

Grades in Graduate School

Folks, Guys, People:

This end-of-semester assignment is part of a “package” that I consider as a gift to you (you are welcome). It aims to provide you with information that, hopefully, will help you to succeed in academia, meaning not just in graduate school, but out there in the world beyond graduate school. Other items in the package are the readings on *tenure*, *adjunct faculty*, and *recommendations*. (Make sure you study this package carefully because I may test you on it. 😊)

What the reading below by Professor Raskin addresses, is the question about the significance of grades in graduate school. So, here is a bombshell that should make your head spin a little: in graduate school grades do **not** matter, *up to a point!*—yes, of course, if you are getting C’s, D’s, and F’s, grades absolutely *do* matter. In fact, you won’t survive graduate school with these grades. On the other hand, imagine this situation: if everyone is getting A’s, then of what significance are the A’s? Here is another way to put it, to quote Professor Raskin: If A’s were supposed to be exceptional grades, then “[i]f exceptionality was the rule, then it wouldn't be exceptional at all, would it? It would just be average. And that would, in my way of making sense of all this, be a "C," which shouldn't count for graduate credit at all.”

Assuming, however, that you are getting B’s, B+’s, and A’s, what really matters in terms of making progress through graduate school are, initially, two things: (a) informal and formal *recommendations* and (b) *knowledgeability* of subject matter, and later, toward the end of graduate school (and beyond), you have to add a third item, (c) *research and publications*. At this stage of your graduate studies, the first two items are really important.

Good recommendations (whether they are formal or informal) will usually depend on building strong *professional* relationships with your teachers, which in turn will depend on a *combination* of things such as: not going below the “B” grades level; not developing a reputation as a “trouble maker” because of constant griping and complaints; possessing at least a modicum of conviviality; expressing gratitude, but with sincerity; and *knowledgeability* of subject matter. About the last item, how does one establish knowledgeability? Very simple: By, first, *always* going above and beyond assigned readings *and*, second, active participation in class discussions (on the basis of the participation rubric you were assigned).

One other point, that you may have not thought of (especially in relation to recommendations): just as students talk about their teachers, at the graduate level teachers also talk about their students. (This is where informal recommendations come in.)

The Meaning of Grades in Graduate School

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SOURCE: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/making-meaning/201701/the-meaning-grades-in-graduate-school>

I teach graduate students. I like them, but they tend to be pretty tightly wound. One of the issues that seem to get under their skin is grades.

Course	Grade	Credits
PSY 5001	B	3.0
PSY 5002	B	3.0
PSY 5003	C	3.0
PSY 5004	A	3.0
PSY 5005	B	3.0
PSY 5006	B	3.0
PSY 5007	B	3.0
PSY 5008	B	3.0
PSY 5009	B	3.0
PSY 5010	B	3.0
PSY 5011	B	3.0
PSY 5012	B	3.0
PSY 5013	B	3.0
PSY 5014	B	3.0
PSY 5015	B	3.0
PSY 5016	B	3.0
PSY 5017	B	3.0
PSY 5018	B	3.0
PSY 5019	B	3.0
PSY 5020	B	3.0
PSY 5021	B	3.0
PSY 5022	B	3.0
PSY 5023	B	3.0
PSY 5024	B	3.0
PSY 5025	B	3.0
PSY 5026	B	3.0
PSY 5027	B	3.0
PSY 5028	B	3.0
PSY 5029	B	3.0
PSY 5030	B	3.0
PSY 5031	B	3.0
PSY 5032	B	3.0
PSY 5033	B	3.0
PSY 5034	B	3.0
PSY 5035	B	3.0
PSY 5036	B	3.0
PSY 5037	B	3.0
PSY 5038	B	3.0
PSY 5039	B	3.0
PSY 5040	B	3.0
PSY 5041	B	3.0
PSY 5042	B	3.0
PSY 5043	B	3.0
PSY 5044	B	3.0
PSY 5045	B	3.0
PSY 5046	B	3.0
PSY 5047	B	3.0
PSY 5048	B	3.0
PSY 5049	B	3.0
PSY 5050	B	3.0
PSY 5051	B	3.0
PSY 5052	B	3.0
PSY 5053	B	3.0
PSY 5054	B	3.0
PSY 5055	B	3.0
PSY 5056	B	3.0
PSY 5057	B	3.0
PSY 5058	B	3.0
PSY 5059	B	3.0
PSY 5060	B	3.0
PSY 5061	B	3.0
PSY 5062	B	3.0
PSY 5063	B	3.0
PSY 5064	B	3.0
PSY 5065	B	3.0
PSY 5066	B	3.0
PSY 5067	B	3.0
PSY 5068	B	3.0
PSY 5069	B	3.0
PSY 5070	B	3.0
PSY 5071	B	3.0
PSY 5072	B	3.0
PSY 5073	B	3.0
PSY 5074	B	3.0
PSY 5075	B	3.0
PSY 5076	B	3.0
PSY 5077	B	3.0
PSY 5078	B	3.0
PSY 5079	B	3.0
PSY 5080	B	3.0
PSY 5081	B	3.0
PSY 5082	B	3.0
PSY 5083	B	3.0
PSY 5084	B	3.0
PSY 5085	B	3.0
PSY 5086	B	3.0
PSY 5087	B	3.0
PSY 5088	B	3.0
PSY 5089	B	3.0
PSY 5090	B	3.0
PSY 5091	B	3.0
PSY 5092	B	3.0
PSY 5093	B	3.0
PSY 5094	B	3.0
PSY 5095	B	3.0
PSY 5096	B	3.0
PSY 5097	B	3.0
PSY 5098	B	3.0
PSY 5099	B	3.0
PSY 5100	B	3.0

Many of them aren't satisfied with anything less than an "A" in all their courses. Give them a "B" and you'd think their hair caught on fire. "B's" are considered abject disasters. Stains on their transcripts. The end of the world as they know it.

I'm usually flabbergasted by this. After all, I prided myself on getting "B's" in graduate school. A "B" meant you successfully fulfilled the requirements of the class and could move forward with your studies. However, it is this very thing—namely, that most graduate schools require that students earn a "B" or higher in their courses to proceed—that seems to be behind why so many students view getting a "B" as a blight on their records. I've heard many students complain that a "B" in grad school is the same as a "C" in undergrad.

Really? Where do they get this from? At most graduate-level institutions, a "B" or higher GPA means the student is in academic good standing. Yet if you read comments online from graduate students discussing grades, they continually equate a "B" with a "C" and a "C" with an "F." It all speaks to the subjective meaning of what grades "really" mean.

Allow me to chime in with how I've made sense of this whole "B" is a "C" silliness. I've always presumed that to earn a graduate degree, one should be required to do work deemed "good" or better. Imagine you are studying for a master's degree in mental health counseling (if you did so at my university, you might even have yours truly as one of your

professors!). Should it be acceptable for you to be "average" or worse at it? I'm guessing anyone seeking services from a mental health counselor would firmly answer "no" to this question! To protect the public and ensure high levels of professional competency, we only want people who perform at an above-average (or better) level getting master's degrees, especially in applied training areas where their work can have a significant impact on people. Graduate programs shouldn't be foisting mediocre mental health counselors, psychologists, nurses, teachers, and accountants on the world.

So, how might we ensure that people who get master's degrees are better than average? Require them to get "B's" or higher in all their classes! That is, demand that their competence be (at a bare minimum) good because average work (i.e., "C" work) simply isn't acceptable for a trained professional with a graduate degree.

Therefore, a "B" grade, at least in my personal construction of what it should mean in graduate school, conveys that a student has done, at minimum, consistently good work. This is not to say I think other professors necessarily abide by this interpretation. Many of them, like their students, (mis?)construe "B's" as "C's"—which, in my humble opinion, leads them to grade too easily. If a "B" is treated as a "C," then a lot of students who should get "C's" probably get assigned "B's."

I can't attest to what other professors do when it comes to grading graduate students, but if you get a "B" in my graduate class, it means I think you're doing good work. If you get a "B+" then I think you're doing damn good work. And if you get an "A" or 'A-', ' then you are in the exceptional range because, in my book, "A" grades are a rare and special bird. If exceptionality was the rule, then it wouldn't be exceptional at all, would it? It would just be average. And that would, in my way of making sense of all this, be a "C," which shouldn't count for graduate credit at all.

So, here's to elevating the status of "B's" in graduate school. Kudos on the good work!
