How We Grade

Grading systems should be based on performance benchmarks. Each grade (A, B, C, whatever) should be described by the appropriate kind of performance for that level. The key skill is for the instructor to describe clearly the differences between each of the levels.

Grading systems should be valid and recognizable. A valid grading system accurately measures whatever quality it is supposed to measure. Grading should be tied to course goals, those statements of what you want students to know and be able to do as a result of instruction. Grading systems are recognizable when students can see how assessment measures relate to the goals, content, and processes of the course.

Grading systems should be reliable and consistent. Grading standards must be applied the same in all cases, ignoring the pleadings of students who "tried hard".

Grading systems should be logical and based on real differences in performance. Grades should be a logical extension of how the individual performance benchmarks have been applied across the semester. And different grades should acknowledge real differences in performance, not just a statistical artifact (89.6 vs 90.0 as B+ and A-). How do we help students understand how and why our grading system works?

Give students the written description of the grading system to compare with their own grade. This is a description of the criteria for the assignment, not just a general guideline such as the assignment description in the course syllabus.

Impose time for thinking between the receipt of a grade and any discussion. Let the passion flame and then die down. Give the students and yourself time to think and reflect. Announce the time when the assignment will be discussed. Have students submit grade objections in writing, defending their position rather than sharing emotion.

Have students apply the grading system to a common example. Use this technique for an exam review session. Distribute an essay question or problem, an answer to it, and the grading criteria. Let the students, individually or collectively, grade the prepared response using the stated criteria.

Have students participate in setting the standards for grading. Obviously this approach must be used with discretion, and it may not be appropriate for all course levels. This technique can also be used in conjunction with review sessions where students write potential exam questions and responses.

Adhere to the rules of good communication. In discussing grades, keep the focus on the grade and not the individual. Try not to let the discussion become confrontational or adversarial. Discussion should center on how the grading system was applied to the situation.

Adapted from "Helping students understand grades" by M. D. Savilla in College Teaching. Summer 1998.