

Grading is the one of the major function, result, and outcome of assessing and evaluating students' learning in the educational setting. This short report provides three basic information about grading students: Its definition, purpose, and rationale. The definition of grades presents the concept of grading that is acceptable in literature as well as its process. The purpose of grading is discussed in terms of feedback administrative purposes, discovering exceptionalities and motivation. The rationale of grades are further explained through absolute and fixed standards, norms, individual growth, and achievement relative ability and effort.

*Keywords:* Defining grades, purpose of grades, rationale of grades

## The Functions of Grading Students

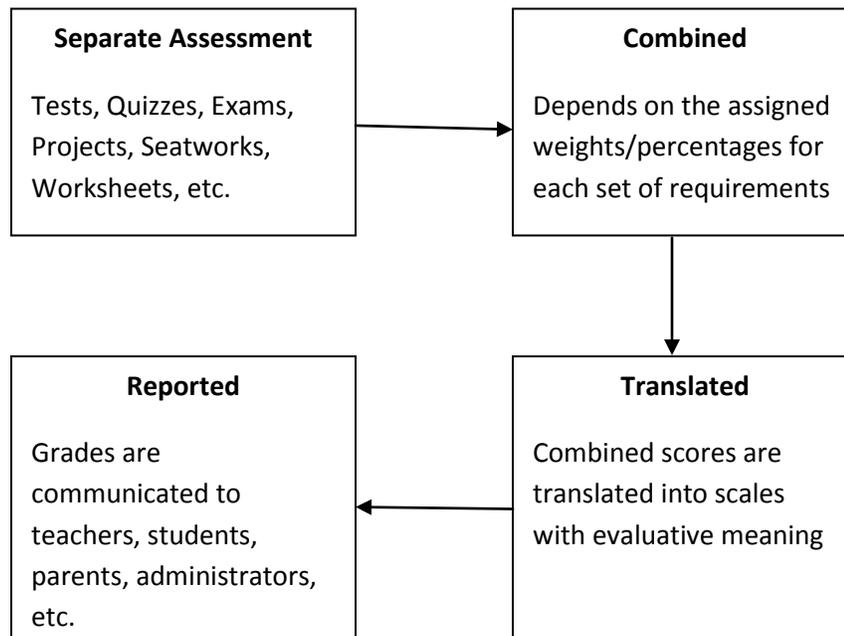
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### Defining Grading

**E**ffective and efficient way of recording and reporting evaluation results is very important and useful to persons concerned in the school setting. Hence, it is very important that students' progress is recorded and reported to them, their parents and teachers, school administrators, counselors and employers as well because this information shall be used to guide and motivate students to learn, establish cooperation, and collaboration between the home and the school. It is also used in certifying the students' qualifications for higher educational levels and for employment. In the educational setting, grades are used to record and report students' progress. Grades are essential in education such that students' learning can be assessed, quantified, and communicated. Every teacher needs to assign grades which are based on assessment tools such as tests, quizzes, projects, and so on. Through these grades, achievement of learning goals can be communicated with students and parents, teachers, administrators, and counselors. However, it should be remembered that grades are just a part of communicating student achievement; therefore, it must be used with additional feedback methods.

According to Hogan (2007) and Magno and Ouano (2010), grading implies (a) combining several assessments, (b) translating the result into some type of scale that has evaluative meaning, and (c) reporting the result in a formal way. From this definition, we can clearly say that grading is more than quantitative values as many may see it; rather, it is a process. Grades are frequently misunderstood as scores. However, it must be clarified that scores make up the grades. Grades are the ones written in the report cards of students which is a compilation of students' progress and achievement all throughout a quarter, a trimester, a semester or a school year. Grades are symbols used to convey the overall performance or achievement of a student and they are frequently used for summative assessments of students. Take for instance two long exams, five quizzes, and ten homework assignments as requirements for a quarter in a particular subject area. To arrive at grades, a teacher must be able to combine scores from the different sets of requirements and compute or translate them according to the assigned weights or percentages. Then, he/ she should also be able to design effective ways on how he/ she can communicate it with students, parents, administrators and others who are concerned. Another term not commonly used to refer to the process is *marking* (see Holbrook, 2010). Figure 1 shows a graphical interpretation summarizing the grading process.

**Figure 1**  
**Summary of Grading Process**



### The Purposes of Grading

Grading is very important because it has many purposes. In the educational setting, the primary purpose of grades is to communicate to parents, and students their progress and performance. For teachers, grades of students can serve as an aid

in assessing and reflecting whether they were effective in implementing their instructional plans, whether their instructional goals and objectives were met, and such. Administrators on the other hand, can use the grades of students for a more general purpose as compared to teachers, such that they can use grades to evaluate programs, identify and assess areas that needs to be improved and whether or not curriculum goals and objectives of the school, and state has been met by the students through their institution. From these purposes identified, the purposes of grading can be sorted out into four major parts in the educational setting.

**Feedback.** Feedback plays an important role in the field of education such that it provides information about the students' progress or lack. Feedback can be addressed to three distinct groups concerned in the teaching and learning process: parents, students, and teachers.

**Feedback to Parents.** Grades especially conveyed through report cards provide a critical feedback to parents about their children's progress in school. Aside from grades in the report cards however, feedbacks can also be obtained from standardized tests, teachers' comments.

Grades also help parents to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their child. Depending on the format of report cards, parents may also receive feedbacks about their children's behavior, conduct, social skills and other variables that might be included in the report card. On a general point of view, grades basically tell parents whether their child was able to perform satisfactorily.

However, parents are not fully aware about the several and separate assessments which students have taken that comprised their grades. Some of these assessments can be seen by parents but not all. Therefore, grades of students, communicated formally to parents can somehow let parents have an assurance that they are seeing the overall summary of their children's performance in school (Magno, Lynn, Lee, & Ko, 2009).

**Feedback to Students.** Grades are one way of providing feedbacks to students such that it is through grades that students can recognize their strengths and weaknesses. Upon knowing these strengths and weaknesses, students can be able to further develop their competencies and improve their deficiencies. Grades also help students to keep track of their progress and identify changes in their performance.

This feedback is directly proportional with the age and year level with the students such that grades are given more importance and meaning by a high school student as compared to a grade one student (see Raven, 2010); however, Motivation plays a role in grades. Such that grade one students (young ones) are motivated to get high grades because of external rewards and high school students (older ones) are also motivated internally to improve one's competencies and performance.

**Feedback to Teachers.** Grades serve as relevant information to teachers. It is through grades of students that they can somehow (a) assess whether students were able to acquire the competencies they are supposed to have after instruction; (b) assess whether their instruction plan and implementation was effective for the

students; (c) reflect about their teaching strategies and methods; (d) reflect about possible positive and negative factors that might have affected the grades of students before, during and after instruction; and (e) evaluate whether the program was indeed effective or not. Given these beneficial purposes of grades to teachers, we can really say that teaching and learning is a two way interrelated process, such that it is not only the students who learn from the teacher, but the teacher also learns from the students. Through grades of students, a teacher can be able to undergo self-assessment and self-reflection in order to improve herself and be able to recognize relative effectiveness of varying instructional approaches across different student groups being observed and be flexible and effective across different situations (Jorgenson & Jorgenson, 1993).

### Administrative Purposes

**Promotion and Retention.** Grades can serve as one factor in determining if a student will be promoted to the next level or not. Through the grades of students, skills, and competencies required of him to have for a certain level can be assumed whether or not he was able to achieve the curriculum goals and objectives of the school and/ or the state. In some schools, the grade of students is a factor taken into consideration for his/ her eligibility in joining extracurricular activities (performing, theater arts, varsity, cheering squads... etc.). Grades are also used to qualify a student to enter high school or college in some cases. Other policies may arise depending on the schools' internal regulations. At times, failing marks may prohibit a student from being a part of the varsity team, running for officer, joining school organizations, and some privileges that students with passing grade get. In some colleges and universities, students who get passing grades are given priority in enrolling for the succeeding term, as compared to students who get failing grades.

**Placement of Students and Awards.** Through grades of students, placement can be done. Grades are factors to be considered in placing students according to their competencies and deficiencies. Through which, teaching can be more focused in terms of developing the strengths and improving the weaknesses of students. For example, students who consistently get high, average and failing grades are placed in one section wherein teachers can be able to focus more and emphasize students' needs and demands to ensure a more productive teaching learning process. Another example which is more domain specific would be grouping students having same competency on a certain subject together. Through this strategy, students who have high ability in Science can further improve their knowledge and skills by receiving more complex and advanced topics and activities at a faster pace, and students having low ability in Science can receive simpler and more specific topics at a slower pace (but making sure they are able to acquire the minimum competencies required for that level as prescribed by the state curriculum). Aside from placement of students, grades are frequently use as basis for academic awards. Many or almost all schools, universities and colleges have honor rolls, and dean's list, to recognize student achievement and performance. Grades also determine graduation awards for

the overall achievement or excellence a student has garnered throughout his/ her education in a single subject or for the whole program he has taken.

**Program Evaluation and Improvement.** Through the grades of students taking a certain program, program effectiveness can be somehow evaluated. Grades of students can be a factor used in determining whether the program was effective or not. Through the evaluation process, some factors that might have affected the program's effectiveness can be identified and minimized to improve the program further for future implementations.

**Admission and Selection.** External organizations from the school also use grades as reference for admission. When students transfer from one school to another, their grades play crucial role for their admission. Most colleges and universities also use grades of students in their senior year in high school together with the grade they shall acquire for the entrance exam. However, grades from academic records and high stakes tests are not the sole basis for admission; some colleges and universities also require recommendations from the school, teachers and/ or counselors about students' behavior and conduct. The use of grades is not limited to the educational context, it is also used in employment, for job selection purposes and at times even in insurance companies that use grades as basis for giving discounts in insurance rates.

### **Discovering Exceptionalities**

**Diagnosing Exceptionalities.** Exceptionalities, disorders and other malfunctions can also be determined through the use of grades. Although the term exceptionality is often stereotyped as something negative, it has its positive sides such as giftedness and such. Grades play an essential role in determining these exceptionalities such that it is a factor to be considered in diagnosing a person. Through grades, intelligence, ability, achievement, aptitude, and other factors that are quite difficult to measure can be interpreted and therefore be given proper interventions and treatments when they fall out of the established norms.

**Counseling Purposes.** It is through the grades of students that teachers can somehow seek the assistance of a counselor. For instance, a student who normally performs well in class suddenly incurs consecutive failing marks, then teachers who was able to observe this should be able to think and reflect about the probable reasons that caused the student's performance to deteriorate and consult with the counselor about procedures she can do to help the student. If the situation requires skills that are beyond the capacity of the teacher, then referral should be made. Grades are also used in counseling when personality, ability, achievement, intelligence, and other standardized tests are being measured.

## Motivation

Motivation can be provided through grades; most students study hard in order to acquire good grades; once they get good grades, they are motivated to study harder to get higher grades. Some students are motivated to get good grades because of their enthusiasm to join extra-curricular activities, since some schools do not allow students to join extra-curricular activities if they have failing grades. There are numerous ways on how grades serve as motivators for students across different contexts (family, social, personal...etc.). Thus, grades may serve as one of the many motivators for students.

## Rationalizing Grades

Attainment of educational goals can be made easier if grades could be accurate enough to convey a clear view of a student's performance and behavior. But the question is what basis shall we use in assigning grades? Should we grade students in relation to (a) an absolute standard, (b) norms or the student's peer group, (c) the individual growth of each student, (d) the ability of each student, or (e) the effort of the students? Each of these approaches has their own advantages and disadvantages depending on the situation, test takers, and the test being used. It is expected for teachers to be skillful in determining when to use a certain approach and when not to.

**Absolute Standards.** Using absolute standards as basis for grades means that students' achievement is related to a well defined body of content or a set of skills. For a criterion-referenced measurement, this basis is strongly used. An example for a well defined body of content would be: "Students will be able to enumerate all the presidents of the Philippines and the corresponding years they were in service." An example for a set of skills would be something like: "Students will be able to assemble and disassemble the M16 in 5 minutes." However, this type of grading system is somewhat questionable when different teachers make and use their own standards for grading students' performance since not all teachers have the same set of standards. Therefore, standards of teachers may vary across situations and is subjective according to their own philosophies, competencies and internal beliefs about assessing students and education in general. Hence, this type of grading system would be more appropriate when it is used in a standardized manner. Such that a school administration or the state would provide the standards and make it uniform for all. An example for tests wherein this type of grading is appropriate would be standardized tests wherein scales are from established norms and grades are obtained objectively.

**Norms.** The grades of students in this type of grading system is related to the performance of all others who took the same test; such that the grade one acquires is not based on set of standards but is based from all other individuals who took the same test. This means that students are evaluated based on what is reasonably expected from a representative group (see Russell, 2005). To further explain this

grading system, take for instance that in a group of 20 students, the student who got the most number of correct answers- regardless whether he got 60% or 90% of the items correctly, gets a high grade; and the student who got the least number of correct answers- regardless whether he got 10% or 90% of the items correctly, would get a low grade. It can be observed in this example that (a) 60% would warrant a high grade if it was the highest among all the grades of participants who took the test; and (b) a 90% can possibly be graded as low considering that it was the lowest among all the grades of the participants who took the test. Therefore, this grading system is not advisable when the test is to be administered in a heterogeneous group because results would be extremely high or extremely low. Another problem for this approach is the lack of teacher competency in creating a norm for a certain test which lets them settle for absolute standards as basis for grading students. Also, this approach would require a lot of time and effort in order to create a norm for a sample. This approach is also known as “grading on the curve.”

**Individual Growth.** The level of improvement is seen as something relevant in this type of grading system as compared to the level of achievement. However, this approach is somewhat difficult to implement such that growth can only be observed when it is related to grades of students prior to instruction and grades after the instruction, hence, pretests and posttests are to be used in this type of grading system. Another issue about this type of grading system is that it is very difficult to obtain gain or growth scores even with highly refined instruments. This system of grading disregards standards and grades of others who took the test; rather, it uses the quantity of progress that a student was able to have to assess whether he/ she will have a high grade or a low grade. Notice that initial status of students is required in this type of grading system.

**Achievement Relative to Ability.** Ability in this context refers to mental ability, intelligence, aptitude, or some familiar constructs. This type of grading is quite simple to understand such that a student with high potential on a certain domain I expected to achieve at a superior level, and the student with limited ability should be rewarded with high grades if the student exceeds expectations.

**Achievement Relative to Effort.** Similarly, this type of grading system is relative to the effort that students exerted such that a student who works really diligently, responsibly, complying to all assignments and activities, doing extra credit projects and so on should receive a high grade regardless of the quality of work he was able to produce. On the contrary, a student who produces a good work will not be merited a high grade if he was not able to exert enough effort. Notice that grades are based merely on efforts and not on standards.

As mentioned earlier, each of these approaches in arriving at grades have their own strengths and limitations.

Using absolute standards, one can focus on the achievement of students. However, this approach fails to state reasonable standards of performance and therefore can be subjective. Another drawback in this approach would be the

difficulty in specifying clear definitions; although this difficulty can be solved, it can never be eliminated.

The second approach is appealing such that it ensures realism that is at times lacking in the first approach. It avoids the problem of setting too high or too low standards. Also, situation wherein everyone fails can be prevented. However, the individual grade of students is dependent on the others which is quite unfair. A second drawback to this kind of approach is that how will the teacher choose the relevant group; will it be the students in one class, students in the school, students in the state, or students in the past ten years? Answers to these questions are essential to be answered by a teacher to have a rationale if achievement in relation to other students. Another difficulty for this approach is the tendency of encouraging unhealthy competitions; if this happens, then students become competitors with one another and it is not a good environment for teaching and learning.

The last three approaches can be clustered such that they have similar strengths and weaknesses. The strength of these three is that they focus more on the individual, making the individual define a standard for himself. However, these three approaches have two drawbacks; one is that conclusions would seem awkward, or if not, detestable. For example, a student who performed low but was able to exert effort gets a high grade; but a student who performed well but exerted less effort got a lower grade. Another example would be: Ken with an IQ of 150 gets a lower grade compared to Tom with an IQ of 80 because Ken should have performed better; while we were pleasantly amazed with Tom's performance... Kyle starting with little knowledge about statistics learned and progressed a lot. Lyra, who was already proficient and knowledgeable in statistics, gained less progress. After the term, Kyle got a higher grade since he was able to progress more; although it can be clearly seen that Lyra is better than him. Conditions of these types make people feel uncomfortable with such conclusions. The second drawback would be reliability. Reliability is hard to obtain when we use differences as basis for grades of students. In the case of effort, it is quite hard to measure and quantify it, therefore, it is based on subjective judgments and informal observations. Hence, resulting grades from these three approaches when combined to achievement are somewhat unreliable. Table 1 presents a summary of the advantages and disadvantages of the different rationales in grading.

**Table 1**  
***Advantages and Disadvantages of Different Rationales in Grading***

<b>Rationale</b>	<b>Advantages</b>	<b>Disadvantages</b>
Absolute Standards	- Focuses exclusively on achievement	- Standards are opinionated - Difficulty in getting clear definitions
Norms	- Ensures realism - Always clear to determine	- Individual grades depend on - Choosing relevant group
Improvement, Ability, Effort	- Concentration on individual	- Awkward conclusions - Reliability

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