Grading Lab Reports
Advice for Responding to Student Writing (especially for TAs)
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Grading lab reports serves three purposes:
- Helping students improve their understanding of science and laboratory skills
- Helping students become better writers, particularly in their discipline
- Evaluating student work (i.e., giving them a grade)

When students know their work is being graded consistently across different sections of a course, they respond to criticism more positively. This advice is intended to make lab report grading more effective and more efficient.

Suggestions for writing effective comments that promote learning:
- Share your grading criteria with students in advance.
- Help students see what's good and bad about their report; don't just circle errors.
- Avoid making too many comments or corrections; instead, comment on what is most important for each assignment.
- Respond respectfully; say where you're confused or where something is missing or wrong, but also point out strengths.
- Help students understand what kind of material belongs in each section of a report.
- Help students see the connection between content and style. Garbled paragraphs and sentences obscure one's ideas. Mechanical errors undermine a writer's credibility and professionalism.
- Consider using something other than a red pen for writing comments.
- Show students examples of answers that are correct and well written.
- Avoid changing a writer's style unless you can explain why his or her style is incorrect, ungrammatical, or hard to read. Don't try to get every student to write the way you would.

Techniques for grading efficiently:
- Identify surface errors, but *don't edit the whole report*. When there are too many corrections on a paper, students often become discouraged or confused. In grading papers, less is often more. For example, instead of editing punctuation errors throughout a paper, correct punctuation or grammar in one paragraph; then write a comment saying that these errors appear throughout the report, and recommend that the student go to the Writing Place for help.
- Suggest a major problem to work on in the revision or next report.
- Spend more time giving comments when students have a chance to revise.
- If the paper has too many problems, invite the student to come to your office hours to discuss the report. Students can often explain concepts orally that they had trouble writing; they need to learn to articulate their reasoning.
- If a problem is common to the whole class, use 5 minutes of class time to explain it to the whole group at once.
- If a report is riddled with errors, refuse to accept it.

Techniques for grading fairly:
- Talk to other TAs about their standards: What constitutes "innovation" in their minds? How much do they take off for 2-3 mechanical errors? Aim for consistency across sections.
- As you assign a grade, imagine yourself explaining your reasoning to the student.
- If you assign less than the maximum score, you should be able to explain how the student could improve in this area.
- Avoid penalizing students simply for your pet peeves. Remember that language changes, and the rules that people have learned years ago in school may have changed.