

General Description of Grades

The purpose of this posting is to better explain the way in which overall grades are awarded. On each and every syllabus, I provide a general description of what I think each of these grades mean. The following is the type of language found on those syllabi.

A grade of “A” means that your work is judged to be of exceptionally high quality, going well beyond what is needed to be minimally acceptable. “A” level work shows originality, depth of thought, factual accuracy, good logic.

A grade of “B” means that your work is judged to be of high quality, going well beyond what is needed to be minimally acceptable. “B” level work shows some of the same good qualities as “A” level work, but not as consistently, or to the same extent.

A grade of “C” means that your work is acceptable – that is, it meets the standards of college level work in terms of relevance, factual accuracy, and logic. “C” work is at the minimal acceptable level.

A grade of “D” means that your work does not meet the standards for acceptable college level work, but it does exhibit some positive qualities that prevent it from counting as a failure.

A grade of “F” means that your work is so weak that it does not earn college level credit.

From the type of feedback I receive at the end of the semester, it appears that further explanation is required. One place in which some of you are not understanding is how this rubric is applied to the components of the class work. Some of the grade problems arise because things are not turned in or are not turned in timely. Other misunderstandings of how grades are tallied arise from miscalculations (i.e., not including the participation portion of the grade, etc.). What I would like to address here is how the evaluative component of grading works. Before I get too deep into this, these are general comments. I am attempting here to express how I understand these notions. There are further factors that are considered with each specific assignment. For those assignments, additional rubrics are generated to further explain how the grade will be assigned. Nothing in those or in this rubric are contrary to one another.

Language found in the description of the grades above indicates “work is acceptable” or “work is at the minimal acceptable level”. I shall start here. What “acceptable” means at the minimum is that 1. It is handed in on time. 2. The formatting conventions are correct and in accordance with the prescribed formatting for the course. 3. No spelling errors. 4. Minimal grammatical errors. 5. The paper is printed in a legible fashion (no blurs, or other printing problems). 6. If the paper is over one page in length, it is stapled. 7. All attachments are clean. That is, there should be no marks on attachments that are not relevant to the work you are turning in. 8. If there are more than one component to the assignment, all of the components are present and in the order prescribed on the assignment sheet. This is what is meant by “minimally acceptable”. In other words, you need to think of your work as a reflection of yourself. You would not show up for work unwashed and messy. Why should your work look “unwashed” and messy. Take pride in

what you are turning in. With the exception of what goes on in class, your work has a greater impression on your instructors than practically anything else does. No one is expecting bonded paper with high cotton content. However, clean, white paper is expected. The use of colored ink, other than black, ought to be approved in advance. The biggest thing to remember is that when you turn something into your professor, this ought to look as good as possible. If it does not, then you are sending a message to your professor that you do not care about your work. If you don't care, why should your professor?

The above discussion only describes the form of the assignment. The content of the assignments likewise are indicated in the above rubric. There are three central concepts at play here: relevance, factual accuracy, and logic. I shall discuss each of these in turn.

A. Relevance. This concept addresses the student's ability to select out of all of the materials only those materials needed for the assignment. Often, in order to understand the importance of some concept, movement, or other, an instructor will lecture or the book will discuss, the context in which this concept, movement, etc. emerges. One way in which students often fail to take notice of the relevance of the materials, is that a given student may reproduce everything that person knows about the subject. This is what I call "information dumping". Rather than being selective, and using only the relevant materials or information, everything is thrown into the pot. This gives two impressions to your instructor. First, it shows that the student in question cannot distinguish the importance of one bit of information from another. Second, it shows a lack of attention to detail. There usually are very specific things we are looking for in an assignment. This establishes the base level for the expectations (i.e., minimally acceptable). When everything under the sun is thrown into the assignment, it gives the impression that the student does not care what he or she is turning in, if I throw all of this in there the instructor can fish it out, and / or I copied a lot of stuff and I want to use it all - whether it is relevant or not. You should demonstrate your mastery of the material by selecting only those bits of information that bear on the matter, and that is it. In other words, no one cares that you found 150 pages of material on the topic, and that you learned a lot about this topic by reading all 150 pages of it. Now, you want to recount your path to discovery. Just don't do it on your paper. Do this on your Myspace page.

B. Factual accuracy. This concept addresses mastery of the materials assigned and their use. At the "C" level, some mistakes will creep into a student's work. At the "B" level, these should be very rare, and completely absent at the "A" level. Errors arise in various forms, but one thing we all can learn from journalism, one ought to double check all of the facts. These are hints that there may be larger problems in this area. One indication that there are factual problems is reflected in the accuracy of the spelling of names. This is one of the easiest and most overlooked aspects in a student's work. The names of authors are usually incorrectly spelled in "C" level or lower papers. Occasional misspellings of names will happen at the "B" level, and none at the "A" level.

C. Logic. This concept addresses organization and flow of the work. Logic is the method used by philosophers for evaluating and presenting positions. For most courses in philosophy, some basic understanding of the tools of logic are assumed and covered. When it is not explicitly

covered, at the “C” level, organization of material is key and crucial. There should be a natural flow of information from one concept to the next, and again internally within paragraphs. “B” level students will demonstrate some use of sequencing globally within the work and internally within paragraphs. “B” level students will also use carefully chosen examples, elaboration, and other such devices to reflect mastery of the concepts.

All of what I have been discussing so far has to do with the minimally acceptable level. In other words, what does it take to get a “C” in my class. Should you want a grade better than a “C”, then other criteria come into play. I have mentioned in the above discussion some indication of how these criteria come into play with “B” and “A” level work. However, notice in the rubric above that under “A” there are two additional criteria: originality and depth of thought. I should mention here, no where in the rubric does it mention amount of time spent on the assignment, or “working really hard”. This is not something that I can feasibly evaluate. I cannot evaluate the effort you put into something. I cannot evaluate the amount of time you spent studying for something. What I am evaluating is the quality of your work not the quantity of your effort. With that said, let’s turn to these criteria.

A. Originality. This concept reflects individual insight into the nature of the assignment not typically seen in undergraduate work. This criterion is rarely demonstrated in most work. Hence, it is one of the most difficult aspects of “A” level work. The “A” level student’s work reflects individual interpretation, the use of standards of good scholarship, and original contribution to the discussions at hand. I typically do not see “originality” as completely new ideas, but insight into the challenge at hand not usually seen in undergraduate work. Again here I need to stress that this is a criterion applied to the quality of the work by a professor who has been teaching in the field for years. The perspective of whether this bit of information is or is not original is not that of the student, it is that of the professor.

B. Depth of thought. This concept reflects some understanding of the place of this assignment in the overall goal of the course. Using materials and concepts previously discussed, scaled with the new material is one indication of depth of thought. Other examples would include, but are not limited to, integrating information from previous course work or current course work in other courses to the materials discussed in this course. Outside reading, personal reflection, and elaboration also factor into this. Again, this criterion gauges the accumulative feature of any class. Solid learning ought to entail a global perspective in addition to the local one. These courses ought to provide overall knowledge, not simply what you need to know in order to pass a multiple choice test.

Many of the grade disputes I receive each semester are not disputes at the D/F boundary. Most of the disputes are at the B/A boundary. With that in mind, I would like to address some of these issues now.

An “A” level student consistently achieves the highest scores on all assignments. An “A” level student also takes the time to set appointments to discuss performance in class, asks for constructive feedback on assignments prior to the deadline, not only follows all of the course instructions but also takes an active role in class - be it in class discussions, group project

leadership, etc. “A” level students also discuss matters with their professors in advance of any sort of problem (student A needs to go to an out of class function. It is scheduled during class time. Student A obtains a letter from their program in advance of the deadline, and alerts both in writing and orally the professor about the event in question. Once the official letter is obtained, Student A follows up with the professor to make sure that he or she has the letter and that this is okay.). “A” level students are prompt for class. Sneaking in under the radar is something that the “A” level student finds embarrassing. The biggest factor here is that an “A” level student will know prior to the final what she or he is getting in the class, because that person has been pro-actively working all along.

“B” level students are not consistent with where their scores are throughout the semester. “B” level students rarely or seldom set appointment to discuss performance in class. “B” level students rarely ask for feedback on assignments prior to the deadline. “B” level students will follow most of the course instructions and policies, but rarely or seldom take an active role in class discussions et al. “B” level students will alert the professor of some upcoming event, but usually want all away “events” excused. I remember distinctly someone a few years ago wanting a weeks worth of class excused because that person won a trip to Las Vegas. Why would anyone think this would be excusable? “A” level students would not ask. “B” level or lower students will. The “B” level student will believe that he or she is receiving an “A” when in fact he or she is probably receiving a “B”. “B” level students have no problem coming occasionally to class late. After all, didn’t they pay for the class? Everyone can wait on them.

Likewise, the “A” level student will keep aware of on-going class projects, will monitor class website and other electronic media. The “A” level student will always place the class time and section information in the subject line of any email communication. “B” level students will not keep abreast of on-going information on class website or other electronic media. “B” level students will have to be reminded to include class information in the subject line of email.

Nota Bene. The grade of “A” is and ought to be reserved for the highest mark in the course. Only 10% of any class will merit this grade, whereas 20% of any class will merit a “B”. 40% of any class will merit a “C”, and again 20% will merit a “D” and 10% will merit an “F”. This is the classic “bell curve” distribution of grades. With that in mind, the grade of “B” does not indicate “bad” or “failure”, it indicates “above average”.

With all of this said, if grades are supposed to mean anything about how a particular student has mastered the subject matter of a particular course, and I believe that grades do have that function, then something near the “bell curve” is ideal.

Hence, the reason not everyone will receive an “A” in any class isn’t because there are a limited number of them. Rather, it is because what is required to achieve an “A” is very difficult to maintain over the course of 16 weeks. On the other hand, “D” and “F” level students are also becoming rare, because most are dropping these courses prior to the end of the term. Once one factors in the drop numbers, the percentiles for “F” level obtain.

What I find surprising is that there are any “D” level students at all at the university. Blatant

neglect and disregard are usually the cause here. If someone is struggling, that person ought to set an appointment with the professor to go over all of the work that person has done for the semester. Also make sure that you have allowed yourself sufficient time for these appointments. Everyone is busy. Everyone has to work. But if you really want to know how to improve your grade, you must take the time to talk to the professor, go over the materials, set a time for a follow up appointment. All of this takes time.

I do intend that these comments are helpful in understanding how I conceptualize each of the grades. A few things for you to notice is that popularity, whether I like or dislike someone, and the lot do not factor into my considerations what so ever. Communication is key, and if you have any concerns about grades, please do set an appointment to go over this with me.