

# Improving Grades to be More Accurate and Equitable

Adapted and modified from *The Grade Repair Toolkit* by Ken O'Conner. 2007; Portland, OR.

**#1: Teachers should include only evidence of achievement in student grades.** They should not include student behaviors such as effort, attendance, participation or following class rules in grades; only use what students show they have learned.

Reason: Grades are inequitable and inaccurate when they mix achievement and non-achievement. Behavior should be reported separately from achievement so we send clear and accurate information about what students have learned.

**#2: Teachers should not reduce points on late work;** instead, they should provide support for the learner.

Reason: Taking away points for late work results in grades that don't accurately show student academic performance, and the strategy is generally ineffective at improving student achievement and motivation. The response to late student work is alternate and more specific feedback for the student that includes a positive, supportive approach that directly affects student behavior, leaving the scores and the resulting grades as pure measures of achievement.

**#3: Teachers should not give points for extra credit;** they should only use evidence that more work has resulted in higher levels of achievement.

Reason: Grades aren't accurate or equitable when teachers provide extra credit or bonus points. Students and caregivers need to get the message that better grades come from evidence of higher levels of performance, not just from more points.

**#4: Teachers should not punish copying or cheating with reduced grades;** they should have other non-grading consequences for cheating, and make students who cheat retake the test or do the assignment again so teachers know students' true levels of achievement.

Reason: Academic dishonesty is unacceptable and must not be tolerated. However, grades are inaccurate if the response to cheating is a lowered score or grade because this makes it impossible to understand the student's true level of achievement. Instead, an academic honesty policy should clearly describe inappropriate practices and the non-grading consequences for cheating. To emphasize that the learning is most important, the policy would also require that students must redo any assessment that involved academic dishonesty – for full points and without cheating or copying.

**#5: Teachers should not include group scores in grades;** they should use only individual achievement evidence.

Reason: Grades are inaccurate and inequitable when they use group scores from cooperative learning or group activities. This is so because the group scores may not accurately reflect the achievement of each student and therefore would be inaccurate, and potentially unfair, for some members of the group. This problem can be addressed by recognizing that cooperative learning is essentially a learning activity—a means to learn, not an assessment tool like a quiz or test. After a class has experienced cooperative learning, teachers can then test students individually to find out what they know, understand, and can do as a result.

**#6: Teachers should not use complex mathematical formulas to yield grades.** Instead, they should provide clear and understandable descriptions of what students need to achieve to earn a grade, including how they use the computerized grading program.

Reason: Complex mathematical formulas don't necessarily make grades more accurate or equitable, and they certainly don't make them more understandable. Instead, teachers should give straightforward descriptions of proficiency and what students clearly need to demonstrate to earn higher grades. Student achievement should be described across levels: for example, "at proficiency", "not yet at proficiency", and "above proficiency".

**#7: Teachers should not include zeros in grades** when evidence is missing or as punishment; they should use alternatives, such as reassessing to determine real achievement, or use “I” for Incomplete or Insufficient Evidence.

Reason: Grades are not equitable when zeros on a 100-point or percentage scale are used because zeros disproportionately and artificially lower the achievement record and can decrease student motivation to learn. There are, however, many grading alternatives, such as “minimum” grading or scales that are more proportionate and equitable.

**#8: Teachers should base grades on recent achievement of a learning standard**, not on an average of scores for that standard collected over the whole grading period.

Reason: When learning is developmental and results from a process that unfolds over time so that student achievement increases with practice, the more recent evidence should “count” for the student’s grade; old, outmoded evidence should be no longer count. Grades are inequitable when a series of scores throughout the stages of learning are averaged together. Instead, more recent achievement should be considered more heavily, with more recent evidence replacing previous evidence.

**#9: Teachers should include students in the grading process.** Involve students; they can – and should – play key roles in assessment and grading that promote achievement.

Reason: Grades are inequitable when students have been excluded from assessment, record keeping, and communication. Students should be involved as much as possible in all phases of learning and assessment in order that they can be more self-aware of their strengths and areas for growth, and more empowered to set goals and reflect on progress.

**#10: Teachers should not assign grades based on a student’s achievement compared to other students;** instead compare each student to preset standards.

Reason: Grading students by comparing their performance to one another distorts individual achievement. Equity means clear, criterion-referenced standards that all students are expected to achieve, regardless of other’s achievement. Teachers in a noncompetitive grading system assign grades to each student based on the student’s own achievement in relation to the applicable standards.

**#11: Teachers should not award points for activities or work designed to give students practice, and therefore which do not show achievement, such as homework or class activities.** Don’t use information from formative assessment and practice to determine grades; use only summative evidence.

Reason: Grades are inaccurate if scores for everything students do find their way into report card grades. Learning is a process in which learners increase their knowledge, understanding, and skills as a result of effort, instruction, feedback, and self-assessment and adjustment. For this process to work well learners must believe that it is important and worthwhile to try and that it is acceptable, and desired, to take risks and make mistakes. To make it obvious that success requires learning from mistakes, the fix is to distinguish between practice and formative assessments (such as homework and classwork) and summative assessments that reflect accumulated learning (such as tests and projects) and to include only results from the latter directly in grades. Grades shouldn’t be merely about accumulating points.