

BIO recommendations for effective syllabi and fair grading

Every semester, many students complain about the grades they receive. In general, complaints arise in classes with unclear or unstated grading rules, and in classes that enforce a specific distribution of grades (grade on a curve). The Biology Instructional Office (BIO) recommends the following guidelines to improve grading transparency and reduce student complaints.

1. Grading rules need to be clearly explained in the syllabus

On the first class day, in the syllabus, students must be given a clear explanation of how exactly final grades will be determined. Students need to be able to figure out throughout the semester exactly where they stand with their grade. It happens all too often that students have no idea what their grade will be like before the end of the semester, and this is usually due to lack of clarity in the syllabus.

2. Grading on a curve is discouraged

Grades should be given according to an absolute standard, determined by the instructor and clearly spelled out in the syllabus. The grade of a student should only depend on that student's performance in class, not on the performance of other students in the same class. If all students meet the standard to receive an A, they all should. If no students meet the standard, none of them should receive an A.

3. Adjustments for excessively hard/easy exams

One objection that is often raised against absolute grading standards is that they cannot be adjusted for excessively hard/easy exams. BIO suggests that you adjust grades for excessively hard exams, **but not** for excessively easy exams. If your exams are too easy, then that is not your students' fault, and they should not be punished for doing well on easy exams. Make your exams harder the next time. If your exams are too hard, then raise overall performance by giving extra points to everybody or by lowering grade thresholds.

4. Simple letter grades vs. +/- grading

Since UT now offers +/- grading, instructors should make use of it to provide more differentiated grades.

5. BIO recommended grading scheme

BIO recommends the following grading scheme. Experience has shown that instructors using this scheme receive extremely few student complaints about grades.

- Each assignment (exam, homework, in-class participation, etc.) is worth a certain number of points. Students receive points according to their performance on each assignment.
- The final grade in the class is determined by the total number of points a student has collected during the semester. How many points are necessary for which grade is stated at the beginning of the class, in the syllabus.
- If necessary, the instructor adjusts grades by lowering published grade thresholds or giving extra points to all students in the class. Such adjustments should be announced to the students. Importantly, adjustments **must never be to the detriment of the students**.
- If the instructor feels at any time during the semester that students collect points too easily, then it is up to the instructor to give harder assignments for the remainder of the class.

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