

A Homily on Grading

TO BE CANDID ABOUT IT, we here in the Linguistics Program don't like grading very much, and we would avoid it if we could. Sometimes, reading papers is not so bad. In fact, sometimes student papers can be really interesting, even thrilling. But for the exams, well, we know the answers to the questions ahead of time, and reading twenty-five versions of them really isn't very much fun.

However, grades are important. They are important to you, and therefore, they are important to us. As a result, we take them very seriously. We've given some thought to what grades mean and what they don't mean, and we'd like to share some of those thoughts with you.

The letter that will appear next to your name on our grade reports is not really addressed to you. It is for interested parties who were not able to attend our class so that they could make up their own minds about your performance. You want these people to know how things went. All of us tacitly agree that the professors are in a good position to know how things went, and so we tell whoever you want us to what we think. These people might include parents, grandparents, graduate and professional schools, potential employers, or anyone else who you request. The letter is a kind of code, a condensation of a term's work for someone who doesn't have a lot of time or is looking for an aggregate view of who you are intellectually. On the other hand, if you yourself want to know what we think, you can drop by and we'll tell you lots more than just (for example) "B+". We have lots more to say because we've thought about you a lot more than the simple letter would imply. Actually, we'll say it to anybody who has a right to know and wants to, but most recipients of the grade report don't really want that kind of detailed information. In fact, sometimes students don't want it, either.

Here's some other things we want you to know about these grades. First, they are not, repeat *not*, an indication of how we think of you on a personal level. We're human just like you are, and so we like some people more than we like others. But the grade we give to you has nothing whatsoever to do with that. Nothing. In either direction. There are some brilliant linguists who we frankly don't care for, and we love some people who can't tell a second formant transition from a finite automaton. The grade we give expresses our judgment of the skill you displayed in our course, nothing more and nothing less.

Second, we work hard to make the grades fair. In fact, fairness, both with respect to your classmates and to the world outside of Carleton, is uppermost in our minds when the refrigerator has been cleaned, the lawn mowed, checkbook balanced, and we finally have no choice but to sit down and grade those exams. A corollary of this is that we are always, if there is time, willing to reread exams and papers to make sure we judged what you did fairly. Because fairness is our goal, it is our second opinion that counts, even if that second opinion lowers your grade. (As a matter of historical fact, we've never lowered a grade under these circumstances, but we reserve the right to do so.)

We don't think of you as grade recipients. And we hope you don't think of us as grade dispensers. There's a lot more going on in our classes and at the College than that, and watching you at this very special time of your life is one of the joys and privileges of our profession. There are others, but grading isn't one of them, at least not for us. But grade you we will. Maybe, now that you know how we think of this aspect of our relationship, you'll have a better sense of what is happening when we, in the words of fellow Minnesotan Garrison Keillor, get up and do what needs to be done.

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