

## VIDEO CASE 4—Guide to Analysis

### A High School History Department Meets to Develop Consistent Grading Criteria

The goal of this history department meeting is to make the criteria for grading student written work more explicit and consistent. The chair of the department, who facilitates the meeting, states, “It’s good practice when you’re assessing student work to know what you’re looking for. . . . The goal of this meeting is to have us look at student work and say what we’re looking for and what we found so that we can communicate more effectively with each other, reflect on what our priorities should be, and be more equitable in our grading.”

In the video, the teachers grade a 10th-grade assignment in which students have been asked to write an editorial on the effects of the Industrial Revolution from either a capitalist or communist viewpoint. The teachers are directed to use an essay checklist to assess five pieces of student writing from the class and give each a grade. For the meeting discussion, they focus their analysis on Editorial #1 and provide specific reasons for the grades they gave. The teacher whose students wrote these editorials is in the room but remains unidentified since the department chair wants to keep the discussion focused on the student work and away from the teacher and the quality of the assignment.

#### Your Facilitator

**Wait!** It would be very, very difficult to gain any appreciable benefit from your expenditure of time and energy by attempting to conduct this analysis and its series of exercises without a facilitator. You *need* to appoint someone (it can be a team member) as a designated facilitator. This is not necessarily your team leader. This person will not be your “boss.” But this person *will* be responsible for:

- Copying and distributing to all participants copies of the Case and Case Analysis and all handouts
- Organizing role-plays (appointing time keepers and observers, where indicated)
- Moving the process along and staying on track

**Psst! Facilitators:** Read all the activity directions as if they applied to you.

**Psst! Team members:** You, too.

**Materials Needed**

Video Clip

Enough printed copies of the following to distribute to all team members:

The Video Case Guide to Analysis

- Handout–History Department Meeting Agenda
- Handout–10th-Grade History Assignment
- Handout–History Assignment Sample Editorial #1
- Handout–Essay Checklist
- Worksheet–What Do You Value Most?
- Handout–Protocol for Developing a Specific Checklist/Rubric for Writing Assignments in *Your* Content Area
- Chart paper or a board and markers

## A. Analyzing the Case

### Step 1: Prior to Viewing the Video Clip, Complete the Same Assignment the Teachers Did Before the Meeting (15 minutes)

- Make sure participants have the three documents: History Department Meeting Agenda (Figure VC4.1), 10th-Grade History Assignment (Figure VC4.2), History Assignment Sample Editorial #1 (Figure VC4.3), and Essay Checklist (Figure VC4.4).
- Read the assignment and compare it to the Essay Checklist.
- Are any elements missing?
- Working individually, assess Sample Editorial #1 using the Essay Checklist and give Editorial #1 a grade.
- Post the grades given by the participants to Editorial #1 on chart paper or a board.

### Step 2: Watch the Video Clip (13 minutes)

As you watch the video, take detailed notes to capture the specific dialogue and comments the teachers make about the essay during the meeting.

### **Step 3: Establish the Facts of the Case (10 minutes)**

Divide into pairs and combine your notes. Identify which comments were positive and which were negative. Note the similarities and the differences among the teachers' comments as well as their rationales for assigning the grades. Partners share their findings with the whole group.

### **Step 4: Case Analysis Questions (15 minutes)**

Building on the previous discussion, address the following questions:

- Which elements of the assignment and those listed in the Essay Checklist are of most interest to the teachers?
- In the Video Clip there are some interesting conversations about the criteria that the teachers use to assess the writing (e.g., use of evidence, use of quotes, relationship between mechanics and content). The teachers express opinions about the Essay Checklist criteria. What are their opinions, and what are *yours* regarding the criteria?
- Do you think any of the team members will change their grading practice as a result of this meeting? If so, how?
- At the beginning of the meeting the department chair states his goals (i.e., start a conversation about making criteria for grading student work both explicit and consistent within the department, give teachers the opportunity to reflect on what their priorities are for student writing, and enable teachers to share their thinking within the department). In your opinion, which of his goals were realized and which were not?

## **B. Exploring the Dilemma**

Grading of student work has become an increasingly contentious issue in schools, particularly in high schools where students—and parents—challenge teachers on grades. Grading is often a subjective enterprise, related to the subject area, the perceived academic ability of the students in the particular class, and the specificity of the assignment.

Rubrics/checklists have become the tool of choice for grading. Rubrics, developed to make grading more objective, can be generic, designed for a particular subject area or writing genre, or adapted to

each assignment. Still, even with this tool, teachers struggle with how to give an appropriate grade.

## Step 1

Read and respond to the following thoughts about grading by the chair of the history department.

“You find teachers along a spectrum. For some teachers, the methodology is: I’m going to give them very clear, specific instruction and hold them strictly accountable, and they will learn through this mechanical process how to do what advanced writers do, which is to write beautifully and persuasively and elegantly. But they’re going to learn it through a strict method, and I think that’s a valid point of view.

Then there are the other people, the intuitive and romantic among us, who can in fact be quite inspiring and can say, Whatever the details, the citation isn’t perfect, the punctuation isn’t perfect, but are you driven by the idea? Are you organically presenting an argument? If so, I can overlook the little stuff if you get the big stuff right. This side has validity in the sense that ultimately it is about ideas.

I think there isn’t a simple answer to this question, but part of the answer about form and structure versus content and inspiration is about where your kids are at. Some of them need structure. One of the complex things you learn about your students is that some of them need structure and some of them are ready to run.”

## Step 2

After you’ve read the chair’s description of the range of grading philosophies, think about your own ideas about grading, and place yourself on the continuum ([Figure VC4.5](#)). Are you somewhere in the middle? Or a little closer to one side or the other? Put an X on a spot on the scale where *you* grade. Discuss with your team.

Bear this in mind in the next section when you develop your own grading criteria.

## C. What Do We Do Now?

The video highlighted a number of concerns:

- No single checklist or rubric can work for every assignment.
- If the checklist is generic, categories will be missing.
- There is always a tension between the weight of content and mechanics.
- There are frequent variations in teachers' grading decisions.

The department chair states, "It's our duty to our students to be clear. . . . The goal is that over time there will be more and more clarity about both what the department is looking for and what individual teachers are looking for."

Building on this idea, Figure VC4.6 is a protocol to use with your team to develop a checklist/rubric with enough clarity so that you can hold your students accountable.