

Grades & Tests

Grades

What do grades measure? Don't "think" about this. Rather, "feel" what it feels like to get an "A." And what it feels like to get a "D." Almost everyone has some anxiety about grades. What is it you fear? What would failure prevent you from achieving? What would an "A" mean two months from now? What does a "C" on a test really mean?

**A grade is not a measure of worth;
it's only a measure of performance.**

Your "C" is only a rough measure of how you performed on one test. It's rough because it cannot definitively place you much better or worse than other test-takers. It's also rough because it is designed by a teacher who is more or less skilled at preparing tests. And it is only about your performance on one test—which is to say that it doesn't indicate anything about your courage, your character, your capacity to succeed, or what grade you'll get on any other test. Likewise, an "A" doesn't make you better than anyone else. It doesn't even say you learned more. It just says you answered the questions in ways that the teacher believed were correct.

Might you be obsessed with high grades? Who do you imagine is checking up on you? Your parents? God? You know the truth: No one! Let it go. Or do you feel the need to impress others? Think of the people who made good, strong impressions on you. I expect it's because of their character, not their grades.

Before long, nobody will care about your grades. You need to pass, of course, and maybe your parents would like to brag, but, seriously, will you ever brag about getting great grades? Diplomas are little more than union cards. They get you through doorways. In my experience, it's the "B+" students who are most successful in life anyway.

But are you worried about getting into graduate school, or maintaining a good average to be eligible for financial aid? Then, yes, you do need to worry about grades. Your mind needs to keep a double focus—really learning the material but not getting so far off on tangents that you do poorly on tests.

Tests

What's a Test?

When you read "test," what image comes to your mind? The image is important for adult learners because not all adults learn what tests really are. They cling to an image they had as children. It's so easy to get stuck at a Child-Parent image where we are punished if we do badly. Or they carry a Child-Adult image where they "ought to be ashamed" for doing badly. An Adult-Adult image is quite different. It's two adults, where one wants to learn where his/her learning needs to grow. In short, tests are a way of learning what we haven't learned.

This is a challenge to teachers as well as students. Teachers too can be stuck in Child-Parent or Child-Adult images. They can imagine their tests as ways to punish or shame their students. But effective teachers use tests and study guides as ways to highlight what they think are the key things to learn in their courses. They imagine their students as their employers. They see tuition as a wage paid by people who want to learn what they need to learn.

Of course, students have their own horizons; they come to school with their own concerns about what they really need to learn. But even there, an effective teacher hopes that students will learn not only what they hope to learn, but also what they really need to learn. They not only want to convey information and insight; they also want to peer deep into the mental well of students and bring unnoticed questions up into the light. In this way, tests can open new areas of exploration for students.

When a student does poorly on a test, effective teachers will drive out of their mind any images of a dumbbell or a lazybones. Labels, after all, are simple-minded substitutes for understanding. Instead, life being bigger than school, they will consider whether the student is focused more on life questions that have nothing to do with the course. Or perhaps the student has not yet realized how knowledge and priorities are always products of minds and hearts on the hunt, in which case they will praise good questions as passionately as good answers.

Preparing for a Test

What do you currently think are the best ways to prepare for a test? Ask yourself the following questions:

What should I do *before* a test?

What should I do *during* a test?

What should I do *after* a test?

Now don't rush on! Answer each of these questions as completely as you can. This will help you spot some false assumptions about tests that made you do worse than you hoped.

I've given and taken many tests over the years. Let me list a few things I've learned, beginning with the most important.



Before the Test

- Make up your own tests. **This is the most effective way I know to prepare for a test.** It forces you to decide what's important in the course and what isn't. If you make up tests early enough, you'll discover areas where you're weak. You can ask the teacher direct questions about the importance of certain topics ahead of time.
- Put yourself in your teacher's head. That is, aim to know what the teacher considers more and less important.
- Anticipate what the form will be—multiple choice, true/false, essay, etc. There are also some important course items that *cannot* be on a test. Essay tests seldom ask just for facts. Multiple-choice and true/false tests seldom ask for in-depth explanations. This is why making up your own test, *in the form of an upcoming test*, helps you do well.
- Collaborate. Ask a good student to help you. Bring up your questions in a student lounge. (This is *very* easily done in online courses that include a "Lounge" or an informal "Study Group.")

During the Test

- Read the test questions twice. It's amazing how many students give the "incorrect" answer because they misunderstand the question. There are two ways to read a question. The first is the normal way-- just scan the words with your eyes and mind. The second adds your ears and imagination: Read it again out loud. Or, if you're in a classroom, "read" as though (a) you were silently saying it yourself, or (b) you were hearing someone over your shoulder read it out loud, or (c) you were hearing me, the teacher, say it out loud. Very often our ears and imagination convey meanings that our eyes and minds never notice.
- For essay questions, notice the verbs. If it says "define" then give a definition." If it says "prove" then prove. It's a good idea to underline the verbs in essay questions so that you keep your focus.

- Take the full allotted time. If you finish early, go back and make sure your answer matches what the question asked.

After the Test

- Relax. Your grade is nothing but a measure of how you did on this one test. It has nothing to do with your character, your dignity, your heroism, or your capacity to succeed.
- When your test is returned to you, *keep on learning*. If you read the test questions again, you can learn something you didn't know. Obviously, this happens if you had a fact wrong. But less obviously, you might discover that a certain question is about things far more important than you realized—something you never questioned. But now you have learned a good question about an important issue.
- Also, read the returned test for possible ambiguities in the wording of questions. It could justify an appeal.

Tests at Work

Besides tests in school, there are the “tests” in the work world –our job interviews and performance reviews. Many of the same ideas about school tests apply.

For example, you need to prepare how you account for your “mistakes.” We all make mistakes. So to prepare for the “test” of a job interview or a performance review, formulate your mistakes ahead of time as *part of your learning process*. That is, formulate them as progress. Don't say “I didn't ...” or “I failed to ...” Rather, show that you learned something. Identify what positive step resulted from the “mistake.”

Suppose you are a team leader, and that several team members were absent at yesterday's meeting. When your boss asks about this, say,

“I'm concerned about the absentees yesterday. It really slowed down our progress. For good attendance at next week's meeting I'm going to add a 'confirmation of receipt and agreement to attend' to the email announcing the meeting.”

Notice what is *not* here:

You don't speak about your failure. Instead, you claim a problem as your responsibility.

You don't get into your *general* performance (“I'm having trouble at my meetings”) but rather the *specific* problem of yesterday's meeting.

And you don't leave it to your boss to give the next steps; you state them yourself.