

# Scoring Suggestions for Assignments

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I'm going to post here some loose guidelines for scoring of homework assignments in my course. **The main point is to convey some feedback to students.** Hopefully, these suggestions will be useful and can be adapted to be effective with regard to the main point. Most assignments have ten problems, and the suggestions are based on this assumption. In any case, the suggestions are made available to both the graders and students, so everyone should know what has been suggested and can speak up if there are any objections. And especially speak up if you have suggestions. And especially especially speak up if you have suggestions for getting better feedback that do not involve hours upon hours of work for the graders.<sup>1</sup>

There is one thing I'm a bit uncertain about: I don't know if it's better to have a grader grade one problem carefully with careful comments provided or to have the grader give some feedback on every problem. My gut feeling is that the former is better, but that engenders some problems as follows:

1. The assumption that the grader will spend a lot of time on one problem and the student will understand and then know how to do a much better job on the remaining problems assumes the student will actually go back and do the other problems (again), but...
2. Once the assignment is turned in, the student has already done all the problems (once) and is (probably) not going to go back and do them all again, and plus...
3. Why did the student do problems 2 through 9 to only get feedback on problem 1?

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<sup>1</sup>One possibility to which I and the graders might be open is for students to mark certain portions of the assignment that they particularly want read carefully and scored/graded.

I'm open to suggestions, but for the moment I'm going to suggest some less careful grading of all the problems. This can, of course, range from a cursory check that something is attempted and written to careful reading of the grader with comments. I think everyone prefers "comments" to "not comments," but it takes a lot of time and effort. Thus, I usually give the instruction to the graders: Make as many comments as you have time to make, and try to make them useful for the students. Do your best.

Perhaps points can also be used to communicate some useful information/feedback. Of course, points are inherently less descriptive, but they can be determined and assigned relatively quickly. Here is what I imagine might be a reasonable point scheme for this semester which offers something between a cursory check of completion and actual careful reading of the problem...but with a recognition that the grader can't write comments about everything. If they can be accurately assigned, perhaps this approach will be useful (though a little silly perhaps):

Each of the ten problems is "worth" 10 points.

- If the student didn't write anything on a problem, then the student gets...zero points (10 points off).
- If the student has a very nice and easily readable solution which appears to the grader to be entirely correct, then the student gets ten points (0 points off).
- If the student has a basically correct solution, but some minor errors to which attention should be paid, then the student gets nine points (1 point off) and it is highly recommended that the grader at least mark the error if not put a comment.
- If the student has a serious error and has a basically incorrect solution but still seems to at least have a pretty good idea of what the problem is about, then the student gets 8 points (2 points off). The student, if he wants to learn/understand the content/solution of this problem, some significant work/thinking is going to have to take place.
- If the student seems to really not get what the problem is about, then the student gets 7 points (3 points off). No real comment(s) need be made in this case. It is the student's responsibility to ask questions and figure out what is going on.
- If the student is completely writing nonsensical gibberish—but at least writing something—and essentially wasting the grader's time, then the student gets 6

points (4 points off). I really don't want any student to ever do this. It would be better to just write: "We're all wasting time here." There might be an "honest" 6 score of gibberish, but really there shouldn't be many. Let's say each student is only allowed two per semester. It's not nice to waste the time of others. It is almost worse than doing nothing at all.

Picking up on the last idea, if we go back to getting 7 points: You don't want to have too many of these either. Note: The responsibility is yours to understand the question. If you don't clearly see what the problem is about, make a serious effort to get up to speed. If you do understand the problem, you should be able to get at least 8 or 9 points. If you do that on all the problems, you get an 80, and that may be construed to mean you're learning something. That's good. That's all it means. Don't get carried away and come to me crying about getting a "B" in the course. This really has nothing to do (directly) with your transcript grade. You're still going to get an "A." This score is primarily about feedback. It should be **only** about feedback.

Of course, there is the exception: If you get mostly zeros and 6 scores, i.e., you're totally lost or not turning anything in, then I'll probably try to give you a "C." If you see that happening, and you're not happy with a "C," then you should talk to me. This has nothing to do with scoring really. Similarly, if you're really struggling and getting mostly 7 points (70s on assignments), then let's really try to get you up into (at least) the 8 point range on most problems. The graders and I will try to do everything we can, but remember 80 means learning, and no one can do that but you.

Let's just add finally: If you have any special instructions for the grader, you can write them on the assignment. Remember the objective is to **communicate** so be clear in your prose and in your mathematics (or try). If you're giving the grader special instructions, it might also be a good idea to pop me an email to let me know about what's going on.