

Grades

What Do They Mean?

There has recently been a great deal of concern at Harvard College about grade inflation. One recommendation of the group appointed to study the problem was that faculty should explain, both to themselves and to their students, how they understand the various letter-grades they give. This document explains how I understand the grades, as they apply to the work of *undergraduates*. The grading scale for graduate students is somewhat different. See below.

The following remarks apply, in the first instance, to philosophy *papers*. But similar remarks apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to examinations and even to grades for the entire course. And so, for example, a grade of A for an entire course will be given only for work that I would be prepared to exhibit as a model of what I expect of a student's performance throughout a course. That is, I am happy to admit, a high standard, but if one has a lower standard for the grade of A, then one will be unable to distinguish truly exceptional work.

- A** A nearly perfect paper. Clearly organized, well-written, and unusually insightful in its treatment of its topic. Something I'd be prepared to hold up as a model of its kind.
- A-** A paper with many of the virtues of an A paper, but which does not quite approach that level. Typically, its treatment will not be quite as insightful as that in an A paper; but it may instead have a topic or focus too narrow to warrant an A, that is, be not quite ambitious enough. Alternatively, there may be minor, but significant, flaws in the writing, the organization, or the argumentation that leave it short of real excellence.
- B+** Such a paper will display a solid or better understanding of the material under discussion. It too must be well organized and clearly written, for the most part, though flaws in this regard may be present. In other respects, it will fall *well* short of an A paper. There may be significant problems in the exposition or argument, though not significant enough to betray serious confusion or vitiate the discussion. The paper may fail to pursue certain questions as far as it might, or to raise important questions that ought at least to have been acknowledged. But the paper will absolutely be 'philosophical' in its feel, so that one has the sense throughout of serious critical engagement with the material.

A grade of B+, then, still indicates that a paper has significant strengths, though a B+ paper will nonetheless have significant limitations, as well. To earn a grade of A-, a paper must stand out as exceptional in at least one respect: It may be especially clear or make especially interesting observations about its topic. To earn a grade of A, a paper must be exceptional in *every* respect.

- B** Papers on this level have real shortcomings, for example, serious problems of organization or writing. More importantly, there may be significant errors in the exposition or the argumentation that undermine some of the discussion (for example, a misinterpretation that leads to an argument against a straw-man, though not a misinterpretation so bad that the view is unrecognizable). A B paper will contain little real insight into its topic, but it should nonetheless succeed to some extent, and it must leave the reader confident that the

student has a reasonable understanding of the subject-matter, even if that understanding is limited in various ways. More importantly, to achieve a grade of B, a paper must be truly philosophical in its outlook, not a report of someone else's ideas, and not a presentation of opinion.

It would not be unfair to say that I give a grade of B for work that is 'average', in the sense that it demonstrates a minimally adequate understanding of the material.

B- Papers at this level are difficult to read profitably, though they are not wholly without virtues. Errors compound one another, or the paper is just not doing very much. In the latter case, the paper may present the material reasonably accurately, but with little critical involvement. But only a successful paper of this kind can earn a B-: Significant errors of presentation will lead to a lower grade. In the former case, the paper will contain such significant errors of interpretation or argument that some of the discussion ends up being beside the point. Even in these cases, however, the discussion needs to make sense on its own terms, and there needs to be evidence of real effort and real philosophical engagement with the material. Failing that, the paper is in the C range.

Cs To earn a grade in the C-range, a paper must fail in significant ways. Certainly, mere summaries of other people's views that are not even successful in their own terms are C papers. Papers that do not engage the material in a philosophical fashion, that present opinions, rather than arguments, will also fall in the C range. Papers with the same sorts of problems as a B- paper, but whose flaws are yet more significant, will also be Cs. Such a paper would not even succeed on its own terms, the various errors so compounding one another that its criticism of the view it wrongly identifies makes little sense. Where in the C range a paper is will be a function of just how severe the problems are. Any paper in the C range must, however, show evidence of real effort: The student must have made an attempt, however unsuccessful, to engage the material. Otherwise, the paper is failing.

Grades for Graduate Students

My thinking about grades for graduate students is somewhat more inchoate. I tend to give an **A-** to the sort of work that I expect of a graduate student in our program. Such work must engage in a professional and sophisticated fashion with its topic. The paper should be well-conceived and so well-structured, and must also be well-written. The paper must also display significant insight about the topic and original thought, though it is not of course expected that the views developed will be original, in a broader sense. An **A** I give only to work that is exceptional in some positive way, the standard begin, again, work I would regard as a model of its kind. A **B+** signals that the work falls short in some way of what I expect from a graduate student, though not in a way that leaves me particularly worried (though lots of B+s would be cause for worry). A **B**, on the other hand, means that the work is, although passing for a graduate student, a cause for very legitimate concern. A lower grade is, for a graduate student, failing.