

Grades

Why are grades important?

They help teachers notice who needs more help.

They prompt students to work on their studies.

They give graduate school deans a criterion for allowing or denying admission.

Grades give financial aid officers a measure of the recipient's dependability.

Grades also serve as exercises in learning not only tasks-at-hand but also the relative importance of each task. For students, this means keeping one eye on course content and the other on how a teacher envisions which parts of the content are more important. Those who learn what teachers regard as more important earn higher grades because they more clearly anticipate what will be on tests. For the work world, this is a good exercise in paying attention not only to what one's job requires but also to what the boss thinks are the more important parts of a job.

On the other hand, grades are not very important. 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. Nor does an "A" 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 might you feel a 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.

But once your formal education is over, 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.

Tests

What's a Test?

When you read "test," what student-teacher image comes to mind? It is important for adult learners to notice this because people imagine tests in three significantly different ways.

Some cling to an image they had as children. They are stuck at a Child-Parent image where they are *punished* if they do badly.

Some carry a Child-Adult image where they ought to be *ashamed* for doing badly.

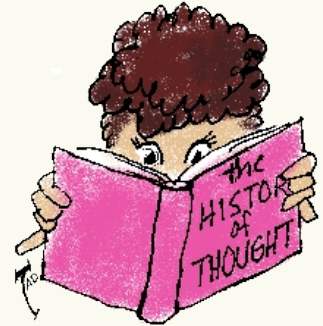
Some envision Adult-Adult image. It's an image of two adults, where one wants to *learn with the other's help*. True, tests are instruments for evaluating a student's performance. But for both student and teacher, tests should also be instruments for learning what one hasn't learned.

This is a challenge not only to students but also to teachers. They too can be stuck in Child-Parent or Child-Adult images. Some will 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 understand the difference between actually enlightening students and just shining in their eyes. Being learners themselves, effective teachers are open to correction.

Students too have their own horizons; they come to school with their own concerns about what they really need to learn. But even there, effective teachers hope that students will learn not only what they personally hope to learn, but also what they need to learn. These teachers want to convey information and insight, but 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. Or perhaps the student has

not yet realized how learning moves from puzzlement to questions to answers, in which case effective teachers will respect looks of puzzlement and praise good questions as passionately as good answers. Or, life being bigger than school, effective teachers will consider whether the student is focused more on life questions that have nothing to do with the course, which may call for a one-on-one conversation.



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 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.") From my experience, many students won't ask each other for help because they imagine courses not as fields of Adult-Adult engagement but as fields of Child-Child competition with other students. Even the brightest

students can show a remarkable lack of intelligence and uncaring self-obsession here.

During the Test

- Read the test questions twice. It's amazing how many students give the "incorrect" answer because they misunderstand the question. I recommend reading the question twice. The first is the normal way-- just scan the words with your eyes and mind. The second adds your ears and imagination: In an online test, 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 overlook.
- 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 may learn something you didn't know. Obviously, this happens if you were ignorant of a fact. But less obviously, you may not have *understood* the issue represented by the facts. In this case, you might learn that a certain issue *never puzzled* you, or that a certain issue is far more important than you realized— something you *never questioned*. The reason you got the answer wrong is because you weren't *puzzled*, didn't *question*, or didn't understand the question that lead to the correct *answer*. But now you have learned that some issue is more important than you thought. And you have learned from your teacher what experts on the issue regard as the key open questions.
- Also, read the returned test for possible ambiguities in the wording of questions. It could justify an appeal and help your teacher improve the test.

Tests at Work

Besides tests in school, there are 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.