

USNEI

USNEI



International Affairs Office, U.S. Department of Education Feb 2008
<http://www.ed.gov/international/usnei/edlite-index.html>

Structure of the U.S. Education System: U.S. Grading Systems

A variety of grading systems are used in U.S. education. The decision on what grading system to use is a matter within the exclusive authority of the individual school or higher education institution, and usually up to the individual faculty member or disciplinary department within the school or institution.

NOTE: There is no nationally mandated grading scheme in the United States. The examples described below are only some of the most frequently encountered grading systems.

NORM-REFERENCED GRADING SYSTEMS

Norm-referenced grading systems are based on a pre-established formula regarding the percentage or ratio of students within a whole class who will be assigned each grade or mark. The students, while they may work individually, are actually in competition to achieve a standard of performance that will classify them into the desired grade range. For example, a faculty may establish a grading policy whereby the top 10 percent of students will receive a mark of excellent or outstanding, which in a class of 100 enrolled students will be 10 persons. A norm-referenced grading system might look like:

A (Excellent)	= Top 10 % of Class
B (Good)	= Next 20 % of Class
C (Average, Fair)	= Next 30 % of Class
D (Poor, Pass)	= Next 20 % of Class
F (Failure)	= Bottom 20 % of Class

The underlying assumption in norm-referenced grading is that the students are roughly equal in ability, and the goal is to select the best performers in the group. Norm-referenced systems are most often used for screening selected student populations in conditions where it is known that not all students can advance due to limitations such as available places, jobs, or other controlling factors. Highly competitive and oversubscribed programs of study, such as law and medicine, or related preparatory programs may use norm-referenced grading to reduce the class size that is allowed to enter or continue such programs. U.S. students often refer to norm-referenced grading systems as "grading on a curve," a phrase that reflects the formulaic character of such systems.

CRITERION-REFERENCED GRADING SYSTEMS

Criterion-referenced grading systems are based on a fixed numeric scale, usually equated to a letter mark, from which the faculty assign grades based on the individual performance of each student. The scale does not change regardless of the quality, or lack thereof, of the students. For example, in a class of 100 students there might be no one or any number of students who score high enough to achieve a grade of excellent, or who fail. Criterion-referenced systems might look like:

A (Excellent)	= 95-100	or	90-100
B (Good)	= 85-95	or	80-90

C (Fair)	= 75-85	or	70-80
D (Poor)	= 65-75	or	60-70
F (Failure)	= -65	or	-60

Criterion-referenced systems are often used in situations where the faculty are agreed as to a standard of performance but the quality of the students is unknown or uneven; where the work involves student collaboration or teamwork; and where there is no external driving factor such as needing to systematically reduce a pool of eligible students.

In many situations, faculty may wish to indicate that certain students, despite achieving a specific score, demonstrated qualities that cause the faculty to believe that the grade by itself does not reflect the student's actual contribution or potential. In such cases they may attach plus or minus signs to the letter grade (examples: A+, A, A-, B+, B, B-, etc.) to refine their evaluation. These refinements can be important in calculating cumulative grades and awarding honors.

It is noteworthy that many U.S. criterion-referenced grading systems use the principle of subtracting points from a defined perfect score, which is usually, but not always, set at 100. This approach differs from that sometimes used in other countries such as the United Kingdom, where points are added from a defined lowest score (zero or another number). Understanding this difference can make comparing criterion-referenced grades easier, since grades representing similar achievement but calculated in these different ways can be as much as 20 or 30 points apart.

ALTERNATIVE GRADING SYSTEMS

Pass-Fail Systems. Some U.S. faculties, schools, and institutions use pass-fail grading systems, especially when the student work to be evaluated is highly subjective (as in the fine arts and music), there are no generally accepted standard gradations (as with independent studies), or the critical requirement is meeting a single satisfactory standard (as in some professional examinations and practica).

Non-Graded Evaluations. A number of U.S. faculties, schools, and institutions do not assign numeric or letter grades as a matter of policy. This practice is usually based on a belief that grades introduce an inappropriate and distracting element of competition into the learning process, or that they are not as meaningful as measures of intellectual growth and development as are carefully crafted faculty evaluations. Many faculty, schools, and institutions that follow a no-grade policy will, if requested, produce grades or convert their student evaluations into formulae acceptable to authorities who require traditional measures of performance.

[Return to Evaluation and Assessment](#)
[Return to Structure of U.S. Education](#)
[Return to USNEI Home Page](#)