

Psychology Plus/Minus Grading Policy

Beginning with the Fall, 2006 term, instructors will have the option of assigning grades on a plus (+) and minus (-) scale for undergraduate and graduate courses (see <http://www.gsu.edu/es/20425.html> for details from Enrollment Services). Departments were encouraged to develop a policy regarding this option. The Psychology Executive Committee has considered the potential advantages, disadvantages, and ambiguities of plus/minus grading and recommends the following policy:

1. Instructors of psychology courses may use plus/minus grading so long as
 - (a) the course syllabus clearly specifies how all grades (including plus/minus grades) will be awarded,
 - (b) the instructor assigns grades in strict accordance to the guidelines of the syllabus, and
 - (c) the syllabus includes the reminder that “Courses or criteria that require a grade B or C will continue requiring the same. Grades of B- or C- will not fulfill the requirement.”
2. Instructors who elect not to use plus/minus grading for a course must indicate this clearly on the syllabus.
3. Recognizing issues of academic freedom, no department-wide system for awarding points and grades is prescribed. However, course coordinators, in consultation with instructors, are responsible for ensuring that a uniform procedure for assigning plus/minus grades is used for all sections of each multi-section course each semester.

In this period of transition, clarity and consistency will be keys to implementing plus/minus grading in a way that minimizes student complaints and grade appeals. Each instructor should read the information at <http://www.gsu.edu/es/20425.html> and should understand how assignment of plus/minus grades affects students' qualification of prerequisites, eligibility for Honors or other GPA-based activities, and financial aid.

Approved by EC 20-July-06
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Approved by faculty vote, 7-August-06

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE PLUS/MINUS GRADING POLICY

Why did we need a policy on plus/minus grading now?

How was this policy formed?

Why did we vote on the policy in this way?

The decision to implement plus/minus grading for Fall '06 was made at the university level (see <http://www.gsu.edu/es/20425.html>), and thus the option for assigning plusses and minuses is going to appear when instructors submit grades to GOSOLAR this semester. We had to decide on a departmental policy before the beginning of the semester.

The Executive Committee debated the policy on 14-July-06 and in the days following. The policy recommended to the faculty was unanimously endorsed by the EC, which was then charged with polling the faculty for comments and votes on the policy. Given the press of time and the unavailability of many faculty members for a summer meeting, this option seemed most effective and expedient. Although many objections and suggestions were generated in this process, there was no comment that had not been considered by the EC in its initial debates. The majority of the faculty voted to adopt the recommended policy.

Couldn't we just decide as a department not to use plus/minus grading?

Yes, this was one option available to departments, although it was discouraged for a variety of reasons, including:

- a. Many instructors are eager to use plus/minus grading, as it allows instructors the ability to distinguish between A students and A- students, between B+ students and B or B- students, and so forth. That is, plus/minus grading increases the instructor's options for evaluating student work.
- b. Other departments at GSU will be using plus/minus grading, and thus students would object to having the option in some departments but not in ours.
- c. The perception is that stronger academic institutions, such as departments that are in our aspirational group, use plus/minus grading.
- d. Instructors will see plusses and minuses as grading options irrespective of our departmental policy, and thus someone would have to monitor compliance.

In view of these considerations, the Executive Committee recommended and the faculty endorsed a policy in which instructors who object to plus/minus grading are not compelled to use it, but those who want to take advantage of the option can do so.

**Why don't we have a uniform plus/minus grading system across the department?
Why not say that everyone must use plus/minus grading?
Why not specify a specific scale for plus/minus grading?**

Although many faculty members are strongly in support of plus/minus grading, others are opposed to it. Thus, the Executive Committee chose generally to leave the decision of whether or not to assign plusses/minuses to individual instructors, with the condition that the grading policy be explicitly and clearly specified in the syllabus.

In the absence of plus/minus grade options, most instructors consider grades of 90% and above to be an A, 80% and above to be a B, and so forth. This is a convention however, and not a requirement. The only requirement is that the grade of A should correspond to work that is considered Excellent, B for work that is Good, C for work that is Average, D for work that is Poor, and F for Failure.

Given that the department does not specify how to translate exam and assignment scores into letter grades, no specific formula for using plus/minus grading was recommended. As has always been the case, instructors will determine the criteria upon which letter grades (including plusses and minuses) will be assigned, and will specify these criteria in the syllabus.

Indeed, there was considerable disagreement within the EC as to what convention is most appropriate for assigning plus/minus grades. Is a score of 80% appropriate to a grade of B or a B-? That is, some faculty thought the convention should be something like A=100 to 93, A- =92 to 90, B+ = 89 to 88, B = 87 to 83, B- = 82 to 80, and so forth. However, other faculty thought the convention should be something A=100 to 90, A- = 89 to 87, B+ = 86 to 84, B = 83 to 80, B- = 79 to 77, and so forth.

In time, we may discuss the convention for assigning qualitative letter grades (B = Good) to quantitative scores, but it seemed clear at this time that there was neither sufficient agreement nor sufficient need to generate a specific scale at this time.

Why must multiple sections of the same course have a consistent plus/minus grading scale?

As a faculty, we do balance academic freedom with consistency and quality of course content. For example, in some multi-session courses we agree to use a common textbook and grading standard. Thus, it seemed minimally invasive to academic freedom, and considerably practical to require course coordinators to work with instructors to produce a common implementation of plus/minus grading across sections. This should reduce the number of complaints that students have that comparable work in the same course produces different results.

**Why doesn't a C- count for course requiring a C or better?
Doesn't the new policy raise the standard for prerequisites, Honors, and so forth?**

The university policy for translating letter grades in to quality points (used in computing the GPA) is indicated at <http://www.gsu.edu/es/20425.html>. The university policy is that a grade of B- translates to 2.70 quality points, and thus pulls a student's grade below the GPA level of 3.0 associated with a B. A grade of C- is below the threshold for courses requiring a C. This should be clearly stated on all syllabi—particularly those for courses that serve as prerequisites for more advanced coursework.

We may decide as a faculty to change our requirements (requiring a C- rather than a C, for example), although this suggestion would meet with considerable opposition and debate. At present however, we have not changed the requirements. "C" means "C" not "C-". Depending on how individual instructors assign plus/minus grades, we may indeed have made it more difficult to attain these standards.

Note that the university will use a different formula for computing GPA with respect to HOPE scholarship eligibility (see <http://www.gsu.edu/es/20425.html>). All students will thus have two GPAs: one for HOPE that strips plusses and minuses, and the other for transcripts and matters of academic standing.

**Won't students complain about this policy?
Isn't the hassle going to outweigh the benefits?
Isn't this going to be confusing?**

It is likely that no policy involving such an important change in grading would be free of student complaints and confusion. The policy we have adopted would seem to minimize confusion and controversy as much as possible by putting the onus on the syllabus as the contract between instructors and students with respect to plus/minus grading. The students may not like an instructor's decision whether to use plus/minus grading, or that instructor's formula for assigning plus/minus grades; however, no student should be able to say that he/she was uninformed about the way grades would be assigned in the course.

Students who receive plus grades are likely to embrace these changes. Students who receive minus grades will not. As always, students who have score averages that are close to the next higher letter grade will campaign for consideration. Be clear and be consistent to avoid an increase in grade appeals.

As a faculty, we will revisit and revise the policy as needed.

Must I submit my syllabus to Tenagne Mulugeta prior to the beginning of each semester?

Yes. This is specified in our faculty handbook. It is particularly important for the Fall, 2006 semester as we will be verifying that each syllabus contains the necessary information pertaining to plus/minus grading.

8-August-06