

Designing a Grading System

In every grading system, numbers or letters are merely signifiers, and their meaning is entirely derived from the reliability of the systems used to make a grading determination. In other words, the accuracy, authority, and dependability of all grades depend on the quality of the methods used to award them. If a school's assessment and reporting system is flawed, the resulting grades will be questionable, misleading, or meaningless; if the system is based on consistently applied learning standards and aligned assessments, the consistency, reliability, and utility of the grades will increase dramatically because the grades will have common meaning from course to course, assessment to assessment, and student to student.

While the numbers or letters used to report, track, and record academic achievement matter far less than the system used to award a grade, the Great Schools Partnership nevertheless recommends that schools use grading and reporting systems that are familiar to parents, college-admissions officers, and prospective employers.

Most schools find that 4.0 scales work best in proficiency-based systems, mainly because 100-point scales represent too many fine-grained distinctions that are not discernable in a standards-based approach to assessment. For the purposes of scoring individual assessments, we recommend that teachers use a simple 4-point proficiency scale (1.0, 2.0, 3.0, and 4.0). While many schools use only four proficiency levels on their rubrics and scoring guides, some schools choose to add two levels of achievement below and above proficiency: 2.5 and 3.5. The additional proficiency levels allow teachers to recognize students who are progressing toward the next level of proficiency, but who have not yet met the standard. For example:

Proficiency Levels	Proficiency Descriptions
4.0	Exceeds Proficiency
3.5	Proficient
3.0	Proficient
2.5	Partially Proficient
2.0	Partially Proficient
1.0	Insufficient Evidence

To determine a final end-of-term grade for a course or other learning experience, teachers will aggregate a student's performance on summative assessments using a common formula, producing final grades that fall somewhere on the 4.0 scale. In proficiency-based systems, students may not achieve proficiency on all learning objectives for a unit or lesson, but their end-of-course grades will reflect an aggregate score between 3 and 4. While the students have earned a "passing" score for the course, graduation eligibility is based on both passing courses and demonstrating achievement of all graduation standards. Consequently, students who fail to achieve a sufficient percentage of performance indicators associated with a graduation standard may, in some cases, earn an aggregate "passing score" for a course even though they have not demonstrated aggregate achievement of a specific standard required for graduation.



When designing a grading system, we recommend that schools allow for sufficient graduations both above and below proficiency, regardless of where the cut-off score is placed on the 4.0 scale. Ideally, teachers want to be able to recognize both high achievement that exceeds proficiency, and academic achievement that is close to—but not yet—proficient. In the following 4.0 system, end-of-term grades may be represented as 3.2 or 3.6, for example (we recommend rounding all grades to a single decimal point):

Proficiency Levels	Proficiency Descriptions
3.6–4.0	Exceeds Proficiency
3.0–3.5	Proficient
2.0–2.9	Partially Proficient
1.0–1.9	Insufficient Evidence