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 class, 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. While this will not harm your overall letter grade (see items 3-5), it can be a little shocking at first.

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

So why don’t I design the exams so the average is 70 of 80% like in many other courses?

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 fair.

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 a week for you to complete homeworks and I operate under the assumption that the homeworks are started early.

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 a few 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

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.

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

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

I do not set absolute cutoffs either, because I want the freedom to modify the brackets should the need arise.

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 shouldn't use this as a guide to estimating your current course grade.

You should just see this as evidence for the fact that despite a lower percentage than you may be used to seeing, 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 59 - 77%
- The start of the C- grade bracket has ranged from 52 - 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.

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 30 - 57%
- The fraction of C-/C/C+ in a class has ranged from 0 - 24%
About My Grading Standards

- The fraction of D-/D/D+ in a class has ranged from 0 - 15%
- The fraction of F's in a class has ranged from 0 - 17%

6. 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 grading scheme and standards. 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.

7. 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.