

What Do Grades Mean?

Official Philosophy of the Cuyamaca College English Department

A GRADE IS AN EVALUATION.

A grade is not a reward or a punishment, a gift or a slight, a compliment or an insult. It is simply *an appraisal of the degree of success you have achieved on an assignment or in a course*. A grade tells you how well you have performed relative to how well you need to have performed. Most important, it tells you *how likely you are to succeed on future assignments, in future courses, and in professional life beyond college*—any time mastery of the subject matter or skills under consideration is required of you.

Students sometimes rate teachers as “easy” or “hard” graders. But do not be deceived: Grades are not a matter of kindness or meanness, of rigor or laxity. *Grades are either accurate or inaccurate. That is all*. All you gain when you receive a grade that is inaccurately high is a dangerously unrealistic estimation of your level of mastery—surely a recipe for future disappointment and failure. Conversely, there is nothing more useful than a realistic sense of your skill level and a clear awareness of where you need to improve in order to succeed later. Therefore, *do not demand kindness; demand accuracy*.

The trend in educational theory since World War II has been to nurture students’ self-esteem at all costs—even when there is no legitimate basis for esteem. All of the evidence suggests that this was and continues to be a patently stupid idea. No: *Success depends not upon hollow, groundless self-esteem but upon real skill and real knowledge. Our goal at Cuyamaca is to build genuine self-esteem*. Folks feel genuinely good about themselves when they are confident that they possess important and useful knowledge and that they can do things that are important and useful.

WHAT’S IN A GRADE?

Every grade begins as a “C,” which means “adequate.” You have done some things well, but there is an equal number of weak points in your work. You can expect to perform adequately—but barely adequately—in the future whenever mastery of the subject matter or skills at hand is demanded of you.

- When you demonstrate *mastery of relevant skills and knowledge, when the positive substantially outweighs the negative* in your work, your grade appropriately will move up to a “B.”
- Only when your *mastery is overwhelmingly strong, when the quality of your work is entirely positive*, will the “A” be assigned. You can anticipate outstanding success in the future whenever you are called upon to employ skills and content taught in the present course or assignment.

Your grade may also move down from “C.”

- When your performance features *a few strong points, but the weak points substantially outweigh the strong*, when your work reveals *a need for a great deal of improvement*, when without substantial extra effort your future success will be seriously threatened, then “D” is the appropriate score.
- Finally, when your teacher determines that, *given the level of mastery you have demonstrated, there is practically no chance that you will succeed in the future when you will need the knowledge or skills taught in an assignment or a course*, then it would be cruel if she or he were to grade your work higher than an “F.”

WHAT ABOUT ETHICS AND OTHER SUBSIDIARY ISSUES?

It is not uncommon for teachers to assess grade penalties for such problems as *lateness* and *inattention to editing* (grammar, punctuation, and spelling), *lack of participation in cooperative activities* such as student-teacher conferences and writers’ workshops, and *plagiarism* (claiming someone else’s words or ideas as your own). Why should these issues influence grades?

- Remember that your grade is an appraisal of the likelihood of your future success. There is no question that all of your future teachers and employers will prefer clean editing and punctual submission of work. To be blunt: *Late and sloppy work will compromise your academic progress and inhibit your career advancement*.
- Academic and professional *success often does not depend entirely upon individual performance but also upon an ability to function as an active contributor to a cooperative team*. An assessment of your ability to work with colleagues is scarcely irrelevant.
- *Plagiarism is universally regarded as grounds for dismissal*—not only from a course but from an academic institution and even from a professional position. Needless to say, success anywhere depends upon avoiding such suicidal behavior.

HOW CAN I GET HIGHER GRADES?

Because they mistakenly perceive grades as rewards and punishments, many students fail to recognize the causal relationship between their work and their grades. Some even blame their teachers for low scores. In order to receive the highest grades possible, *you need to take responsibility for your work and thus for your grades*. Here are some suggestions as to how:

- Attend every class session; never miss—for any reason. Be on time, come ready to work, and never leave early—for any reason.
- Do all assignments, and do not be satisfied until you have done them very, very well—better than you thought you could. Meet all deadlines. Expect to work two to three hours outside class for every hour spent in class (say, nine to twelve hours altogether for a three-unit course).
- Always prepare for class by completing all reading and all other assignments beforehand. Come with questions and opinions.
- Contribute enthusiastically and regularly to discussions, and ask questions when you don’t understand what your teacher says. Be reluctant to leave class without a complete grasp of all the ideas discussed there.
- Talk to your teacher outside of class about course content and your work. There is a not-very-surprising correlation between high grades and the amount of time folks spend doing this.
- Begin assignments as early as possible, so that you can get help from your teacher or a tutor in time to resolve problems, to do excellent work, and still to meet your deadlines.
- Expect every assignment and every course to push you hard. Otherwise how would you grow? English 120 will be harder than English 110; the second essay in English 120 will be harder than the first.

In short, commit yourself to mastery. Accept nothing less from yourself than the very best performance you can deliver—the kind of performance that will leave your teacher no choice but to return to you a glowing assessment. *Always think of the future—when mastery will equal power.*