This might involve giving them an answer key, or walking them through sample assignments that would receive a certain grade, or having them attend a class discussion of the assignment and take notes.
- Students self-grade. This requires them to both identify and explain what parts of the assignment they did correctly, and where their assignment could be improved. It also (usually) gives them the option of correcting or rewriting portions of their assignment in order to earn back some (or even all!) of the points that they would otherwise lose. Usually a component of the assignment's grade is tied to having completed this self-grading process in addition to the original assignment.
- The student submits something that shows their self-grading work. This can just involve notes that they wrote during class on a printed version of the original assignment, or it can be a more detailed self-grading sheet that is due several days or a week after the original assignment.
- The professor reviews both the original assignment and the self-grading work to confirm that the grade assigned by the student is fair.

I use these steps as a template, but vary the details depending on the type of class and the type of assignment.

### **3 Some examples**

Below are examples of how I have implemented this system in different courses including:

- For daily, very short homework assignments in an introductory or mid-level course.
- For longer reading responses in an upper-level seminar.
- For papers.
- For weekly “problem sets” in mid-level courses.

#### **3.1 Daily, short homework assignments**

These daily homework assignments are designed to encourage students to read the assigned reading for the day carefully and to allow them to practice important skills like identifying the thesis of a paper, identifying the definition of technical terms, argument reconstruction, etc. They are generally very short, requiring no more than 50 words and sometimes far fewer. They work well in both introductory level and mid-level classes.

The homework question is assigned along with the reading. Students submit their answer online before class and also print and bring a copy of their homework to class. During the class discussion, at whatever point it becomes relevant, the professor pauses and asks a volunteer to present their answer to the homework. The professor reviews the correct answer to the homework and asks students to grade their homework right there in class, using the following rubric to assign a grade out of 5 points.

Step 1: Assign yourself an initial grade

3 out of 5 points if you attempted the question, but got the answer completely wrong

4 out of 5 points if you attempted the question, and got the answer partially correct.

5 out of 5 points if you answer the question correctly.

Step 2: Demonstrate your understanding

If you did not get full credit on Step 1, but you understand the correct answer, write down the correct answer and explain how it differs from your original answer. Then add one point to your initial grade to get your final grade.

Students are encouraged to ask questions if they aren't sure about the correct answer. The professor can then either collect the printed assignments with the students' self-grading notes or ask students to submit a separate self-grading sheet online, whatever is easier.

### **3.2 Longer reading responses.**

These assignments consist of 3-5 reading questions that require students to write 500 - 1500 words in response. The questions rarely had a single right or wrong answer. The goal of the assignments is to encourage students to do the reading and come to class prepared for discussion, while also giving them a lot of opportunity to practice writing in a low-stakes setting.

Students submit their assignments online before class. They also print the reading response and bring them to class. In class students review their answers in a small group and then we discuss them as a whole class. After class students are asked to self-grade their response using the following rubric.

Step 1: Assign yourself an initial grade

3 out of 5 points if you answered all of the questions, but your answers had serious shortcomings in terms of either accuracy or clarity.

4 out of 5 points if you answered all of the questions, and your answers had some shortcomings in terms of either accuracy or clarity (but not serious ones).

5 out of 5 points if you answered all of the questions, and your answers had few shortcomings in terms of either accuracy or clarity.

Step 2: Demonstrate your understanding

If you did not get full credit on Step 1, but you understand how to improve your answers, rewrite them and explain how they differ from your original answers. Then add one point to your initial grade to get your final grade.

Students have to submit their self-grading sheet within a week of the day the reading response is due. If students don't complete the self-grading exercise they automatically get 3/5.

### **3.3 Papers**

Students submit the original version of the paper and are given a clear rubric, e.g. grades on the paper are out of 10 where 2 points are for the argument reconstruction, 2 points are for your analysis of the argument, 2 points are for accuracy, 2 points are for clarity, and 2 points are for completing the self-grading exercise.

Students are then given a self-grading guide that helps them evaluate each component of the rubric. For instance:

Argument reconstruction (worth 2 points)

Compare your reconstruction to the reconstructions on the sample assignments.

Was your reconstruction correct? If so, give yourself 2 points.

Was your reconstruction partially correct? If so, give yourself 1 point.

Was your reconstruction incorrect, but at least you attempted it? Give yourself .5 points.

Analysis (worth 2 points)

Did you do all three of the following?

A. State whether you thought the argument was sound or unsound and why.

B. Consider a possible response to your position.

C. Explain why that possible response didn't change your mind.

If so, give yourself 2 points.

Did you only do some of A - C? If so, give yourself 1 point.

Did you do none of A-C? Give yourself 0 points.

Accuracy (worth 2 points)

Was your paper accurate? (Did you consistently define terms, explain key ideas, and attribute positions to other philosophers correctly?) If so, give yourself 2 additional points.

Was your paper somewhat accurate, but could have been better? Give yourself 1 point.

Was your paper not at all accurate? Give yourself no points.

Clarity (worth 2 points)

Was your paper clear? If so, give yourself 2 additional points.

Was your paper somewhat clear, but could have been better? Give yourself 1 point.

Was your paper not at all clear? Give yourself no points.

Self-grading:

If you did not get full credit in any of the categories above, but you understand how to improve your paper, rewrite the relevant portion of the paper and explain how it differs from the original version. Then give yourself 1-2 additional points depending on whether you have resolved some or all of the areas where you originally lost points.

### **3.4 Weekly Problem Sets**

These assignments work well in class with at least some formal content, e.g. logic, critical thinking, some philosophy of science classes, but can be used in any class. The problem sets usually consist of a mix of short questions and questions requiring a paragraph or more of writing.

Problem sets are posted along with a grading rubric that helps students understand how each question on the problem set will be graded. Students complete and submit their problem sets online. The professor then posts an answer key and a self-grading guide. Within a week, students need to grade their own problem set, using the rubric and the self-grading guide.

Here are some examples of the kind of thing students would see on the self-grading guide:

*For a short, relatively easy question.*

Question 1. Worth 1 point. Grade your answer using the following rubric:

Was your answer correct? If so, give yourself 1 point.

Was your answer incorrect, but you now understand why you got it wrong? If so, write a detailed explanation of what you got wrong and why and give yourself .5 points.

Otherwise, give yourself 0 points.

*For a short, really hard question.*

Question 2. Worth 1 point. Grade your answer using the following rubric:

Was your answer correct? If so, give yourself 1 point.

Was your answer incorrect, but you now understand why you got it wrong? If so, write a detailed explanation of what you got wrong and why and give yourself 1 point.

Otherwise, give yourself 0 points.

*For a question that requires a longer answer and that has a single right or wrong answer.*

Question 3. Worth 4 points total; 2 points for content, 1 point for clarity, 1 point for self-grading.

Step 1. Content points:

Was your answer correct? If so, give yourself 2 points.

Was your answer partially correct? If so, give yourself 1 point.

Was your answer incorrect, but at least you attempted it? Give yourself .5 points.

Step 2. Clarity points:

Was your answer clear? If so, give yourself 1 additional point.

Was your answer somewhat clear, but could have been better? Give yourself .5 points.

Was your answer not at all clear? Give yourself no points.

Step 3. Self-grading:

If you did not get full credit on Steps 1 and 2, but you understand how to improve your answer, rewrite it and explain how it differs from your original answer. Then give yourself an additional point.

*For a question that requires a longer answer and that can be answered well in many ways.*

Question 4. Worth 6 points total. 2 points for content and reasoning, 2 points for clarity, and 2 points for self-grading.

Step 1. Content points:

Did you do all three of the following?

A. State why you agreed or disagreed with the author.

B. Consider a possible response to your position.

C. Explain why that possible response didn't change your mind.

If so, give yourself 2 points.

Did you only do some of A - C? If so, give yourself 1 point.

Did you do none of A-C? Give yourself 0 points.

Step 2. Clarity points:

Was your answer clear? If so, give yourself 2 additional points.

Was your answer somewhat clear, but could have been better? Give yourself 1 point.

Was your answer not at all clear? Give yourself no points.

Step 3. Self-grading:

If you did not get full credit on Steps 1 and 2, but you understand how to improve your answer, rewrite it and explain how it differs from your original answer. Then give yourself 2 additional points.

Usually completing the self-grading exercise is a component of the student's grade. So, e.g. the problem sets are out of 15 points and 3 of those points are for completing the self-grading exercise. It also should be emphasized that students can only get credit for a problem through the self-grading exercise if they at least attempted it on the original problem set.

## 4 Frequently Asked Questions

### **How often do you have to change a grade?**

Sometimes. It depends on the class, and it is more common at the beginning of the semester, when students are first getting the hang of things. And extremely unscientific guess is that after the first few assignments, I change my students' grades only 5% of the time.

### **Don't students try to cheat by giving themselves a better than deserved grade?**

Some do. It's pretty easy to spot them early on, though, and then give those students a little extra scrutiny on subsequent assignments. It also helps to emphasize in class that you are reviewing their grades before they are finalized. It's not just self-grading. It's self-grading *with lots of oversight*.

### **How are students supposed to assess the clarity of their writing?**

This is hard, but I think it is a hard thing that is worth facing up to and dealing with. If you can't teach your students to evaluate the clarity of their own writing then how can you convince them that you are grading them fairly and objectively when \*you\* grade the clarity of their writing? As professors, our attitude toward clarity should not be just "we know it when we see it." (Although of course we do!)

In my experience there are two strategies here, probably best used in conjunction. The first is to give students lots of examples of both clear and unclear writing and to emphasize the ways in which that writing is clear or unclear. (It can be especially helpful to explicitly acknowledge that the readings that we assign for class are often themselves somewhat unclear.) The second is to give students a list of the kinds of things we are sensitive to when evaluating clarity. These include, e.g. using simple language whenever possible, defining all technical terms, avoiding metaphors, using lots of signposting, including concrete examples for abstract concepts. This kind of list can give students something to refer to when evaluating the clarity of their own writing.