

Teaching Time Savers: The List of Grievances and Special Requests

Amy N. Myers

Although I currently teach at an institution that hires math majors to grade homework for required courses, I have had enough experience providing this service to students myself to know how much of an inconvenience it is to mark late work. I efficiently grade on-time papers collected in class, but work that straggles in late takes an unreasonable amount of time to manage. I have to refresh my memory concerning the various correct solutions and equivalent responses, and take time to consult the grading rubric. (Was it 1 point for the correct integrand or 2 points? Did I give students 1 point for including the dx and the $+C$ this time, or not — or was it 1 point each?) When I grade on-time papers, I soon have the rubric in my head. For a late assignment, I have to consult the rubric for each point. One late paper easily takes five times as long to mark as one that arrives on time. Since I don't want to burden my busy paper graders (who are limited to a set number of hours per week) with this chore, I deal with late homework myself.

I used to try to avoid the late homework time drain by dropping each student's two lowest homework scores each semester. This policy seems reasonable, but students with legitimate emergencies that prevent them from turning in homework on time find it unfair. Why should some students be allowed to drop the most difficult or time-consuming assignments, or the one that was due on the same day as their big project for another course, while they were forced to use both of their "free" homework scores to attend their grandmother's funeral, or suffer through an unplanned hospital stay?

With large numbers of students in introductory courses, I accommodate large numbers of emergencies each semester, many of which I learn about through the dean or health service and believe are legitimate. To avoid having



Illustration by John Johnson

to judge the validity of each emergency myself, and to keep the time spent dealing with late homework to a minimum, I ask each student to keep her own *List of Grievances and Special Requests*. Students make a "special request" when they ask that their late homework be counted for credit. They make a "grievance" when they complain that their homework was not graded properly (since the paper graders are themselves students, the grievances are often legitimate as well).

When a student approaches me with a late homework assignment and an excuse for missing the deadline, I ask her to grade the assignment herself during my office hours using the scoring rubric and the solutions manual, and record the points she should have received as a "special request" on her *List*. (I do other work while she determines whether or not she has the right integrand, the dx and the $+C$, and so on.) When a student complains that her solution to a particular homework exercise is equivalent to the one in the solutions manual, but the paper grader didn't give her credit for it, I ask the student to record the number of points she should have earned as a "grievance" on her *List*.

At the end of the semester I ask each student to determine whether or not the points accumulated on her *List of Grievances and Special Requests* are enough to result in a higher letter grade (this information is available via the course website). I then collect the *List* from those students who feel they need the extra points.

Since I teach at an institution where students care deeply about earning top grades, the *List* policy saves me a lot of time hearing excuses and complaints (whether significant or petty), and managing the adjustments they require. Students share the inconvenience created by their grievances and special requests, and feel that their concerns are taken seriously and acted upon. Having students grade their own work also provides the side benefit of making them more tolerant of mistakes made by the paper graders since they experience the difficulty of evaluating their own work by means of the grading rubric and the solutions manual.

Time Spent: One hour at the end of the semester updating the grade book.

Time Saved: One hour per week of grading, recording, and emailing/meeting with students to evaluate excuses and complaints. 🍷

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Teaching Time Savers are articles designed to share easy-to-implement activities for streamlining the day-to-day tasks of faculty members everywhere. If you would like to share your favorite time savers with the readers of MAA FOCUS, then send a separate email description of each activity to Michael Orrison at orrison@hmc.edu. Make sure to include a comment on “time spent” and “time saved” for each activity, and to include pictures and/or figures if at all possible.

Aparna Higgins to Become Director of Project NExT

Aparna Higgins will be the new director of MAA’s Project NExT in August 2009, replacing T. Christine Stevens. After fifteen years on the job, Chris Stevens decided that it was time to pass the baton and asked that she be allowed to step down. The Board of Governors acknowledged Stevens’ amazing work over the last 15 years and voted to appoint Higgins to a five-year term beginning on August 16, 2009.

Higgins has been deeply involved with Project NExT for many years now, which makes her a natural choice for Stevens’ successor. Supporting her on the job will be Joseph Gallian, Gavin Larose, and Judith Covington.

Project NExT (New Experiences in Teaching) is the MAA’s professional development project for new and recent PhDs in the mathematical sciences. Over the span of a couple of years, NExT Fellows receive intensive guidance and support as they start their careers as professional mathematicians, with workshops and sessions on how to manage the complex blend of research, teaching, and service that make up the everyday life of college and university faculty. Fellows then remain connected with their mentors and which each other, providing them a network of professional connections that will last for many years. There are 1085 current and past Fellows, and 80 new Fellows are accepted every year. Many NExT Fellows are now among the leaders of the profession and of the MAA.

For more information on Project NExT and the many other professional development activities of the MAA, visit <http://www.maa.org> and click on the “Professional Development” tab. 🍷



Aparna Higgins will take over as the NExT director for Project NExT. Photograph by Fernando Gouvêa.