

## PSYC 310 Policies

### **Mastery and Effort Description Info:**

Grade assignment is an important philosophical decision. It may reflect certification of skills learned, assessment of knowledge, or an award reflecting the quality of work. Students are keenly aware of grades and may often seem to be more concerned with grading than learning. Informing students that they learned a lot despite a poor grade is not going to satisfy them. From an instructor's perspective, assigning a poor grade to a student who tests poorly but who is clearly sophisticated in his or her thinking about course content, or assigning a good grade to a student who memorizes well for an exam but who cannot demonstrate deep thinking about the course or is only in class at exam time, are both equally unsatisfying options.

The grading goal of PSYC 310 is to provide an accurate assessment of student understanding of research methodology. Grades can also reinforce behaviors I believe encourage learning. Grades are calculated based on test performance (mastery) and homework (effort). The former is designed to assess a student's basic methodological knowledge and to his or her ability to apply it in a limited context (the exam). A student may be able to do this successfully but fail in a broader context, or may not perform optimally on the exam but can understand broader issues in research and methods. The effort grade is designed to reflect opportunities to place factual knowledge in a general context.

Exam (mastery) and homework (effort) grades are interactive. The final grade is a reflection of both components. A minimum level of performance in each is required for a particular grade. For example, absence of effort results in a lower grade even if expertise is high. And effort without expertise is similarly reflected in a lower final grade. My in-class explanation goes something like this: "If you perform less well on an exam that you feel reflects what you have really learned, but you are making an effort to apply your knowledge, you *will* learn, and I am comfortable certifying that you earned a final grade higher than reflected by your mastery. Similarly, if you just read the book and notes and do not attend class, and therefore do not do the assignments and demonstrate effort, I cannot certify a level of even average learning for this material."

The specifics of the grading scheme are provided on the syllabus. To summarize, students must have an overall percentage of work both on exams and homework to earn a grade on the same order as other courses (90% is an A, 80% is a B, etc.). However, exam performance can be lower (80% makes students eligible to earn an A) and brought to the overall criterion through the addition of effort points. Students must also do a certain amount of effort to be eligible for grades as well; for example, earning an A as a final grade requires that they do 80% of the homework assignments and all of the research reports.

This grading scheme has two effects. First, it encourages students to attend class and complete assignments. I believe there is value in my lectures and in the examples that are generated via the interaction with students during feedback sessions about homework. For this reason, I require students to be present to turn in an assignment. I doubt students who memorize a book truly retain anything they learn, but students who provide their own examples and who can see the context of those examples in discussion, will retain that learning. Second, it provides a correction for lower exam grades. My exams are designed to be difficult to avoid ceiling effects in

assessment and to help students see how deeply they grasp the material. However, there is a realistic requirement to provide students with the ability to achieve grades that are consistent with the expected norm. This is accomplished by allowing students to raise exam scores by demonstrating effort.

**Attendance Info:**

My philosophy on attendance is that I cannot teach a student who is not present. Attendance is not required, unless students wish to earn a grade that certifies they have learned something. I do not have a section on attendance in my syllabus. However, I strongly encourage attendance in a few different ways, using course assignments as the hook. Assignments are 50% of the course grade. I absolutely do NOT provide a calendar of assignment due dates. In my course, students must be present to turn in assignments. I explain to the class that the real learning for an assignment is during class discussion of the assignment, not in simply doing it, so I cannot certify that they have learned anything if they simply have someone drop off their assignment, send it to me via email, or turn it in late. I have an assignment workbook, but I frequently modify assignments in class as a function of class discussion. Students must do the modified assignments. I give students one late assignment option so they can turn in one assignment late on the last class day, no questions asked.



*See if you can guess which class period has an assignment due and which does not. Assignments encourage attendance.*

I believe a grade is meant to reflect what a student has learned in a course. Part of this is exhibited in the ability of a student to perform on an exam. However, I also feel that if I have developed good assignments, and students do those assignments and attend the lecture discussing the assignments, they will learn, even if their exam performance does not reflect memorization. I strongly feel that attending class is critical for learning and thus have my assignments set up in a way to maximize this. First, I do not announce in advance when assignments will be due. Informal tracking in the first few years of this methods course showed that attendance waxed and waned with assignment due dates. When students only show up to turn in an assignment, they miss the context and purpose of it. I discourage this by only assigning homework as it is relevant

for the course. This also meets the goal of making assignments relevant to the class discussion because they come at an appropriate time. A second aspect of encouraging attendance is that assignments can change as a function of class discussion, as discussed above. The added value from an attendance standpoint is that a student must come to lecture to get the assignment that will be due. I stress to students that the learning I am certifying with a grade is a function of being present when an assignment is discussed, in addition to actually doing the assignment.

### **Pass/Fail Grading Info:**

Assignments and reports are graded on a pass/fail basis. These are viewed as gateways to further learning, not the learning outcome themselves. Thus, these assignments may lead to learning in class, rather than reflect what has been learned, making non-pass/fail grading less appropriate. The original intent of the pass/fail system of grading was to 1) minimize a student's focus on the "right" answer and instead encourage exploration and thoughtful discussion and 2) minimize instructor workload for a large section with little assistant support. The system has generally worked, but over time we have modified it to improve student performance.

In the first version of the grading system, there were "pass," "fail" and "bonus" points available. "Bonus" was for assignments of clearly high effort. Students that did two assignments of bonus quality were given the option of not turning in one assignment later. Of course, the students that had bonus assignments were also those that would generally do all of the assignments anyway, so this was not a great motivator for them. The hope was to bring up the work of the middle range of student, though there was no evidence this occurred. This grading option has now been eliminated.

The "pass/fail" option does lead to some near-failure assignments that are still graded as "passing". To reduce this, we have more recently begun mining work from previous semesters for examples of excellent and failing work. These are posted when an assignment is made, and students are told that if their work models poor assignments, they will fail. A GTA in the Spring semester of 2007 who also served as a GTA in the Fall of 2006 reports that there has been a substantial reduction in failing work as a result. In addition, more students have done work at an excellent level of performance.

Mark Chan, PSYC 310 GTA, reports: *"Having had the opportunity to TA PSYC 310 for 2 semesters, has given me the opportunity to witness improvement in the way our students approach their homework assignments. Prior to giving students examples of good and bad homework assignments, as was the case in the first semester, students would engage their assignments with minimal effort. With the introduction of positive and negative examples of assignments this semester, students tend to give clearer answers, often elaborating to support their decisions. This in turn also further enhances lecture discussions as students would be more prepared to speak up, having had the opportunity to critically think about their answers."*