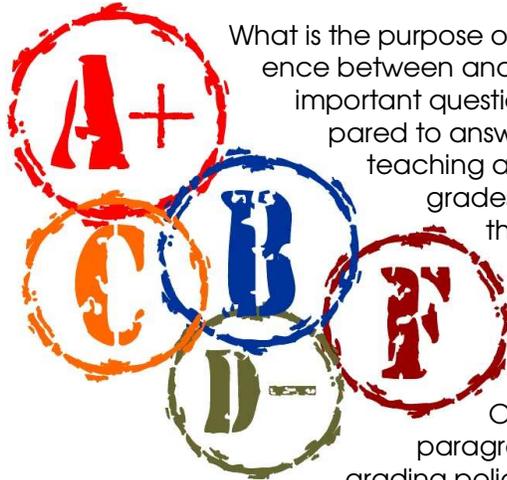


what do grades really mean?

By Melissa Kelly and Hamilton Richards



What is the purpose of grades? What do grades really mean? What is the difference between an A and a B? Why do grades even matter? All of these are important questions that teachers and students should consider and be prepared to answer. Why? Because the end result of a semester's worth of teaching and learning will be summed up in one grade. And while grades in the middle school years are not typically life changing, those in high school can make a huge difference. Grades not only determine whether students will receive a diploma but on the other end of the spectrum, which schools and scholarships students are eligible to attend or receive.

One thing that should become clear after reading the last paragraph is that it is key for teachers to have a consistent and fair grading policy. Grades given for subjective assignments should be based on rubrics in order to make the grading as fair and accurate as possible and ensure that students are given equal chances to succeed.

“What purpose do grades serve?” Grades are intended to reflect the degree to which students have mastered the course material. Although we commonly say that instructors “give” grades to students, we don’t mean that grades are gifts from the instructor; they are earned by the students who receive them.

“But, I worked really hard this semester. Don't I deserve a higher grade?”

Grades are supposed to reflect students' output, not their input. A grade should indicate what a student has learned, or is able to do, at the end of the course.

Consider two different students in the same class. One is very quick, and is able to master the material with very little effort. The other makes up for his lack of brilliance with hard work, and earns the same scores on all the tests as his more brilliant classmate. Would you penalize the brilliant student for having worked less hard?

Suppose we were to decide, nevertheless, that grades should depend partly on students' effort. Can you suggest how that effort could be measured?

“Homework and outside reading (AR) are time consuming... so why does it count for a lesser percentage... and why should I even bother?” When we say that students earn grades, we should not be misled into thinking of grades as a form of hourly wages. They are supposed to reflect the quality of the student's work, rather than its quantity.

A class like this one presents both opportunities for learning and opportunities for demonstrating what one has learned. Homework assignments are opportunities for learning; since we have no way of knowing for sure who actually did the work, they are not useful for measuring students' mastery of the material.

“I had serious non-academic difficulties this semester. Can't you take them into account when assigning my grade?” Let me remind you of something you already know: A student's grade in a course is supposed to reflect the student's performance in that course.

If a teacher ever starts letting students' grades be influenced by their accounts of how hard they've worked, or of the non-academic difficulties they've encountered during the semester, the word gets around that grades can be raised by means other than performance. Some students choose that route and the hard-luck stories come pouring in tenfold. Now the teacher's dilemma is to determine which of the accounts is genuine, and then to evaluate their worth, in terms of grades. I don't know of any way to do this fairly, so I don't do it. At all. Ever.