

# Frequently Asked Questions

## Contents

1. [What grade scale do you use?](#)
2. [Can I get an extension on my paper?](#)
3. [I am going to miss the \\_\\_\\_\\_\\_ \[quiz, exam, etc.\] \\_\\_\\_\\_\\_. What should I do?](#)
4. [I missed the \\_\\_\\_\\_\\_ \[quiz, exam, etc.\] \\_\\_\\_\\_\\_. How can I make it up?](#)
5. [Do you offer extra credit assignments?](#)
6. [Why did you take points off of some of my answers on the exam?](#)
7. [I heard that you are a hard grader. Is that true?](#)
8. [How do you calculate participation grades?](#)
9. [What is my grade so far in the class?](#)
10. [How can I improve for the next paper?](#)
11. [What do these marks on my exam mean?](#)
12. [What do these marks on my paper mean?](#)

\*\*\*

## 1. What grade scale do you use?

<u>Answer:</u> 93.0 – 100.0	A	<b>A</b>	Excellent, exceptional, outstanding work	Strong evidence of deep, robust understanding of the material – even of its most subtle or complex aspects ; Beautifully clear and well-communicated ; Demonstrates exceptional critical thinking and evaluation skills ; Display of extraordinary creativity and/or original thought.
90.0 – 92.9	A-	<b>B</b>	Good work	Evidence that student firmly grasps the subject matter ; Demonstration of developed critical capacity and analytic ability; Mostly clear and understandable communication.
87.0 – 89.9	B+	<b>C</b>	Satisfactory / adequate work	Evidence that the student is deriving some benefit from course enrollment, and meeting assignment requirements, but displays <i>some</i> lack of understanding of the material, or lack of clear communication or critical reasoning.
83.0 – 86.9	B	<b>D</b>	Minimally acceptable	<i>Some</i> evidence of familiarity with the subject matter, and minimally meets assignment requirements, but displays <i>some major</i> misunderstanding, lack of clarity, or under-developed critical thinking and evaluation skills.
80.0 – 82.9	B-	<b>F</b>	Inadequate, unacceptable	Little evidence of even superficial understanding of the subject matter, or of the ability to communicate clearly, or critically analyze and evaluate ideas.
77.0 – 79.9	C+			
...And so on				

## 2. Can I get an extension on my paper?

Answer: No. I do not give extensions. However, you may turn the paper in late, for a penalty as described in the assignment sheet.

## 3. I am going to miss the \_\_\_\_\_ [quiz, exam, etc.] \_\_\_\_\_. What should I do?

Answer: Any and all conflicts with assignments such as exams, debates, etc., must be submitted for my approval no later than the last day of the second week of class. If your conflict is legitimate, and brought to my attention in a timely manner, we will work together to re-schedule (or, for quizzes, simply excuse the absence). If your conflict is not legitimate, or you miss the second-week deadline for submission, you will receive a zero for any assignment that you miss.

Example: Most frequent legitimate conflict: W&M athletes out of town for an away-game.

Example: Most frequent **non**-legitimate conflict: Booking a plane ticket with the intent of being out of town (on vacation, with family, etc.) on the day of the exam.

**4. I missed the \_\_\_\_\_ [quiz, exam, etc.]. How can I make it up?**

Answer: You cannot. You now have a zero for this assignment.

**5. Do you offer extra credit assignments?**

Answer: No. I do not.

**6. Why did you take points off of some of my answers on the exam?**

Answer: I will consider discussing your graded exam during office hours only after you have taken the following steps: (i) You must first consult the lecture notes and/or a classmate, and write (or type) up a report for each of the questions for which you did not receive full credit. There, you will write down what your answer was, and what you believe to be the correct answer, as well as a brief summary explaining how/why your answer differs from (what you now believe to be) the correct answer. (ii) Then, you must turn this report in to me. (iii) In the event that your report is perfectly accurate, you will now have a perfectly accurate answer to your own question. In the event that your report is inaccurate, I may deem it necessary to arrange a meeting to discuss any confusions and/or mistakes.

Most common reason for why a student is confused about their failure to earn full credit for some particular answer: The student's answer differs from the correct answer by only a couple of words, but these missing words are crucial, and render their answer incorrect or incomplete. Example: The exam question is, "Define hedonism". Student answer: "The view that happiness is intrinsically good." Correct answer: "The view that happiness is the only thing that is intrinsically good." (The student's answer describes not only hedonists but also *non*-hedonists. Virtually everyone believes that happiness is intrinsically good. What's distinct about hedonism is that it is the view that *nothing else* is intrinsically good. So, this student's answer does not earn full credit.)

**7. I heard that you are a hard grader. Is that true?**

Answer: No. It is not. Several of my students have *believed* that it is true – but these students' beliefs were false. That said, you should *not* expect an automatic 'A' in my course. Per [the W&M grading system](#), I assign B's for good work, and reserve A's for excellent work. So, if you want to earn an A in my course, then you will need to achieve excellence. Ultimately, the vast majority (over 88%) of my graded students receive grades that are either *good* or *excellent*. Below is a breakdown of final grades earned by the 1,565 students that I have taught at W&M (Fall 2014 – Fall 2023).

**663 A's** (45.3%), **636 B's** (43.4%), **112 C's** (7.6%), **33 D's** (2.3%), **21 F's** (1.4%) ; **Average GPA:** 3.3 (B+)

Note 1: Over this same period, the average GPA for all undergraduate courses at W&M was 3.44 (B+).

Note 2: The data above does not include the **95 P's** earned by those students who took my course pass/fail, nor any of the handful of withdrawals.

## 8. How do you calculate participation grades?

Answer: I first calculate your grade for all course work (typically 90% of your grade). I then assign a participation grade which is equal to that grade. So, for instance, if you received an 86.9% on all course work, then your base participation grade is also an 86.9%. I then adjust this grade if and only if the following criteria are met:

- (a) The final grade is borderline (e.g., a couple of tenths of a percent above or below a letter grade boundary).
- (b) It is mathematically possible for the participation grade to affect the final grade.
- (c) The student's participation and attendance were exceptional in some way, whether exceptionally good or exceptionally bad (e.g., they had 100% attendance and regularly made constructive contributions to class discussions, or they never came to class, or were constantly disruptive, etc.).

In this particular example, the student's grade (86.9%) is *almost* a B+ (which is an 87.0%), and the participation grade *could* affect whether this student receives a B or a B+. So, the first two criteria met. As such, I then move on to criterion (c), and ask: Were the student's attendance and participation exceptional? If so, I will change the participation grade from an 86.9% to something higher, in order to boost the student's final grade by the one-tenth of a percent needed to receive a B+.

Note: In rare instances, for those students whose final grades are close but not *super* close to the borderline (for example, an 86.6%), but who still meet criteria (b) and (c), I may take additional factors into consideration when assigning participation grades. For example,

- I may look at the student's grade on the "Big Four" – typically, two papers and two exams. This is the student's "real" grade in the course – i.e., their grade on the assignments that actually measured their understanding of the material in the course. If the Big Four grade is very high, this counts as a reason in favor of a grade bump. But, if the student's Big Four grade is significantly lower than their broader final grade, then this is a reason against a grade bump.
- I may look at the trend line across the Big Four, over time. For example, if the student did poorly on early major assignments, did they improve dramatically from the first paper to the second, and/or from the first exam to the second? If so, then this shows me that the student has put in the effort to learn from earlier mistakes, and to do better over the course of the semester, and this is a reason in favor of a grade bump. If the student did poorly on early assignments, but did *not* improve significantly, then this is a reason against a bump.
- I may check to see if the student has ever received any penalties. For example, perhaps Student A received a 12 point penalty on one of their papers, for turning it in 24 hours late, while Student B received a 10 point penalty for not following instructions. (They wrote their paper on a something not listed under the approved topics, without obtaining instructor approval first.) If this penalty is the *only* reason that each student falls just shy of the next letter grade, then this is a reason in favor of a grade bump (though not a decisive reason).
- I frequently also re-read / re-grade papers and exams, to regain a fresh sense of what the student's performance was in the course as a whole, and also to compare my re-assessment with my original one. If there were any way for me to justify a slightly higher grade on any earlier assignments, then this would be a reason in favor of a grade bump. If not, then this is a reason against a grade bump. (*Though I should clarify that, in practice, my re-assessments have never revealed that my earlier, original assessment was too harsh. I simply check, to be absolutely sure.*)

## 9. What is my grade so far in the class?

Answer: Please consult the syllabus and apply your basic math skills.

Example: Suppose that we have had so far a mid-term (worth 15% of the final grade), a paper (10%), and four reading quizzes (worth 1% each). In that case, you have completed 29% of your final grade so far ( $15 + 10 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1$ ). Suppose further that your grades on these were: 86/100 on the mid-term, 82/100 on the paper, and a 6/10, 8/10, 8/10, and 10/10 on the four quizzes (so that your quiz average is 32/40, or 80%). Calculate your grade as follows:

$$[(86 \times 15) + (82 \times 10) + (80 \times 4)] / 29 = 83.8\%$$

## 10. How can I improve for the next paper?

Answer: First, if you are asking this question, make absolutely sure that you have studied the guides linked to in the paper prompt: [The Pink Guide to Philosophy](#) (pgs. 11-17), by Wellesley professor Helena de Bres, and this [Video Guide for Writing a Philosophy Paper](#), by professor Jeffrey Kaplan (UNC Greensboro). Here are some additional guides to help you as well:

- Harvard's [Brief Guide to Writing a Philosophy Paper](#)
- this guide from [Aaron Griffith \(W&M\)](#)
- this guide from [Manuel Vargas \(UC San Diego\)](#)

Second, if you did not receive the grade that you wanted, ask yourself:

- (a) Did you start your paper more than 48 hours before it was due?
- (b) Did you put at least 10 hours of work into your paper? (or 20 for longer papers)

If 'No' to both, then a poor to mediocre grade is to be expected. For the next paper, be sure to correct these two mistakes. I strongly recommend starting your papers several days or weeks in advance. In all of my courses, it is typically possible to begin working on your papers at least a month in advance (often, two months). Regarding the work itself, a good strategy is as follows:

- Start by re-reading the relevant article(s) or text(s) that you plan to write about.
- Then, begin mulling things over informally. For instance, create a document and just start typing, spilling all of your thoughts out onto the page. Or, discuss the topic with a friend. Philosophy makes for a great conversation starter. This will help you clarify your thoughts.
- Decide what your stance is on the issue, and what your reasons are for *why* you believe this.
- Figure out what you hope to achieve in your paper, and make a plan for how you'd like to do it.
- Write a rough draft, following your plan, or outline.
- Let that draft rest for a while. Spend a week or two mulling over your objections every now and then. Let your brain work on it for you in the background.
- Return to your draft and revise it, getting it into its final shape to be turned in.

Finally, feel free to stop by my office hours to discuss your outline, bounce ideas off of me, etc. That's what I'm here for.

Here are the two most common issues with student papers:

(1) **The paper is not clear.** Some general tips:

- *Do not try to sound smart.* Use simple sentence structures, and write in plain English.
- *Signposting.* Be sure to let your reader know what you are doing at every stage. Are you transitioning from discussing an argument to presenting some objections? *Tell* the reader!
- *Start early.* Begin writing the paper well in advance of the due date. After writing a draft, let it sit for a day or two and then re-read it. Often, the paper will make way less sense to you once you've distanced yourself from the mindset you were in when you initially wrote it. This will help you to better detect and revise the portions of your paper that are unclear.
- *Have a peer read it.* Try having your roommate read the paper. And don't merely ask them, "Was it good?" because they'll just say "yes" to be nice. Instead, quiz them. Ask them: What was my central thesis? What were my primary reasons given in defense of this thesis? What were the main objections that I examined? Why were those objections potentially damaging? How did I reply to them? And so on. If they cannot answer every question perfectly, then your paper may have been unclear (or else your friend didn't read it very carefully).

(2) **The thesis is not well-supported.** Some general tips:

- *Provide reasons.* For every claim that you make which is not immediately obvious or almost universally accepted, you need to provide *reasons* in support of that claim. Supply *evidence*. Explain *why* your reader should accept that the claim is true.
- *Uncontroversial reasons.* The reasons that you appeal to in support of your claim should be uncontroversial. Remember, you are trying to convince someone who may *disagree* with you. To do that, you'll need to find the common ground between you and your opponent – some claims that you can BOTH accept – and argue from *those* claims to your conclusion. For example:

*Imagine that you were arguing in favor of laws enforcing mandatory vaccination. Your opponent has raised an objection: "But," they say, "It is unjust for the government to tell you what you can and cannot do with your own body. A vaccine mandate would infringe on our right to bodily autonomy!" Now imagine that you respond as follows: "No, a vaccine mandate would not be unjust on those grounds. There are already lots of laws that restrict bodily autonomy. For example, lots of states have laws banning abortion. Therefore, since the government already restricts bodily autonomy in this way, it would be permissible for the government to further restrict bodily autonomy by mandating vaccines." NO! In order to support your stance on vaccine mandates, you just appealed to one of the most controversial issues in the country! At least half of your readers are going to reject your claim that abortion bans are just. The reasons that you give in support of your claims should always be less controversial than the claim you are trying to defend – not more controversial.*

- *Examples help.* It is often helpful to support your claim with a concrete case, or story, or example, which illustrates the point that you're trying to make.

## **11. What do these marks on my exam mean?**

Answer: Here is your secret decoder.

- ✓ Answer is correct
- ok Answer is basically correct, but imperfect; slightly vague, sloppy, or incomplete, but not enough to warrant a point deduction

- ~ Answer is nearly correct, or is in the general vicinity of the correct answer, but is ultimately flawed in some way; vague, sloppy, or incomplete enough to warrant a minor point deduction
- x Answer contains some clear error; e.g., it asserts something false, or it does not address the question, etc.
- ? Answer is unclear in some way; e.g., it is worded in a confused way, it is vague and could be interpreted in several different ways, it contains a controversial assertion which is unsupported by any reasons, etc.
- ?? Answer contains a serious confusion; e.g., it is unintelligible due to word choice (or poor handwriting), or seems to misunderstand the question, etc.
- why? Answer contains an assertion that is left unexplained and/or unsupported by any *reasons*—likely in a way that fails to fully answer the question.
- ^ Answer is missing one or more important words where this mark occurs.
- ... Answer is incomplete. Further explanation is needed for full credit.
- =? Written next to a term or phrase, this mark indicates that the phrase/term needs to be defined or explained more carefully.
- " Typically accompanied by an arrow which connects some portion of the question to some portion of the answer, this mark indicates that the answer (or some portion of it) is essentially just repeating the question without adding anything new, and therefore fails to actually answer that question.

## 12. What do these marks on my paper mean?

Answer: Check out this handy decoder.

- ✓ Nice job. You've stated something in an exceptionally clear and careful way; or this passage contains some impressive insight; or perhaps you have presented an original case or objection that very nicely demonstrates your point.
- ~ Sort of. You've stated something that is nearly correct, or almost clear, but is ultimately flawed in some way; vague, sloppy, unclear, or incomplete.
- x No. You've said something false, or drawn a mistaken inference, or inappropriately applied a case or objection, etc.
- Ⓜ This passage contains an assertion which is insufficiently supported by *reasons*. Remember that you are trying to *convince* your reader to agree with you. This means that any claims that are not obviously true—and *especially* any claims that are controversial—must be *argued for*. That is, they must be demonstrated to be true by presenting supporting reasons or evidence in favor of them. Furthermore, these reasons must be ones that the average reader is likely to accept.

- why?** Often interchangeable with the previous mark, ‘@’, the present mark, ‘why?’, indicates that this passage makes an assertion, or draws an inference, etc., without stating clearly to the reader *why* they should believe that this assertion is true, or *why* this inference is legitimate, etc.
- DEV.** I’d like to see this point developed further. As it stands, it is not adequately explored. I’d like to see you take a deeper dive into this issue, or objection, or reply, etc., exploring it more carefully & thoroughly.
- ?** This passage is unclear in some way; e.g., it is worded in a confused way, or is ambiguous, or draws an inference that is not quite clear, etc.
- ??** This passage contains a serious confusion, or is worded in a way that makes it unintelligible to the reader.
- //** A transition is needed where this mark appears. If you are moving on from discussing an argument to discussing objections to it (or from an objection to a reply), *you must clearly indicate this to the reader.*
- ^** One or more important words are missing where this mark occurs.
- ...** This passage is incomplete. Further explanation is needed in order to fully or convincingly or accurately convey the point that is being made here.
- =?** Written next to a term or phrase, this mark indicates that the phrase/term needs to be defined or explained more carefully. Remember, your target audience has not studied this issue, so any technical terms or unfamiliar concepts will need to be explained to them.
- "** Typically accompanied by an arrow which connects two portions of the text, this mark indicates that the two connected passages are redundant. Perhaps you have claimed to be presenting a new objection or issue, when it is really the same as something stated previously—or perhaps the text is simply too redundant—without adding anything new to the narrative.