

How to evaluate? *A quick guide*

There are two basic types of evaluation regarding the academic classroom, that of students and that of faculty, which focus on learning and teaching, respectively. The two domains are however strongly intertwined, and this document suggests how a good combination of the two could look like. Remember, however, that adaptation is crucial, as is holding onto the principles of 1) gradually building skills and knowledge; and 2) transparency, diversity and consensus about evaluation criteria.

Students usually get evaluated by their teachers, but they can also evaluate themselves individually and receive feedback from their peers as a group. Depending on the type of class and students' experience, I consult with students on how they prefer to be evaluated, usually drawing on a broad menu of tasks and feedback type. For instance, in an elective or advanced seminar involving both technical skills (e.g. paleography) and the digestion of secondary sources, the following can be relevant:

- Classroom presentation
- Presence and participation in class and through the class website
- Short assignments to be handed in or shared online
- Final paper or joint project / presentation
- Mid-term and/or final exam

Teachers' expertise can help define which of these moments are better administered by them, although at least with senior students there is a way to jointly write and/or grade exams, as well as evaluate participation, presentations and even papers. The success of performing evaluations in this way depends on the type of dialogue students and teachers foster already at the beginning of the class/term, as well as on institutional culture. If the experience is one-off rather than something classes face routinely, students may be less likely to make the most of the opportunity.

Typically, I would propose an evaluation package, indicating the criteria, schedule, assessor/s and the relative weight of each element as a starting point for discussion, and ensuring that the class and the assignments given build gradually the stated skills and knowledge to be assessed. If neither aspect is clear to the students and instructor, the evaluation procedure is flawed. This is a sample outline of pertinent criteria, which could change, not only between classes, but also among students in the same class:

Element	An excellent element would...	Frequency
Presentation	Be knowledge-based and critical, original, well structured, clear and concise	Once or twice
Participation	Be voluntary, consistent, original, knowledge-based, clear and concise, critical and respectful	Ongoing
Short essay	Propose an original thesis, evidence-based, engages both debates in the field and primary sources, clear and elegant academic prose	Once or twice
Final paper	As above, larger in scale and in all matters more pronounced, building on accrued feedback	Draft and final
Exam	Show an ability to synthesize and analyze knowledge built in class and independently on the basis of reading materials	Once

Students consider my proposal until our next meeting, as do I on the basis of the group's initial composition and their initial reaction, at which point we may come up with revised proposals (perhaps making room for individual wishes as well) and discuss them until we reach consensus. You would be surprised at how smooth and fast such processes could be, but of course there is also no reason to shy away from any debate that clarifies everyone's position. As a humanities instructor, I too have red lines. For instance, in a traditional-style seminar, I think that a final paper (which can be evaluated in different ways) must be worth at least 50% of the final grade and that participation in the discussion (and there are various forms for doing so) must make up the majority of the rest. The former combines the most important skills humanities students are expected to acquire, while the latter paves a path to articulating and digesting material in an open and collegial way that is unique to a classroom setting. At any rate, establishing what a good academic paper is and what are positive ways to contribute to a discussion in class need to be routinely demonstrated in class. Otherwise students have little to go by when preparing tasks, let alone final papers.

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Improving our **teaching** skills is always a work in progress in which student- and peer assessment play a major role. Course evaluations are perhaps the most familiar form of feedback an instructor receives, but they are the least useful for the students of an ongoing class (and, unfortunately, they are sometimes designed for entirely different purposes than improving learning and teaching...). That's why ongoing classroom assessments are superior for understanding in real time what students are learning, what can be improved in teaching and how. Structured feedback can be simple and concise during class, over a break or after class. Here are a few suggestions, none of which reduces from the importance of the most straightforward forms of feedback, namely regular eye contact and discussion:

- Concept cloud: students make a diagram reflecting the foregone discussion
- Mini essay: students respond briefly to questions such as a) what is the most important thing you've learned during this class? b) what is the most important thing that remains unanswered? c) what is the muddiest point/concept in this lecture?

You can carry these out using index cards, which lend an informal character to the activity.

- Personal or anonymous feedback on the class online portal
- Group feedback collected by someone other than the instructor

These options can be based on responses to general questions such as: a) what works? b) what doesn't work? c) how can things be improved?

- Midterm evaluation. Questions may include: a) what do you like about this class? b) what do you dislike about this class? c) what would you change about this class? d) what is helping you learn in this class? e) what is making learning difficult? f) how can your learning be improved?

This can be done online or during class, and questions can be more specific. Either way, it is important to discuss the results and clarify the extent to which the teacher's can respond to them during term.

- Small group evaluation. Students respond individually to the same set of questions as above (or after filling a midterm evaluation) and come together to complete a collective form based on the same questions.

This exercise enables you to quickly and easily get themed feedback from a class (of any size); it also gives students a chance to hear how their peers are evaluating the class, sometimes adjusting perceptions through their interaction. Important: the group form can only be filled on the basis of a [full group consensus](#).