

Handout: Recommendations for Equitable Grading

Grades play an important role in many classrooms, schools, and communities. Grades influence motivation and accountability in the classroom and sum up and communicate student achievement over a period of learning. In some contexts, grades can serve as a gatekeeper for students who wish to gain access to extracurricular and postsecondary opportunities. In these instances, grades are used to make inferences or predictions about future student performance. Consequently, close attention to the beliefs, policies, and practices related to grading is imperative.

In many settings, grading decisions are guided by individual teachers who may have limited training and support when it comes to grading. Without consistent and equitable grading policies in place, negative consequences can include significant variability across different teachers (Brookhart et al., 2016); unclear and even misleading information about student knowledge and skills; susceptibility to implicit race, class, and gender biases; calculation methods that do not reflect student growth and ultimately learning; and conflict with commonly held values about learning and growth mindsets (Feldman, 2019).

These issues can contribute to inaccurate or unfair grades that can harm students by warping their intrinsic motivation and limiting their opportunities, particularly when grades serve as gatekeepers to course access, extracurricular opportunities, and postsecondary options.

In order to ensure student grades are an equitable and meaningful reflection of learning, grading policies should prioritize grades that are:

- **Valid:** Grades should accurately describe student academic achievement and content mastery.
- **Reliable:** Grades should be consistent across teachers and resistant to bias and subjectivity.
- **Focused on learning:** Grades should reflect a growth mindset, recognize the central role of mistakes in learning, and ensure that students have pathways to success in their final grade even if they encounter early mistakes.

Table 1 describes some equitable grading practices that can help ensure grades are valid, reliable, and focused on learning.

Table 1. Equitable Grading Practices

Equitable Grading Practice	Why It Matters
<p>Eliminate 0–100 Grading Scales</p>	<p>Percentage grades that rate students on a scale of 0–100 are weighted toward failure. These scales provide 101 different levels of student performance, with nearly two-thirds of those levels representing failure. In a typical 0–100 point-scale, an “F” is assigned for any score that falls in the range from 0–59 points, while letter grades “D,” “C,” “B,” and “A” each have a range of only 10 points. This results in an unequal, unfair, and ultimately less meaningful distribution of grades mathematically as the vast majority of the scale represents a failing grade (Guskey, 2021). If a point scale must be used, a 50-point total range scale is recommended with each grade having an equal range of points.</p> <p>A 0–100-point scale can also produce a high degree of variability among teachers (Brookhart et al., 2016). The degree of precision reflected by the volume of performance levels is deceptive, as most teachers cannot consistently agree on the differentiation between adjacent levels. For example, what distinguishes an 84 versus an 85 on a piece of writing (Guskey, 2021)?</p>
<p>Eliminate Zero Grades</p>	<p>Zero grades, which should represent the student has not achieved any learning, are almost never an accurate description of what students know and can do with respect to content standards. Instead, zeros are often assigned as an academic consequence for behavioral issues like late, incomplete, or missing work, rather than to indicate a complete absence of learning. In grading systems where final grades are calculated by averaging scores, a score of zero can limit the chance that a student will earn a passing grade, even if they ultimately learn the content, because students earning a zero would need to overcome a 59-point deficit to earn a passing grade. For this reason, a zero grade can decrease student motivation to persist in learning. As an alternative to a zero grade, teachers can assign incomplete grades using a different indicator and avoid using a zero score as a punishment or consequence (Guskey, 2004; Feldman, 2019). Some student information systems or online gradebooks automatically assign missing grades as zero, so it is recommended to check the settings to ensure this is not the default.</p>
<p>Use a 5-point Grading Scale</p>	<p>In a 5-point scale, perhaps a 0–4 or an A–F letter grade scale, performance levels can be more clearly described and differentiated and minimize the impact of a lower grade on a student’s final grade (Guskey, 2021; Feldman, 2019). Using a 5-point scale reduces the number of grade categories teachers have to consider, which subsequently reduces the number of performance cutoff categories needed when compared to a 0–100-point scale (Guskey, 2021).</p>
<p>Grade Academic Performance, Not Behavior</p>	<p>Teachers often assign a single grade that reflects academic achievement and additional factors like behavior, engagement, compliance, and attitude. Some researchers refer to these as “hodgepodge grades.” In these systems, failing grades do not represent a lack of learning, but rather, a lack of compliance. Grades assigned for these factors are highly subjective and susceptible to racial bias (Feldman, 2019). Grades should reflect what students know and can do in relation</p>

Equitable Grading Practice	Why It Matters
	to the academic standards. Instead of using “hodgepodge” grading, teachers can assign standards-based academic grades.
Do Not Assign Grades for Learning Activities	Grades are not appropriate for in-process learning, which relies on trial and error, learning from mistakes, and taking risks. The formative assessment process and activities like homework should focus on learning and developing student agency over their learning. Assigning grades undermines the purposes of these learning opportunities. Instead, grades should reflect student performance at the end of the period of learning (Shepherd, 2019; Feldman, 2019).
Use Standards-Aligned Rubrics	Grading using detailed, standards-aligned rubrics, particularly when teachers have access to anchor papers and have invested time in calibration activities, can support reliable scoring and can be resistant to bias. Additionally, a good rubric and exemplar work samples can help make it clear to students how their grade was derived and what they can work on to improve (Feldman, 2019).
Provide Opportunities to Make Up Work	Students turn in late work or do not demonstrate proficiency on assignments for a variety of reasons. Retakes and redos provide students another opportunity to demonstrate their learning. It encourages them to learn from mistakes and invest in improvement. It also results in a grade that more accurately describes student learning and mastery of the course content (Guskey, 2004; Feldman 2019). Rather than providing extra credit, it is recommended to give students multiple opportunities to demonstrate what they were expected to learn.

Table 2 shows some traditional responses when communicating with students and ways to reframe those responses for equity.

Table 2. How to Talk About Equitable Grading with Students

Traditional Responses	Responses Reframed for Equity
“You didn’t complete the assignment, so you get a zero.”	“Because you didn’t turn in the assignment, I can’t determine what you know or understand. I have marked this as incomplete until you make up the assignment, but you can make that up by completing the assignment on Monday.”
“No retakes!”	“It is important to be prepared when we have a planned assessment, but it is important to me that your grade accurately reflects what you know and can do. Let’s meet and talk about your learning plan and schedule a time to retake this assessment.”

Traditional Responses	Responses Reframed for Equity
“Homework is worth 40% of your grade, so please complete it every night.”	“You have homework assignments to give you a chance to practice applying what we are learning. It is an important way we both can check in about your learning in between lessons so that we both know areas of strength and what you need to work on.”
“No late work.”	“Even if you are late, please make sure to share your work with me so that we can see how you are doing in your learning. If your work is constantly late, we will need to make a plan to support you to get your work in on time.”
“Your grade reflects these errors/mistakes.”	“Your grade reflects the things you did well. Here’s what you can keep working on.”

References

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