About My Grading Standards

Here are some quick facts about course difficulty and grades. Believe me, you should read this in full just to put your mind at ease!

TLDR: despite the apparent difficulty of the classes I teach, if you just do the work and avoid stressing too much over the marks, you’ll probably do pretty well!

1. Exams

The exams I write are quite thorough and challenging. This will not harm your overall letter grade (see items 3-6), but it can be a little shocking at first.

I design my exams with the understanding that an exam grade of around 55% is respectable. If you are scoring above 50% on the exams, then you do have a basic understanding of the course content.

So why don’t I design the exams so the average is 70 or 80% like in many other courses you might be taking?

The answer is that I know you are all capable of in-depth learning and to design a simpler test, I believe, would be an insult to your intelligence.

The exams are designed to be challenging, but certainly not impossible for the well-prepared.

Having these sorts of exams also allows for very hard-working, knowledgeable students to really stand out, with a grade of 90%, say. It wouldn’t mean as much to score 90% on an exam when the intended average is 80%; but, to score 90% on a challenging exam says a lot.

2. Homeworks

The homeworks are where nearly all your practical learning will take place.

Grading is based not only on producing something that works and gets the job done, but also upon style. This is an important part of your education: in industry, it’s important to communicate scientific ideas clearly, to adhere to robust and efficient coding practices, etc.

You won’t be able to start an assignment a night or two before and finish. Or if you do, there will likely be many points lost along the way. I aim to provide roughly 5-7 days for you to complete homeworks and I operate under the assumption that the homeworks are started early and done in stages.

In doing a homework, unlike an exam, you have nearly unlimited resources available to you: online resources, office hours, discussions with classmates, etc.

Because the homeworks are graded rather stringently, I am sympathetic to seeing some points lost here and there. But because some low scores are dropped and there are so many available resources, I would be unimpressed by an overall homework average below 70%.

I consider an overall homework average of 85-90% to be quite respectable. Yes, it will require effort to reach that level.
About My Grading Standards

You should read the style guidelines very carefully. For programming students: get into the habit of proofreading your code for efficiency, const-correctness, code documentation, the proper use of move semantics, etc. You are explicitly told every possible way you can lose a mark for style in a nice enumerated list so if you ignore those guidelines, you have no one to blame but yourself. Seriously: read those style requirements! If you don’t understand them, seek clarification.

3. Your GPA will not be harmed (unless you don’t do the work)

While I want to provide you with honest feedback in how deeply you have learned the material (even if this feedback seems harsh as in items 1 and 2), I do not want to harm your GPA if you work hard and show an understanding of the course content.

A large portion of the course grade comes from homeworks and there are effectively free marks based on participation. Although the exams do count for a large part of the grade, too, there is a lot of "cushioning" added with the homeworks and participation. By working hard all quarter, you are in a better position to succeed.

At the end of the quarter, I examine the grades and reflect upon what they mean before determining the mark cutoffs: see item 6.

I do not scale: there is no limit to the number of A's, for example.

I do not set absolute percentage to letter grade cutoffs either, because I want the freedom to modify the brackets should the need arise at the end.

4. Historical percentage cutoffs for A-, B-, C-, D-

I want to give a loose sense of where some the cutoffs were drawn in the past. You'll observe there is a lot of variability and you should not use this as a guide as to what your course grade will be.

You should just see this as evidence for the fact that despite a lower percentage than you may be used to seeing in other classes, the letter grades can still be quite good.

- The start of the A- grade bracket has ranged from 64 - 85%
- The start of the B- grade bracket has ranged from 50 - 77%
- The start of the C- grade bracket has ranged from 45 - 70%
- The start of the D- grade bracket has ranged from 42 - 65%

5. Distributions of A's, B's, C's, D's, and F's

The fraction of different letter grades I give out varies from class-to-class and quarter-to-quarter, depending on the overall quality of work I see done. All these distributions can be found on my website if you want to look up specific courses.
About My Grading Standards

As another piece of proof that many students can do well (in some courses, there aren’t any F’s, D’s, or even C’s!).

- The fraction of A-/A/A+ in a class has ranged from 30 - 54%
- The fraction of B-/B/B+ in a class has ranged from 13 - 57%
- The fraction of C-/C/C+ in a class has ranged from 0 - 24%
- The fraction of D-/D/D+ in a class has ranged from 0 - 20%
- The fraction of F’s in a class has ranged from 0 - 17%

6. What do the grades mean in the end?

Important: the grade brackets described below only reflect the points earned in the course and in no way do I believe they reflect a student’s overall academic aptitude. Other personal factors in life can result in a low course grade simply because a student cannot spend sufficient time on a course.

Before describing the meaning, it is important to note that if student X has a lower overall course percentage than student Y then the letter grade of student X can be no better than the letter grade of student Y. This is always followed.

I find course work tends to filter students based on common traits and characteristics, kind of like a centrifuge. I am aware of this process and I assign grades with the understanding that my homeworks are demanding and the exams are extremely difficult. Most of the time, a sincere student who dedicates time to the course each week, works hard, has a positive attitude and learns from their mistakes, and has a basic understanding of the material will earn at least a B-.

A+: earned by students who have demonstrated breathtaking performance in all aspects of the course, typically earning above 90% on the final examination (and project if applicable), having 100% in nearly all homeworks, having fully participated in the course lectures, etc. – scarcely ever given out.

A: earned by students who are exceptional in all aspects of the course. They have done their homeworks with a high level of excellence and care, participated fully in lectures, and performed admirably on the course examinations at a level indicative of material mastery, typically earning at least 75% on the final exam (and project if applicable). Students at this level have a laudable level of perseverance, discipline, care, and knowledge of material.

A-: earned by students who have done very good work throughout the course. Students in this bracket share many traits of A students but may not perform as well on the exams or may have lower grades on their homework which they make up for on tests. All students earning an A- show a strong proficiency in both homework and exams. Usually this means respectably high homework grades (85% or above), a high level of class participation, and a final exam grade of around 55% or more.
About My Grading Standards

**B+:** earned by students who have done *good work over the course*, but did not reach the level of the A-students in their homeworks or exam/project performance. Usually this means having high homework scores but an exam grade of around 40% or having a strong exam grade of around 60% but having weaker homeworks and class participation over the quarter.

**B/B-:** typically earned by students who do reasonably well on homeworks but do not perform as well on exams, often earning scores of around 30-40% on the final exam. Occasionally students wind up with these grades because they did well on the exams but had very low homework or participation scores pulling down their overall percentage from what would otherwise earn them a B+.

**C+/C/-D+/D-/F:** these letter grades cover a range of performances all below what should be achieved of a student who was able to dedicate themselves to the course and learn from mistakes in the homeworks and on the midterm(s). A student who actually did their homeworks at a reasonable level and demonstrated a basic knowledge of course content will most likely earn a grade above a C+.

The above descriptions are not written in stone. I’d say about 80% of the time, this describes the grade brackets.

7. **Success tip**

The biggest success tip I can offer is: **do not give up** and **seek help early if you get stuck**!

Plenty of students who ultimately got A bracket grades had a few low homework scores or a less-than-stellar midterm grade, perhaps getting off to a rough start while adjusting to the course grading scheme. But these same students persevered and brought their marks up across the board.

Getting an A does not require perfection and I know that there is a learning curve in adjusting to any course.

I tend to be quite sympathetic in deciding grade cutoffs if I see students who were diligent and hardworking: doing all or most of the homeworks with reasonable scores, fully participating, and showing basic competence on exams.

8. **I want you to do well.**

I do care about your learning and success in the class!

If you focus more upon learning the material and trying to make improvements to your work, and focus less upon stressing over every mark you have lost, I think you’ll do just fine.