Grading Five Hundred Pages

Idea In Short

Get content right before touching persuasion: ask the right question, frame the problem and prove the recommendation deserves a million dollars. Then craft the argument with clear takeaways, working titles, disciplined formatting, visible logic, a stated so-what and a story the reader can follow.

The Double-Edged Sword

Grading papers is insanely time-consuming and enormously valuable, both at once. A single semester can mean reviewing more than 500 double-spaced written pages plus countless presentation slides, teaching assistants notwithstanding, because some feedback must come from the grader's own eyes. The payoff justifies the hours: when someone really digs into your work and returns raw, actionable feedback, consider it gold, since it is the only way anyone gets better.1 Team assignments raise the stakes further. The toughest and most interesting problems require teamwork, being too large, ambiguous and conflicted for a one-person show, so student teams spend enormous time cycling through the madman, architect, carpenter and judge phases of writing that Betty Sue Flowers named.2

Content First, Persuasion Second

The grading hierarchy never changes. Content comes first, and the first goal of any paper is asking the right questions, genuinely one of the hardest parts of the work. Teams must frame the problem into distinct elements, sorting inputs from outputs, constraints from considerations and in-scope from out. Then come the recommendations, defended against alternatives: why these rather than others, and where is the proof, evidence and logic that gives a reader confidence? The severe test separates recommendations from mere ideas: is this worth one million dollars of the client's money? Only after content survives that test should teams begin the equally laborious craft of structuring a great argument, and semester after semester the papers tackle worthy questions at recognizable companies

spanning retail, energy, technology, media and consumer brands.

Takeaways and Titles

The verbatim feedback clusters into patterns, and the first cluster concerns takeaways. Be clear on what the reader should do with the information. Dense slides lose readers who cannot find the focus. Background without a call to action is a museum, not a memo. A slide carrying 122 words in tiny font has become a document pretending to be a presentation, and when options are compared, highlight the top choice rather than making the audience guess. The second cluster concerns titles, the deck's most valuable real estate. A title reading financial analysis answers no so-what, and analysis of X and Y is too generic to earn its position. Use concise presentation English, shorter phrases that read quickly, and never let three consecutive pages carry the same title, which is wasted real estate three times over. Tell the reader your point of view in the title, because that is what titles are for.3

Distraction and Logic

The third cluster gathers the small sins that compound. Five background colors on one slide distract. Mixed verb tenses at the start of parallel bullets, enhance beside enhancing, grate on careful readers. Tiny fonts on grey backgrounds defeat the eye before the argument begins. These are nitpicks individually and credibility leaks collectively. The fourth cluster cuts deeper, into logic made visible. Claims that would be true of any company prove nothing about this one. A recommendation appearing from nowhere invites the question of why this problem among all candidates. Assertions that might be entirely correct still fail when the reader is not brought along with data. Undefined terms like high profitability demand thresholds, and plausible recommendations without a visible path from evidence to conclusion remain merely plausible.

The So-What and the Story

The fifth cluster asks the executive's eternal question. What are the financial implications of the recommendation? Will it preserve competitive advantage and build a sustainable economic moat? If the reading executive agrees, what are the next steps and the risks? A paper that cannot answer those questions has stopped one chapter early. The final cluster is storytelling: make it easy for the reader to get it, supply transitions when the argument jumps from overview to deep dive, add the rigor consultants owe clients and cut words so

the great research underneath can be seen. Persuasion is architecture, and every graded comment above is a load-bearing inspection.

Running Your Own Grading Pass

Writers can apply the eight clusters as a self-review before any reviewer sees the work. Read only your titles in sequence and check whether they tell the story alone. For each page, state its takeaway in one sentence, and cut the page if you cannot. Hunt the five formatting sins, colors, tenses, fonts, density and unsourced claims, in a single dedicated pass, because mixed-purpose reviews miss them. Then role-play the skeptical executive: where did this recommendation come from, what does high mean numerically, what happens Monday morning if I agree? Finally, read the document aloud once, since the ear catches transitions and jargon the eye forgives. The pass takes forty minutes on a typical deck and routinely prevents the majority of comments a grader would have written, which is the difference between feedback that polishes and feedback that rebuilds.

Gold, Given and Received

The eight lessons travel far beyond any classroom, because the same failures recur in proposals, board papers and strategy memos written by professionals with decades of experience. The remedy also travels: find people who will dig into your work and return the raw version of the truth, and offer others the same. Feedback of that quality is expensive in time and priceless in effect, which is exactly why so little of it circulates. Be a source of gold, and seek it relentlessly.

- 1Feedback
- 2Betty Sue Flowers
- 3Purdue Online Writing Lab

Summary

Five hundred graded pages compress into eight lessons: content precedes persuasion, takeaways must be explicit, titles must work, distraction kills, logic must show, the so-what must land and the story must flow. Raw actionable feedback is gold. Seek it, give it, apply it.