

How I Determined Your Course Grade

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Oftentimes, a student wants to know some details about how his/her grade was determined. Information requests that I sometimes receive from students include, but are not limited to:

- (1) “What was the numeric score on my final examination?”
- (2) “Which questions [on the final examination] did I get wrong?”
- (3) “Why is this particular answer wrong?”
- (4) “How many points did I get on my term project?”
- (5) “Why did you give me only x points for the term project?”

Sometimes, the student’s inquiry is as it seems: a genuine desire to know and to understand. However, there are times when purpose of the student’s communication is not so much to understand the reason for his/her grade, but rather to argue over it or to persuade me to raise it, as, for example:

- (6) “I was only [fill in the blank] points beneath the cutoff for a [fill in the next higher grade than what the student actually got]. Can’t you move the cutoff down just a bit so that I can get the higher grade?”
- (7) “I think my term project was worth at least y points more than you gave me.”
- (8) “Why didn’t you give me at least z Class-Participation points? I conscientiously attended [almost] every class, I sat up straight in the front row, I was always alert, attentive, and polite, I took copious notes, and I handed in every homework.”
- (9) “I need a grade of at least [fill in the blank] in order to:
 - a. get into law school
 - b. maintain my scholarship or loan
 - c. avoid academic probation
 - d. graduate, or
 - e. satisfy my mommy’s hopes and ambitions for me.”
- (10) “You must have made some mistake. I **know** I earned a higher grade than [fill in whatever grade the student got].”

Please note that if your question is of the first type (items 1 through 5), then I shall be glad to answer it. Also, if I made a mistake in recording your quiz grades, your homework grades, or your exam grades, in calculating your numeric score, or in any other aspect of the determination of your grade, then I shall be pleased cheerfully to correct my mistake. **However**, grading standards are, according to university policy, totally at my discretion. Wherever I decide to place the cutoff between adjacent grades, *some* student is going to be the one with the highest grade below the cutoff point, and thus perhaps to feel frustrated at having just barely missed out on the next higher grade. You may happen to be that student. But I cannot adjust cutoff points

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to placate a frustrated student; the result of such a poorly-considered adjustment would just be to shift the locus of the frustration from you to a different student, namely, the student who would have the highest numeric score just below the **new** cutoff..

The fact is that I do consider ***very*** carefully the grades that I assign. I put a lot of time and attention into the grading process, all the way from the design of the course syllabus, which gets posted at the beginning of the semester, to the determination of the final course grades at the end of the semester. I am therefore not inclined at all to debate with anybody about just what is it that I reward with Class-Participation points, about why did I give you only so many points on your term project, etc., etc., etc. Furthermore, the ***sole*** basis for determination of your grade is measurement of your mastery of the subject matter as demonstrated by you to me in your quizzes, examinations, homework submissions, and project(s). I do ***not*** tailor the grades that I assign in order to meet students' personal or career aspirations. If you need a certain grade, then it is ***your*** responsibility to have worked hard enough during the semester to earn it.

My policy on explaining to students their grades is therefore as follows:

- A:** I am sorry, but I can **not** respond to queries regarding grades that are sent to me either over the E-mail or by telephone. I require that the entire dialog take place between us face-to-face.
- B:** Before I will consider meeting with you to discuss your grade, I must insist that you read through the course syllabus very carefully. Approximately 2/3 of the time, I answer the student query by waving the course syllabus in front of his/her eyes and pointing out some particular detail that is stated there ***very clearly*** about how the course will be graded. You can save your time and mine by reading the syllabus yourself **before** you address to me your inquiry.
- C:** Should the point that you want to make be **not** addressed in the syllabus, then I will be glad to explain your grade to you, **in face-to-face conversation during the course of a personal visit by you to me in my office.** Please follow the instructions posted on my Conference Hours document on the web, to which there is a hypertext link on my personal home page, to make an appointment to see me. Please note that I will hold such a conference with a student **only** during the semester, **not** during intersession (*i.e.*, during the between-semester break or the summer break).
- D:** When I have explained the basis for your grade, should you disagree with me regarding the method used to determine the grade, you are welcome to explain to me your position. I will accord you a reasonable opportunity to do that.
- E:** My experience is that most students, despite their initial reservations, accept their grade once I have taken the trouble to explain it to them. However, should you remain dissatisfied following our conversation, the university has a procedure for requesting that your grade be reviewed. This procedure is described in the undergraduate catalog in the section entitled, "Grade Review Process." Be aware, however, that the university catalog

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explicitly states that there are **only** two grounds for grade review. These are: “The grade was assigned in a manner other than that listed in the course syllabus...” or “The grade was assigned in a manner other than that used for other students in the class.” Should you feel that you have grounds to request grade review that fall within one or the other of the two reasons allowed under the university’s rules, please note that there is a restricted time range within which your protest must be filed. For details, please consult the catalog.

Conclusion: It is extremely unpleasant for me on those occasions when I have to inform a student that his/her performance is less than splendid. I don’t like giving a student a low grade any more than you like receiving one. I am sorry if you feel hurt or insulted because of the grade that I assigned to you. If in fact I erred in assigning your grade, I shall be glad to correct the error. Such errors are, however extremely rare in my experience. Should I leave your grade unchanged after we discuss it, which is far and away the most usual occurrence, I would be pleased to advise you as best I can as to what strategy or strategies you might pursue to improve your performance in your remaining courses.

With best wishes for success in your academic endeavors,

Charles Abzug