

Grading for Incoming GPTIs: Instruction Set Feasibility Report

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Contents

1. Overview of Instructions.....	3
2. Methods	3
3. Results	4
3.1 Instruction Set, Part 1: Positive	4
3.2 Instruction Set, Part 1: Negative	4
3.3 Instruction Set, Part 2: Positive	5
3.4 Instruction Set, Part 2: Negative	5
4. Recommendations.....	5
Appendix A: Usability testing script.....	7
Appendix B: Feedback form – part 1	13
Appendix C: Feedback form – part 2	16
Appendix D: Research study and recording consent form	18

1. Overview of Instructions

These instructions are a two-part series designed to prepare incoming graduate part-time instructors (GPTIs) in the first-year writing program (FYW) for their responsibility of grading. This task is an important part of the job position, and because many first-year GPTIs have struggled with grading, these instructions seek to improve their knowledge, confidence, and accuracy.

The first part of the instruction set should take place during FYW GPTI orientation, a multi-day training seminar that takes place several weeks before the semester begins. Although orientation is long, this training section should take around 30-60 minutes to conduct.

The second part of the instruction set should be made available on the FYW SharePoint, a collectively accessible site for sharing documents that GPTIs have access to from orientation and through the semesters in which they teach. The document is intended to be a reference resource for GPTIs who are actively grading. It may be opened and read at any time, and as frequently as necessary.

2. Methods

These materials were tested for feasibility with a small sample of current GPTIs. The testing took approximately 90 minutes to conduct, in addition to a short break between parts one and two of the instruction set.

Participant	Semesters Taught	Class Standing	Age	Gender Identity
One	1	1 st -year MA	22	“trans masc”
Two	1	1 st -year MA	22	“female”
Three	1	1 st -year MA	23	“female”
Four	3	2 nd -year MA	22	“trans”

Fig. 1: Research study participant demographics. Gender identity is self-described.

The first part of the instruction set was tested in a role-play scenario of FYW GPTI orientation; the participants role-played as newly-hired GPTIs, and I role-played as a member of the FYW program administration team. The training was delivered in a group setting as an interactive lecture, including a PowerPoint presentation, an index card for each participant, a sample student rhetorical analysis essay, and the accompanying assignment guidelines for that sample essay.

The second part of the instruction set was tested without any role-play, but rather as a resource for currently-working GPTIs. The reference document was printed for each participant to annotate. Participants were asked to mark each confusing part with a question mark (?), each helpful part with a star (★), each incorrect part with an X, and any

other notes written out. There was no time limit given for these annotations. Once every participant had finished annotating the document to their satisfaction, the video element of the document was introduced. Participants were asked to review the video, follow along with its instructions, and make notes on the printed document as they did so.

Following each part of the instruction set testing, the participants were asked to fill out a short feedback form. For the sake of immediate feedback for accuracy, these questionnaires were separated into two to discuss only one part of the instruction set. The participants were not given a time limit for their feedback.

3. Results

3.1 Instruction Set, Part 1: Positive

The participants generally approved of the instruction set. For the first part (orientation training), the most-appreciated activity was the practical application of the training through the sample essay. Participants also noted the usefulness of understanding the grading scale, both as an objective tool (Texas Tech's definitions) and as a subjective tool (personal definitions). They enjoyed the interactive qualities, and responded as mostly confident in their knowledge in grading as an outcome of the training. With the student sample, the participants liked the use of the rhetorical analysis as the practice example, the ten-minute time frame for reading and assessing, and the ability to discuss their assessments as a group. Additionally, the participants appreciated the activity of creating a personal definition of the grading scale so much that they moved off-script to take the time to compare their definitions to each others'.

3.2 Instruction Set, Part 1: Negative

Although the participants appreciated the chance to practice grading a student essay, the use of a rhetorical analysis (the third project taught in ENGL 1301) meant that their confidence was lower than expected in beginning to grade with the first project. The participants also requested a second sample for comparison, an already-assessed sample for setting a grade norm, and a consensus of the "correct" grade for the sample used to conclude the group discussion. Additionally, the use of a rhetorical analysis as a student sample meant that the assignment guidelines were more complex than the others and needed some explanation.

Due to the small sample size of test participants (4), there was not an opportunity to create a discussion around the difference between a plus (+) or minus (-) on the letter scale. Finally, the think-pair-share model for discussing grades took more time than predicted, and needed either a time limit and/or stronger emphasis on brevity. Although the participants were more familiar with grading and with each other than incoming GPTIs

would be during orientation, this activity is still likely to take longer than it should due to the mental freedom it allows.

3.3 Instruction Set, Part 2: Positive

Overall, the testing participants approved more highly of the reference documents than the orientation training, with a 100% response rate of agreement to its accessibility, logic, thoroughness, usefulness, and correctness. The first sentence, the “Grade scale” section, “Written feedback” description, and the “Tips” section were marked as useful in particular.

Similarly, the video component received a 100% response rate of high agreement to its accessibility, logic, and usefulness. Participants noted their appreciation for its clarity, slow pace, and inclusion of less-known information like hiding/showing student grades.

3.4 Instruction Set, Part 2: Negative

Participants were able to note several instructions missing from the reference document and/or video, including manual grade overrides, drop down arrows, definition of “holistic” grading, how to save a draft of a comment/grade, distinction between departments/majors of what constitutes ‘passing,’ and the over-involvement of an instructor in their students’ grades. The most common annotation was additional bits of advice to add to the “Tips” section and reorganization of the bullet points under the “Written Feedback” section. There was also some correction under the “Grading holistically” section that questioned the statement that work should be “graded individually, rather than comparatively.”

In the video specifically, the participants requested the addition of how to set up/adjust weighted grades and calculated columns, pros and cons of hiding student grades, an introduction segment, and more thorough directions to the grading center. Participants also suggested a need for explanation of how to sync Top Hat grades and how to navigate the communication skill level rubric that is used in conjunction with the Unit 3 project grading.

4. Recommendations

While this instruction set was overall successful in improving the confidence and knowledge of GPTIs for the task of grading, there are several revisions to be made to three major elements: the grade norming practice during the orientation training, the thoroughness of the reference document, and the thoroughness of the video component of said document. Generally, the wording of the orientation training may stay the same (though future presenters may want to speak from their own minds rather than the script in Appendix A); some wording should be edited on the reference document in the “Written feedback” and “Grading holistically” sections.

The grade norming practice during the orientation training should be revised to include a sample graded language autoethnography essay to prepare instructors for grading the first project in ENGL 1301 and to see an example of a graded project. Additionally, there should be a three- to five-minute timer set on the discussion of GPTI assessments of the sample, and an unofficial one- to two-minute time limit set on the report of each group's assessment reasons. After that, the presenter (a member of the FYW administration team) should summarize the responses given to the sample and recommend a final grade to conclude the discussion.

The reference document should be revised to include more thorough information. To add additional and relevant tips, a survey of currently-working GPTIs and FYW program administrators may be useful. The video component at the end of the document should be edited to include the information suggested by participants above (in section 3.4), re-recorded with a higher quality voiceover and re-edited for a clearer introduction and conclusion segment.

Once revisions are made to the instruction set, the materials may be given to the FYW program administration team for a larger-scale testing on actual incoming first-year GPTIs. If willing, those GPTIs should be given a new follow-up instruction response questionnaire to further improve the instruction set.

Appendix A: Usability testing script

Hi, everyone, thank you for giving your time to be here today. As you know, my name is Willard Justice, and I'll be walking you through the session today. I'm going to be reading from my papers to make sure that I don't forget anything important. I've shared some information already about what this project is, but let me go over it again briefly.

I'm asking you to role-play as newly-hired graduate part-time instructor, responsible for teaching two sections of first-year composition classes. In the scenario which this training is provided, the new graduate instructors are in a multi-day orientation several weeks before the semester begins. I'll role play as a member of the first-year writing program administration team as I deliver the training. If you could do your best to approach these instructions with that mindset, that would be a big help to me.

The session should take about ninety minutes. The first thing I want to make clear is that I'm testing the training, not you. I want to know whether it works as intended, so don't worry about making mistakes. Also, please don't worry about hurting my feelings – I want to hear your honest reactions to the training and materials. If you have any questions about what I'm asking of you through this session, feel free to ask. If you need a break at any point, just let me know.

You may have noticed the camera set up. With your permission, I'm going to record our interactions and conversations. The recording will only be used to help me figure out how to improve the training materials, and it won't be seen by anyone except for me. It also helps me because I don't have to take as many notes.

If you would, I'm going to ask you to sign a simple permission form for me. It just says that I have your permission to record you, and that the recording will only be seen by the people working on the project.

- Give them a consent form and a pen
- While they sign it, start the presentation and camera recording

Do you have any questions so far?"

Alright, then let's begin.

Welcome to first-year writing orientation. Today, I'll be going over grading as GPTIs so that we can get a feel for what we need to do. Grading can be scary at first, but I know you'll get the hang of it in no time.

- Click to slide two.
- Pass out index cards and pens.

So, the first thing you need to know is your personal teaching philosophy. We'll get more into the theory of pedagogy in 5067 once the semester begins, but for now, just write down your goal for teaching 1301. What do you want to do for your students?

- Call a couple volunteers for their answers. Connect them to the program's goals.

Good! It sounds like you all have a good idea of who you want to be as a teacher.

- Click to slide three.

The next thing we need to know is how we approach grades. We all bring in our own unique perspective of what a grade means from our experiences in K-through-12 and our undergraduate years, and all of the different teachers and professors that have given us grades before.

Flip your card over and write down what you think of as the meaning of each letter grade. For example, you might think of an assignment that gets an A+ as "incredible." Just so you know, Texas Tech uses a letter scale with plus- and minus subsections. An A+ through a D is considered passing, and an F is considered failing.

At this point in orientation, I'd ask a member of the program administration team to define what an average grade is to them. Since we're in a role-play scenario, I'll simply relate to you what Dr. [REDACTED] has told me about her own perspective:

- Play the short audio clip of Dr. [REDACTED] discussing an "average" grade: Memo 3, 1:52-4:54

"An 85. It's, and again, I hesitate because that would imply that the student shouldn't use a more elevated vocabulary, but not everybody has that too—an elevated vocabulary. So, I mean, someone who does the job, does it well, but doesn't stay after school to clean the blackboards, to give an analogy. But at the same time, I think those are the kind of --- sometimes, it's just a proclivity for language in English, and not everyone is interested in that. I think the average is good, it's good, you did good, you did well. And at the same time, the more I'm talking about it with you, the more I'm like, well, maybe that should be an A, and maybe there needs to be a distinction between sort of, like, degrees of excellence rather than... But again, that's assigning excellence, and when you receive that, it becomes, oh, this is my new standard, and anything below that is not good. And that's not good for high-achieving students. So, I don't know. Average is... it's just that. So, unfortunately, it has to do with... it's not about ability, it has to do with someone's interest in vocabulary, or being particularly well-read, you know?"

Thank you, Dr [REDACTED] for your insight. Dr [REDACTED] used both a letter and a numerical grade in her description, so let's take a moment to define that by TTU's standard. Letter grades range over ten points, so an A may be anything from a 90 to a 100. A plus indicates the top half of that range, so an A+ is anything from a 96 to a 100; a minus is the bottom half, which would be from a 90 to a 94 for an A-. The only exception is a D, which doesn't have any plus or minus, and is anywhere from a 60 to a 69. When you grade, you'll do it by the letter scale, so that you can grade more holistically. However, those letters need to be converted into numbers for entering them into Blackboard. However you choose to convert them, it needs to be consistent. Don't take a point or two off from one student but not the next. So, if your B+ is an 87, every student who gets a B+ needs to be entered as an 87. Does anybody have any questions about these technical things?

- Clarify any questions about the grade scale and conversions.

Great. So let's look at your note cards and how you defined the grade scale. Look at the low end. What emotions come up when you think about assessing a student's work at a low grade?

- Take volunteered answers and accept each one as valid.

Wherever your perception of the "average" grade lays, there's a point where you consider work to no longer be 'good.' So, the unfortunate truth is that some students will do poorly in your class. You may have heard of the idea that an instructor doesn't fail a student, the student fails. Although it sounds trite at this point, this is something that you'll have to contend with as you grade. It's a balancing act between caring for the students and wanting them to succeed, and being able to give an honest assessment of their work. It's important to remember that you don't fail the student – the student fails.

If it helps, you can think of the time you spend instructing as time where you're on the side of the student. You help them learn, you provide feedback and guidance, and you support them as they work through the course materials. After you do all you can for the student, you can approach grading as time where you're committed to the integrity of the course and the field. You can give honest feedback and assess the work's quality without trying to protect the student.

- Click to slide four.

So let's move on, and put all of this talk into practice. I've emailed you all a copy of a student sample from a previous 1301 course and the assignment guidelines for that essay. Let's take ten minutes to review the assignment guidelines and the sample. When you're through, assign a tentative grade to the sample using the +/- letter scale.

- Set timer for ten minutes.

Okay, that's time. Now, I'd like you to rearrange yourselves a little bit. For those of you who gave the sample an A, come to this side of the room. For those of you who gave it a B, over here. If you gave it a C, come over here. And if you assigned it a D or F, come to this side.

- Indicate four distinct areas for the GPTIs to meet at. Divide large groups by + or – if necessary.

Talk to the other people who graded similarly to you, and come up with a summary of your reasons for that assessment. In a minute, we'll come back together and discuss as a group.

- Allow them time to discuss briefly.

Alright, can I get someone from the A group to tell me your reasons?

- Listen and accept their answers.
- Repeat for each following group.

Thank you! You all can return to your seats now. So there's some things that we noticed the sample did or didn't do that were important, like meeting the assignment guidelines or fulfilling the assignment's purpose, and some that weren't important, like spelling mistakes or formatting. To some extent, you each have the authority to determine how much is too much when it comes to mistakes. Consider a word count, for example. If the student's submission is 100 words off from the minimum, would that lower their grade? Sometimes, things that you specifically say in class can become more important than they originally were. If you take class time to discuss good quoting practice and integrating text evidence, then that might be something that you weigh more heavily.

The only thing that's important to NOT do is to take a few points off for mistakes. Although the assignment guidelines for each project give clear directions for formatting, length requirements, specific questions to answer, etc., your job is to grade holistically. That means that you should assess the student's submission as a whole, rather than by picking it apart into pieces. There's a level of compromise that you can make for a submission that meets the spirit of an assignment while missing unimportant parts. That level of compromise is up to you – just remember to be consistent from student to student.

- Click to slide four.

The other big thing that I want to talk about is commenting. If you think of grading as an opportunity to give feedback to the student, comments are the best way to do that. When you put in a number grade, Blackboard will give you the opportunity to put in a global comment. This is a good spot for summative feedback over the whole submission. There's

also marginal comments, where you can respond directly to a specific part. You'll want to make your comments forward-thinking – how can the student improve in the future? – and both positive and negative. Your lead professors of your teaching teams will talk more about comments as the first assignment comes closer to being due, and give you more specific advice on marginal comments.

- Click to slide five.

Alright, let's wrap it up. What I want to leave you with is this sort of wide-view understanding of what grading is meant to do. We're opening a dialogue to create a conversation around the student's writing so that they can see what they're doing well and what they're missing. We want the students to think about learning writing as a process as more valuable than a grade, so think of grading as a time to offer feedback rather than assigning a value to their work. And again, the first-year writing program doesn't use rubrics – we grade holistically and individually.

- Click to slide six.

That's all that I have for you all on grading! We'll have this information on the first-year writing sharepoint for you to review when it gets closer to time to grade, and your lead professors should walk you through grading more at that time. You'll likely review grading as a teaching team during weekly meetings at the end of each unit so that you're prepared to grade each project.

Can I get a show of thumbs – thumbs up or thumbs down – to where you're all at right now? How do we feel about going into grading?

- Acknowledge their thumbs up/down. Reassure them again if the majority are down.

Okay, that concludes the first part of this instruction set. If you all will take five minutes to fill out the feedback form that I've emailed you, I'd appreciate that. Again, I'd like your honest thoughts about the instructions and any feedback you have about revising them for future incoming GPTIs. Once you finish that form, we'll take a short break from this session. When we come back, we'll take a look at navigating Blackboard.

- Break.

Alright everybody, let's get into part two of the usability testing session. This section will focus on the resources I'm creating for long-term use that will be posted to the SharePoint for first-year writing. The reason these instructions are separate from the first part of training is because most incoming GPTIs don't have access to Blackboard at the time which orientation occurs. You don't need to role-play with me anymore, but I do ask that you approach these resources with an eye for thoroughness.

- Pass out "Grading as a GPTI" document and pens.

I have a copy for each of you printed out so that you can mark them up as much as you'd like. Please read through the document front and back. If you find something confusing, mark it with a question mark; if there's something you appreciate, mark it with a star; and if there's something that you think is incorrect, mark it with an X. Feel free to leave comments or notes on the page as well.

Don't worry about the video at the bottom of the document for now. Once we finish annotating the page, we'll move on to the online portion.

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Now that everybody is through annotating, please open your laptops. I've emailed you all the link to the Blackboard navigation video instructions that you saw on the bottom of the document. Please open that video and log in to Blackboard. Follow along the video's instructions for navigating to Blackboard's grading center. Feel free to pause the video or rewind as much as you need.

As you work through the video instructions, make note of what information seems useful, confusing, unnecessary, or missing. You can note this down on the document if you'd like to, or I can give you another piece of paper to take notes on.

Once you're through with the video's instructions and taking notes, please return to my email and fill out the second feedback form. Remember, take your time and be honest in your feedback—there's no wrong answers here. This form will also have a few questions over demographics. That information will be kept private, but it will be associated with your responses. After you fill out the form, you can go ahead and close your laptop, and we'll wait for everyone to finish.

It seems that everyone is finished! That concludes this usability testing session. Thank you again for your time. Your feedback will be a huge help to me as I work to improve these instructions for future GPTIs.

Partially adapted from sample script by Steve Krug.

Appendix B: Feedback form – part 1

Question 1: Consider the training as a whole. Mark the degree to which you agree with the following statements as an outcome of the training.

● Strongly agree
 ● Agree
 ● Neither agree nor disagree
 ● Disagree
 ● Strongly disagree



Question 2: What information did you find useful in the training?

1	I find the explicit act of grading an assignment that will be done, helpful to understand a realistic version of what will be submitted and how the program feels about individual grading philosophies and practices.
2	Practicing grading one of the projects our students will do in FYW was helpful to see what kind of work we can expect as we begin teaching. I also appreciated seeing TTU's specific grading scale and getting to discuss what each letter means together. After discussing what grade each of us gave the sample essay, it was good to hear that the aspects stressed while grading can remain subjective to each instructor.
3	I found it useful when we went over what everyone's understanding of the grading scale is. Also when we practiced and discussed grading papers during the training.
4	Information on the letter/number grade and being consistent, and looking harder and things that were looked at or taught in class

Question 3: What information in the training was not useful?

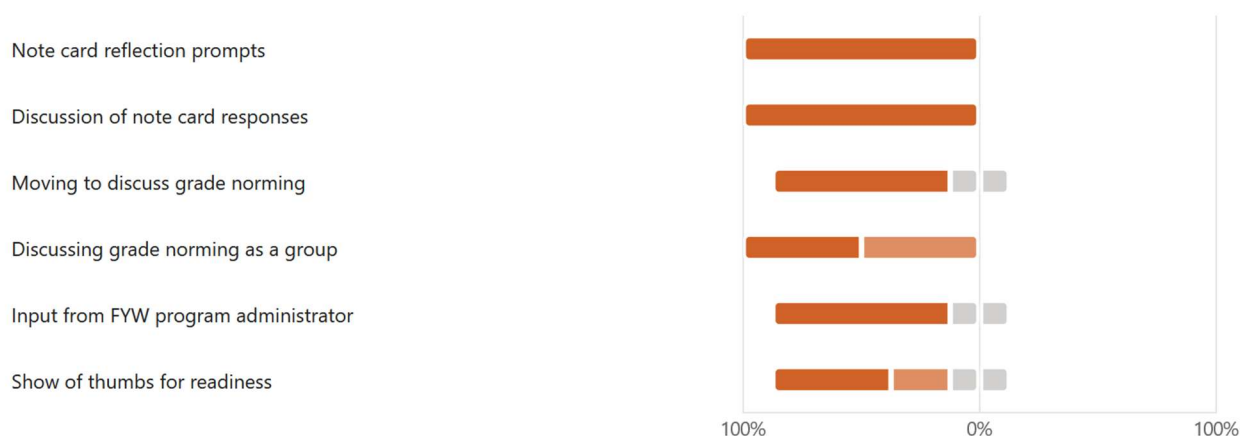
1	I think what's hard is doing this as someone who has had this experience recently so we don't have as many realistic questions.
2	I think all the information given was useful.
3	All of the information in the training was useful.
4	hmm... not that I can think of

Question 4: Is there any information you would have liked to see included in the training?

1	More info on grading with the program's lack of rubric and what that means.
2	You mentioned grading holistically, but I wasn't sure exactly what this meant. How do we as FY GPTIs grade student work holistically? What does this look like? I also thought talking specifically about what grades mean in the FYW program would be helpful, in terms of the purpose of grading. Are we just correcting mistakes, encouraging, etc.?
3	More information about how we should be viewing the grading scale instead of encouraging us to keep being more subjective about it. Maybe we could have gone over the guidelines that take the paper from a C to a B.
4	Going over assignment guidelines more fully and in depth, how to approach grading in timely manner, black and white thinking approach

Question 5: Consider the interactive aspects of the training. How did you feel about the inclusion of these?

● Really liked it
 ● Liked it
 ● Neutral
 ● Didn't like it
 ● Really didn't like it



Question 6: What suggestions do you have for improving any of these aspects?

1	Unsure, hard to decided with the bias as someone who has already done this and with a smaller sample pool
2	Loved them all and think they will make a long day of training more enjoyable
3	After certain showing of thumbs of readiness, maybe make room for questions to be asked, or areas of concern to be brought up, especially for those who don't seem to feel as prepared. When we discuss grade norming as a group, it would also be helpful to understand how more lead professors view the grading scale.
4	Big discussion at end to come to consensus on grade

Question 7: Consider the student sample used in grade norming.

● Yes ● No ● Maybe

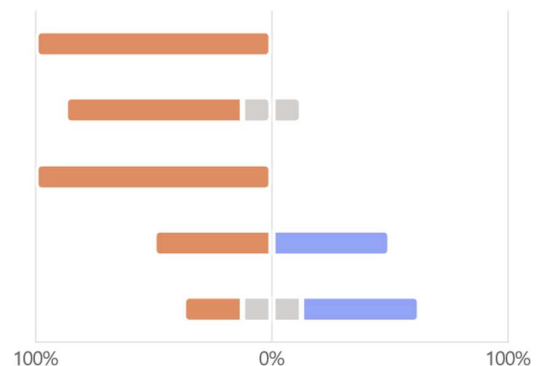
The student sample was a good example to use.

There was enough time to read the student sample.

The assignment was a good choice for grade norming.

There was enough time to read the assignment guidelines.

The consensus on a grade for the sample felt accurate to me.



Question 8: What suggestions do you have for improving any of these aspects?

1	The rhetorical analysis is a pretty big project and may require more time to discuss the guidelines with participants who have never seen them before and won't know what to look for/prioritize
2	Maybe seeing an example of grade norming before we jump into it ourselves would be helpful.
3	I think this part felt very open-ended because while we were encouraged to discuss the paper and potential grades, we didn't decide on a letter grade. I understand that subjectivity is unavoidable when it comes to grading, but maybe we could define what grade is "wrong" to give a student who submits this level of work.
4	Maybe give two examples, one with a low grade and one with a high grade so we can practice being critical and giving feedback on a variety of levels

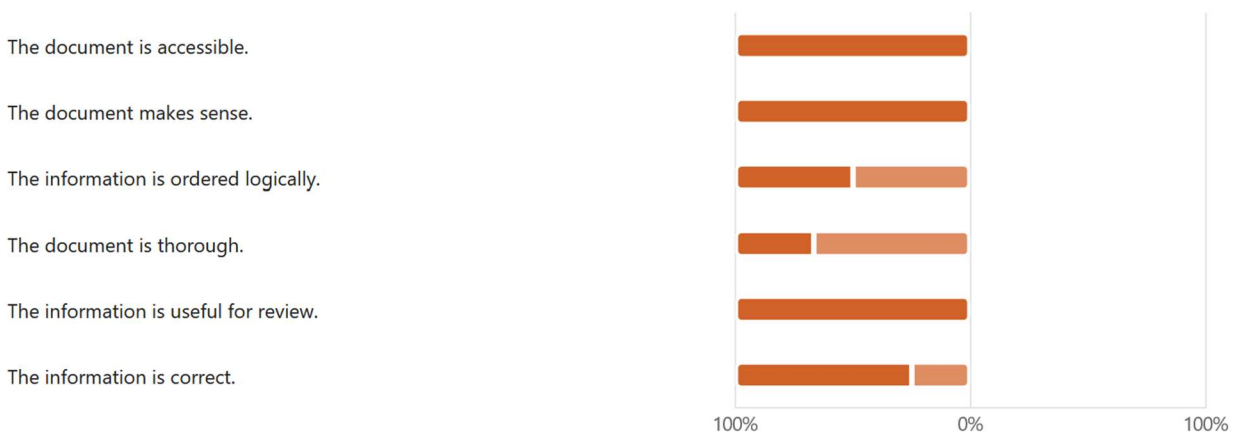
Question 9: Do you have any other feedback about the grading training?

1	a question I thought of that may come up/require time to discuss is "difference between Texas Tech's + vs - grading. What makes a B+ vs a B-?"
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Appendix C: Feedback form – part 2

Question 1: Consider the review document as a resource for new GPTIs.

● Yes, very ● Sort of ● Neutral ● Not really ● Not at all



Question 2: What suggestions would you make for revising the document?

1	including more details in how to navigate around the grading center. Including manual overrides and drop down arrows
2	Maybe move the "Grading Holistically" section closer to the "Grade Scale" section so that GPTIs can more easily refer to both of them at the same time. Also, holistic grading is referenced, but there is no definition or explanation of what this means, which would be helpful for GPTIs to learn.
3	Clarify if saving drafts of comments and grades is equivalent to hiding grades from students. I'm not totally sure about this, but you may need to qualify that some majors don't see D as a passing grade.
4	go over emotional attachment to grading and feedback and time

Question 3: Consider the Blackboard training video as a resource for GPTIs new to Blackboard. Please ignore the quality of the video composition and focus on the instructions and information provided.

● Yes, very
 ● Sort of
 ● Neutral
 ● Not really
 ● Not at all

The video is clear and understandable.

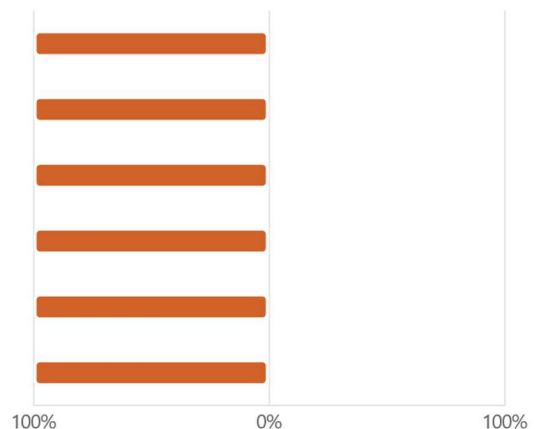
The information is a useful tool for learning how to use Blackboard's grading center.

The video is organized logically.

The voiceover is a useful part of the instructions.

The screen recordings are a useful part of the instructions.

The title cards are a useful part of the instructions.



Question 4: What suggestions do you have for revising the video tutorial?

1	just including more. 2 min is good but theres a lot to unpack when it comes to navigating blackboard as a whole.
2	I think the video is great—it is slow and easy to understand and follow, it provides crucial tutorials, and I love that GPTIs would have the ability to go back and view it as often as necessary instead of having to try to remember everything from one in-person session during orientation.
3	I think it would be helpful (maybe not in this video tutorial) to mention calculated columns in the gradebook that need to be adjusted or created because in my experience so far, the gradebook isn't always set up properly.
4	Might clarify that grading center is under course management section, Go over pros/cons of hiding grades, ALSO might go over communication skills level rubric and what that looks like and how that autosets grade to 0. Also might go over saving drafts of feedback. Also give an introduction where you say like what will be covered in it

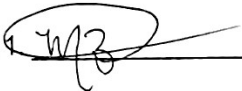

Appendix D: Research study and recording consent form



Research Study and Recording Consent Form

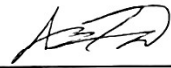

This session will walk through useability testing on an instruction set designed for incoming graduate part-time instructors in the first-year writing program. While there should not be any part of the session that causes you discomfort or harm, you may leave the session at any time.


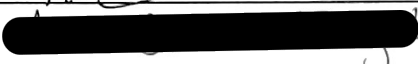
For the best results, this session will be recorded on camera with audio. The recording will not be seen by anyone other than the instructional designer working on this project, and the recording files will be stored in a secure location.

If you consent to be a part of this research study and to be recorded on video with audio, please sign below. If you do not consent, you may exit the session now.

Participant 1.  

Participant 2.  

Participant 3.  

Participant 4.  

Participant 5. _____

Participant 6. _____