

J202 Fall 2011

Culver

Understanding Your Grades

Week 2

As instructors, we prefer to concentrate more on your learning than on your grades. However, experience tells us that students are keenly concerned about their grades in this course, especially because it is six credits. So let us give you some information up front to help you better interpret your grades and learn to improve your work.

Publishable Quality

We judge your work by a standard of “publishable quality.” In short, we ask ourselves whether a paper you’ve submitted is publishable quality and if not, how much work it would take to get it to that level. This publishable quality, however, is not the level of, say, the creative marketing director of Fallon Worldwide or a New York Times financial writer. We look at the quality of an entry-level worker. To do this, we ask ourselves this question: “If this press release (or news article or ad layout or audio package) were turned in to me as PR director (or editor or creative manager or news director) from an entry-level employee, would I welcome it as is or demand changes?”

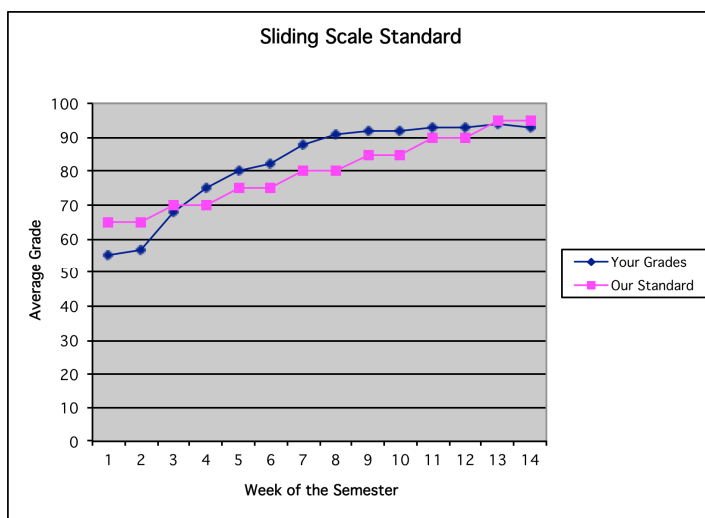
Grading Scale

Here’s how our scale of publishable quality translates to the grading scales you’re used to:

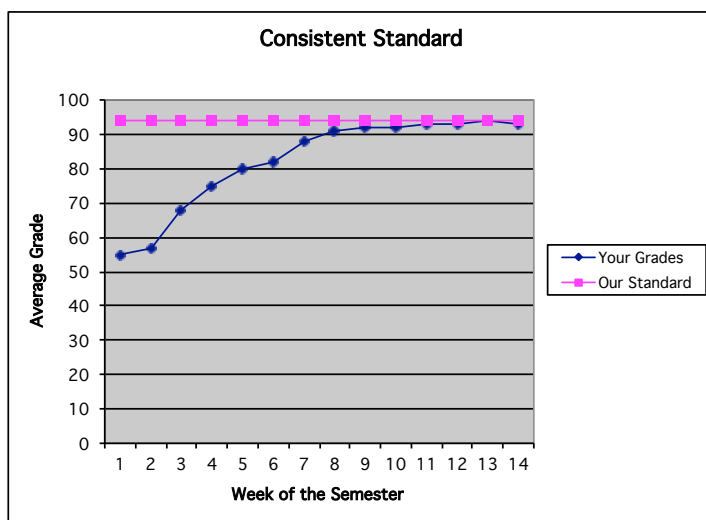
A	93-100	publishable quality in current form with few or no revisions
AB	88-92	publishable quality with minor work
B	80-87	solid elements; will be publishable quality with some rehabbing
BC	75-79	some serious flaws but other strengths; will be publishable quality with reasonable work
C	67-74	major flaws; needs overhaul before being publishable quality
D	59-66	critical errors; could not be considered publishable quality without dramatic change
F	0-58	work not completed or lacks merit overall

Achieving Publishable Quality

Some students become frustrated or concerned about their J202 performance early on because we set high standards and stick to those standards throughout the semester. They can grow quite worried about low grades early on. However, we’ve chosen this consistent standard approach because we’ve found a sliding scale standard is far more frustrating over time. Look at these graphics to better understand what we mean:



With this approach, we would set our standards lower at the beginning of the semester, anticipating that your skills are not yet up to par. This way, grades are not as low in the beginning because the grading scale is curved downward. However, students find this frustrating because as their skills build, the scale continues to go up, giving them the feeling they will never be able to achieve a standard that keeps rising.



With this approach, we set a high standard at the beginning and keep it that way all semester. While this brings frustration with lower grades early on, we find students are much more able to gauge their own performance and see their improvement. This is the approach we take in J202.

Lowering the Impact of Early Low Grades

We always want you to have a real sense of our standards, but we don't want our high expectations to damage your final grade when you're just learning new skills. Therefore, we lower the impact of the grades when you begin to learn those new skills. Your assignments in the beginning of the semester are worth much less in your final grade than pieces you submit in your Individual Story assignment or Final Project, which fall later in the term when you have built more skills.

This system makes it rare that poor performance when first learning new skills prevents students from earning high grades in the course, even As. You should not be concerned with low grades on a first draft or early in the semester. Instead, you should focus on whether your performance is improving. If your grades remain low over time, you should see your TA and me for more intensive guidance. We also strongly advise you to concentrate on your quiz grades, as past students have found that excellent quiz performance substantially improves the likelihood of a strong final grade.

Grading Between Sections

The J202 TAs and I are not robots, so we can't be programmed to grade exactly alike. However, we want grading to be as fair across sections as possible. To accomplish this, we take two kinds of steps. Qualitatively, we work each week to make individual grades consistent. These efforts include adhering to specific grading standards, reviewing each other's graded papers and grading the same sample paper to ensure we're within a few points of each other. Quantitatively, I watch each section to ensure the section averages are similar. If not, at the end of the semester, I adjust all student grades to bring the means in line.

Grading Questions

While the TAs assign grades to specific assignments, I manage all the grading calculations and assign final grades. If you have questions about where you stand, please visit me during office hours. If you object to a specific grade, see your TA first. If you are unable to come to agreement about the grade after that meeting, you may bring the assignment to me for review. I will grade the piece myself and assign that as your grade. Be aware, however, that this process could lower the grade just as easily as it could raise the grade.

Grading Standards

Though grading is a subjective exercise in most instances, we try to use standards to maintain consistency and fairness across the members of the class, as well as across the various assignments each individual completes. The points below give you an idea of how your grade rises or falls based on different aspects of your work. Remember, you start with an average grade of 70 for completing an assignment and work up or down from there.

We have three main areas of emphasis in this course:

1. writing-intensive assignments (such as a press release)
2. concept-focused assignments (such as a print advertisement)
3. technique-based assignments (such as a website)

The items below apply best to our writing-intensive work because that is the primary purpose of J202. However, in each of those three areas, we demand that writing be the focus and will apply these standards to each facet of an assignment to which they're applicable. For instance, when you create a print ad for a magazine, we will grade you on the creative concept you generate. However, we also will apply these writing standards to the strategy memo you supply to explain your creative concept.

Things that raise your grade from 70:

- effective lead
- precise, active verbs
- effective use of quotes
- effective use of details
- well-placed modifiers
- “thread” to tie writing together
- use of convincing evidence
- seamless transitions
- coverage of all angles
- visual language
- solid organization
- use of simple words
- effective use of devices (parallelism, alliteration, etc.)

Things that lower your grade:

- style or punctuation errors
- spelling errors
- misspelled name (automatic 10-point deduction)
- fact error (automatic 10-point deduction)
- missed opportunities in facts
- editorializing in non-persuasive piece
- use of slang or clichés
- poor lead (inaccurate, overstated, buried)
- “overwritten” language
- wordiness
- passive voice
- lack of supportive quotes
- ineffective use of devices
- bulky, ineffective sentences/odd constructions
- use of stereotypes or offensive language (when not necessary in quoted material)