



20 Ways to Cut Your Grading Time in Half

By Jennifer Gonzalez

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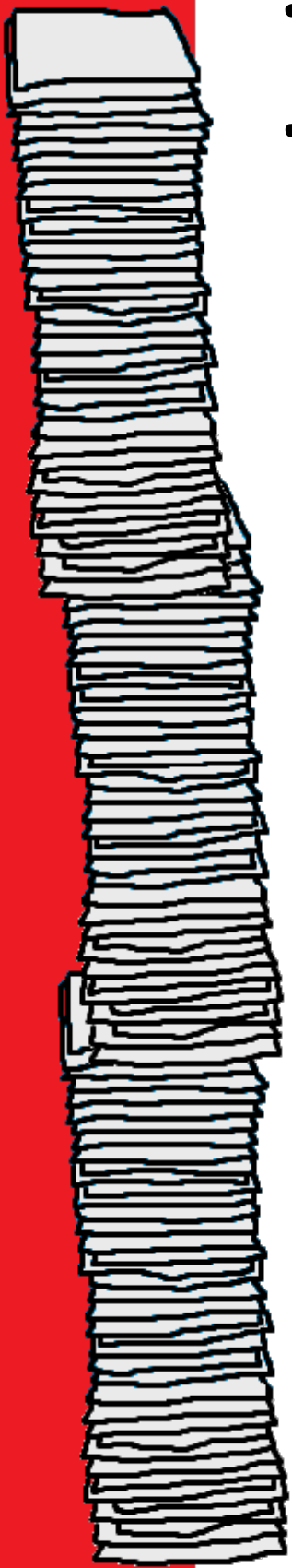
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I have always been too embarrassed to tell this story. It was my third year of teaching and I was behind on grading. Five folders bulging with quizzes, make-up work, essays...I was looking at a solid weekend of nothing but grading.

At my dining room table that Saturday morning, I sorted the papers into piles. I picked up a stack of worksheets from first period and prepared a column in my grade book to record the scores. I uncapped my pen, sighed, and stared at the first worksheet. Then I thought, *Wait. These are just worksheets. From three weeks ago. No one has asked for them. I bet they don't even remember these. What if I just...*

I stood, gathered that pile of worksheets and the ones from my four other class periods, walked over to the recycling bin, and dropped them in. One hundred and twenty papers, gone in an instant. Yes, I still graded the other stuff: the quizzes, the essays...but those worksheets were no longer my problem. I felt kind of guilty. But mostly I felt *free*.

Chances are, you've been where I was that day. Maybe you didn't solve the problem the way I did, but I'll bet you considered it. Well there's a better way. **Lots** of better ways, actually. In the following pages you'll find **20** really smart ideas you can mix and match to cut back on the time you spend grading and get those piles of paper – even digital “paper” – under control.



Enjoy!

~Jenn

Don't grade everything.

While throwing student work away is not recommended, it's a good idea to limit what you actually assign a grade. It's important for students to get lots of practice, and to get credit for their effort, but not *everything* needs careful grading. Here are some ways to grade more selectively:



▶ **Pick Just One**

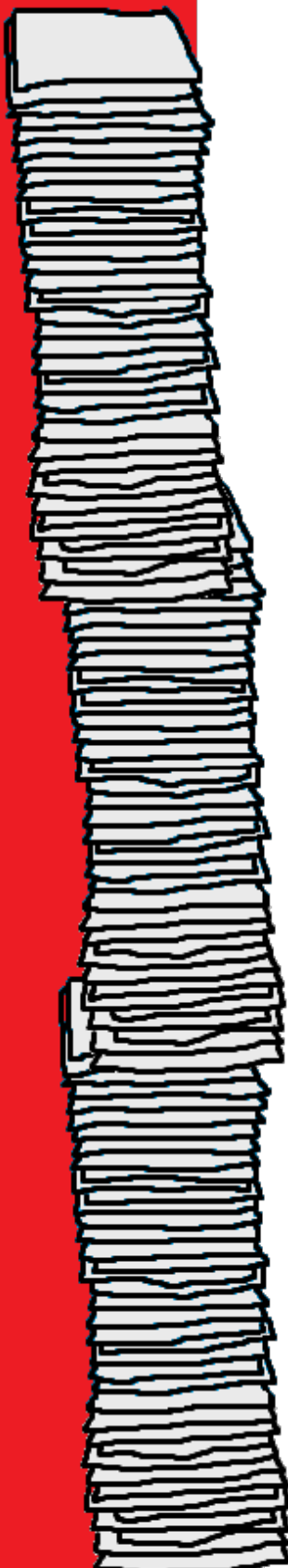
Have students do several similar assignments in a row (journal entries, short constructed responses, geometry proofs, bell-ringers) keeping them in a folder that's stored in class. Then have the student choose the **one** that best represents their ability to turn in for a grade (or they can circle it, highlight it, or mark it with a post-it).

▶ **Spot Check Items**

Let students know ahead of time that for some assignments, you will look over the whole thing for completion, but will choose only a few items to look at carefully and grade for correctness. So for a page of twenty math exercises, you could decide ahead of time that number 3, 7, 15, and 19 are representative of the skills you're looking for, so you only mark those on every paper. Of course, you will not *tell* students ahead of time which items you'll choose; they will find out later, and their "score" will be whatever percentage of those four items is correct.

▶ **Spot Check Students**

Collect everyone's assignments and scan them all for completion, but each time, pull a small number (4-5) of student papers to grade closely. Keep track of the students who get this close inspection, and do it for a different group of students each time until you've gotten to everyone.

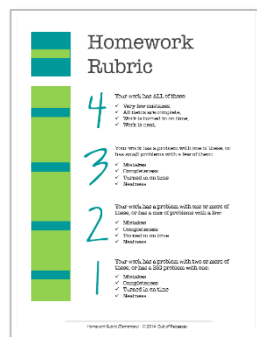


▶ **Start Saying “Practice” and “Feedback”**

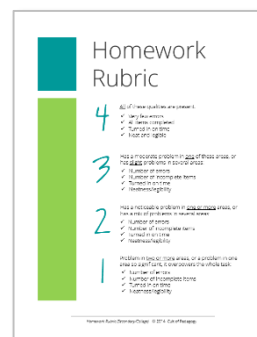
Maybe a change in vocabulary is all you need. Instead of calling every task an *assignment*, start calling more of them *practice*, where the focus is on getting better. Likewise, instead of promising to give every task a *grade* or *score*, give some of them *feedback*, telling students what they are doing well and where they need improvement, rather than always providing a score. When a gymnast is learning a new move, she doesn't go back to her coach after every attempt for a *score* – there's a learning period, a trial-and-error stage that's just about practice and feedback. If that's not already built into your instructional routine, give it a try.

▶ **Batch Scoring with Holistic Homework Rubrics**

Instead of grading every single assignment one at a time, put student work into larger batches and grade each student's work holistically, giving one broad score for accuracy, completeness, punctuality, and neatness over a one- or two-week period. This allows you to stop nitpicking and evaluate work habits as a whole. Although it's still important to assess student understanding of concepts right away, much of this can be done during class time or by informally scanning work as it comes in. When it's time to actually mark papers and record scores, batch scoring can save a ton of time. Check out my FREE holistic homework rubrics to get started:



Elementary (K-6)



Secondary/College (6-12+)



Get students involved.

Your expertise is necessary to make the tough decisions about whether students' work is being done well, but sometimes, students can score their own work. Not only does this save you time, it helps them become more independent learners.

▶ **Grade Papers as a Class**

This one's a classic, but it's worth mentioning: When students finish a task, especially one with cut-and-dried answers, it's fine to go over the answers as a class and have students mark their own papers. It provides instant feedback and allows students to ask questions. To add individual accountability, circulate around the room, informally checking student papers for accuracy.

▶ **Give Away the Answers**

For class work, consider simply providing students with an answer key, holding them accountable for doing the work *before* checking the answers. This obviously requires a shift away from traditional classroom practices: Instead of trying to guess the right answer just to get the right answer, the goal becomes figuring out if you can reach it, and being able to explain how you got there.

▶ **Answer Stations for Tests and Quizzes**

This isn't a HUGE time-saver, but it's an easy way to give feedback: On test days, set up an answer station in a tucked-away part of the classroom (so test-takers can't see it), where the answer key is provided along with a colored marking pen. When a student is ready to hand their quiz in, send him to the answer station *alone*, *holding only his test*, and let him mark incorrect answers. This offers immediate feedback and keeps students from wondering how they did. For essay questions, provide a general summary of what you're looking for, but grade the response yourself. And of course, double-check student corrections for accuracy.

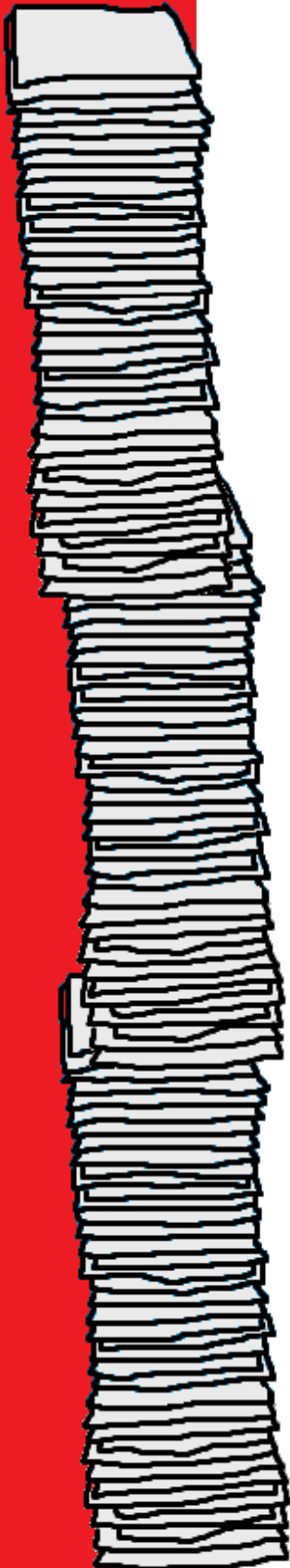
Get more efficient.

It might be that you don't actually have as much grading as you think; you just need to find different, more efficient ways to approach it.

- ▶ **Grade-as-They-Go** ←
Start grading assignments while students are still working on them: Move around the room, placing a check mark beside any items that are done correctly, and circle those that are incorrect. When papers are handed in, you can ignore everything with a check mark – your work is part-way done!
- ▶ **Collected Works**
If students do repetitive daily work, instead of taking up five separate items from each student per week, have students keep “running” assignments all on one paper (or a stapled set), then collect and grade them all at once.
- ▶ **Five-at-a-Time**
When you have a multi-page document to grade, especially one that can be checked quickly for correctness, don't go through each packet one at a time! Grade five (or more) simultaneously: Lay the papers side by side and grade all the page 1's at a time. Record the number missed at the bottom of the page, then turn all packets to page 2 and repeat. When you get to the end of the packets, just go through and add up the scores from the bottom.

This idea came from Marilana Evans, one of our Facebook followers. Thanks, Marilana!



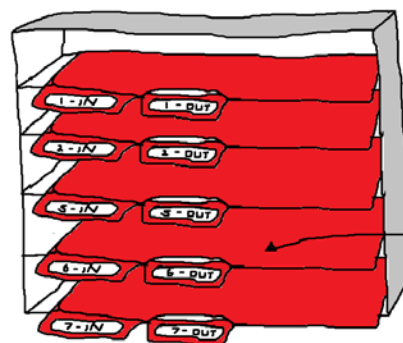


- ▶ **Mark, Comment, Record, and Reflect Separately**
Grading student work actually has four separate components: There's the *marking* of correct and incorrect responses, *commenting* on the quality of work, *recording* scores in your grade book, and *reflecting* on student progress for the purpose of planning for differentiation, re-teaching, or enrichment. Trying to do all four at the same time can make grading drag on and on. Next time, try running through that stack once just to mark incorrect items, then again to comment, and so on. See if this picks up the pace.
- ▶ **Shorthand Your Feedback**
Teachers waste hours of time repeating the same comments on paper after paper: "run-on sentence," "not clear," "can you elaborate?" Whenever possible, find ways to put your comments into some kind of shorthand, and teach your students how to interpret them. Take a look at our video on [Rubric Codes](#) for a great example of how this can be done.
- ▶ **Automate Your Feedback**
Build a nice long repertoire of phrases you can use to provide feedback to students. This will cut way back on the time it takes to think of something unique for each student. Angela Watson's fabulous list of [feedback comments for student writing](#) is a fantastic resource for this.

Get your files in order.

It's not just student work that piles up; you have administrative paperwork, lesson plans, curriculum materials, and all sorts of other print and digital documents that threaten to swallow you whole. If you can set aside a little time to get really organized, here are some starting points:

- ▶ **Set up a Comprehensive Paper and Digital Filing System**
The Organized Teacher blog has a really detailed set of instructions for setting up your entire filing system, including curriculum materials, notes from faculty meetings, e-mails and digital files. Click [here](#) to take a look.
- ▶ **Sort Out Online Bookmarks**
You find a ton of stuff online, too much to keep track of, right? While your browser's bookmarks do a decent job of storing links to these resources, you might be ready to step up to something more robust. A social bookmarking tool like Diigo allows you to save, sort, highlight and annotate online materials. To learn how to use it, check out our [3-part tutorial](#).
- ▶ **In and Out Folders**
Although I think this one's fairly obvious, I figured I would show you how I kept student papers sorted out for grading: I set up stacking files, one for each class period. Inside each slot, that class would get one "in" folder for work that needed grading, and an "out" folder for graded work. Elementary teachers can do this same thing by subject.



two folders for each class period; one "in" and one "out."

When all else fails, just dig out.

A lot of what I've shown you here are proactive strategies you can use to prevent grading and paper overload. But what if you're already way behind? Already overwhelmed? Sometimes you just need ideas to help you dig out of the hole you're in. Here are a few:



Reward Yourself

Break up the work into small, manageable chunks. At first it might be only three papers at a time. Then find small ways to reward yourself after completing each set of three. The rewards can be small, too, like allowing yourself to do the thing you want to procrastinate with (2 minutes on Facebook, eat a Hershey's kiss, move the laundry from the washer to the dryer...that's right...because when you have papers to grade, laundry actually starts to look fun!). Then start working and rewarding!



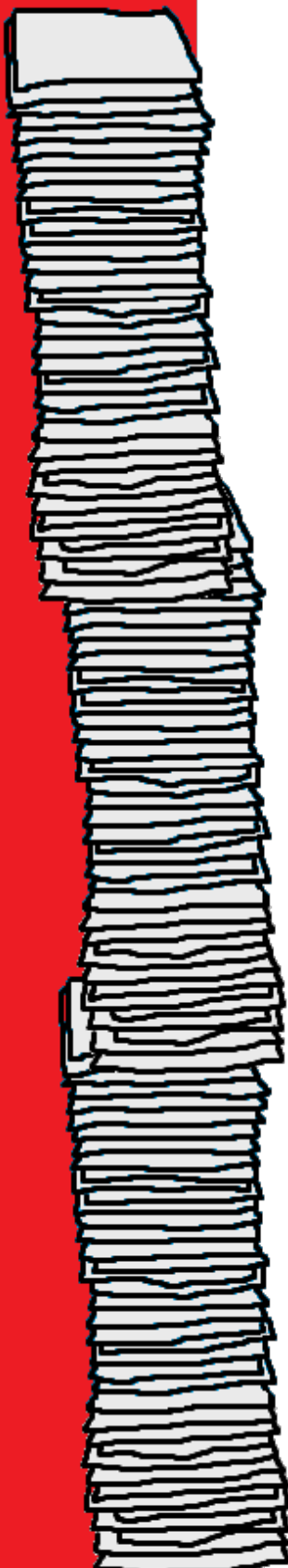
Get Help

Depending on the kind of work you have to grade, you can get others to help you. Some teachers have family members or student assistants help with simple assignments that just need incorrect answers marked, using a key. If and when you have someone help you grade, be sure to look over the papers for accuracy, and if students help you, only choose kids who are mature enough to keep other students' scores private.



Catch-up Day

You don't *have* to take a sick day or show movies in class to get caught up. If your administration will allow it, plan a "catch-up day" with your students. Let them know you need some down time to get caught up on grading, and have them organize their binders, sort out the files on their tablets or laptops, catch up on make-up work, do homework, or read or write silently. You can give them a participation grade if that helps keep them quiet!



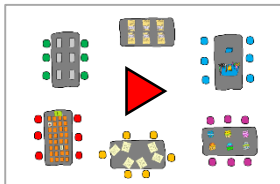


Hi there. My hope is that somewhere in these pages, you found the one trick that will really help you feel less overwhelmed and more in control of your paper load. I would love to hear which one made a difference for you. E-mail me at gonzjenn@cultofpedagogy.com to tell me about it. And if you have suggestions for other e-booklets you'd like to see in the future, tell me about those, too.

Here are a few other things you can do next:



Visit my store on [Teachers Pay Teachers](#), where I am regularly adding products you can use in your teaching.



Come over to Cult of Pedagogy and watch a few short [videos](#) to learn some new instructional strategies.



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Thanks!

Jennifer Gonzalez