

What Is a Grade?

Course grades are meant to be a measure of subject matter understanding, but their validity is threatened by the fact that they are frequently measures of other matters that may have only a tangential or no relationship with the student's mastery of the subject matter of the course. Some of the common threats to the validity of course grades occur when they become influenced by other factors and become as a result measures of these other factors. In contemporary higher education, it is fair to say that grades may be, in varying degrees, measures of any, or all, of the following:

1. A measure of punctuality (when faculty take points off for late work or give extra points for early work)
2. A measure of gain or growth (when faculty base the grade on the degree of improvement over the course of the semester)
3. A measure of place in a distribution (when faculty assign grades on the curve, or some predetermined percentage formula, so that the grades only indicate the students percentile or rank in the class)
4. A measure of dishonesty (when faculty or the institution lower the grade for cheating or plagiarism)
5. A measure of extra or additional achievement (when faculty give extra points for more work that may not be qualitatively superior to the prior work, but is simply quantitatively more than other students have done)
6. A measure of attendance (when faculty deduct points for cutting class or award points for attending class)
7. A measure of writing skill or some prior expertise separable from knowledge of the subject matter as when points are awarded for neatness, rhetoric, or format.
8. A measure of motivation and perseverance (when students receive the last grade of several unsuccessful attempts at the subject matter or when effort is rewarded)
9. A measure of social class (when faculty members introduce examples and analogies that speak to some groups of students more than others or when there is cultural bias in the teaching format)
10. A measure of political statement (when faculty are sensitive to the student's draft or immigration status, scholarship and grant conditions, athletic eligibility, gender, etc. and take these into consideration in the assignment of course grades.

Above extracted from: Outline for the Preparation of the *Inquiry* Brief. (September 2000) Teacher Education Accreditation Council: Washington, D.C. Pp 11 and 12.