

Point-Based Grading Systems: Benefits and Liabilities

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By Maryellen Weimer,
PhD

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If there's a perfect grading system, it has yet to be discovered. This post is about point systems—not because they're the best or the worst but because they're widely used. It is precisely because they are so prevalent that we need to think about how they affect learning.

It would be nice if we had some empirical evidence to support our thinking. I'm surprised that so little research has been done on this common grading system. Does it promote more effective learning (as measured by higher exam scores or overall course grades) than letter grades or percentages? Does it motivate students to study? Does it make students more grade oriented or less so? Does it provoke more grade anxiety than other systems or less? Does it make a difference whether we use a 100-point system or a 1,000-point system? We all have our preferences—and sometimes even reasons—for the systems we use, but where's the evidence? I can't remember reading anything empirical that explores these questions—if you have, please share the references.



To stimulate our thinking and further conversation, here are some regularly mentioned benefits of point systems and some of their unspoken liabilities.

Benefit — In a word, clarity. Allotting a designated number of points to each assignment and activity makes it completely clear to students what's worth more in a course and what's worth less. If we look at where we're directing students' energies, it should be toward those activities that achieve the most important learning objectives. Point systems make easier for us to check that connection.

Benefit — Point systems give teachers wiggle room. If a student is arguing for more points, making a reasonable but not exceptional case, and there are 10 points between an A and B, the teacher can give the student a couple of points, and the conversation ends happily. The student got something, and the teacher didn't compromise the grade.

Benefit — They're expected. Students are used to being graded with points. Given the level of anxiety grades generate, having students comfortable with the system means less worry about the mechanics and maybe more focus on learning (we can only hope).

Benefit — They look objective. Numbers connote accuracy and precision. Numbers mean something. Letters grades look much more subjective.

Liability — Point systems are less objective than they seem. The criteria used, the levels on the rubric, the one factually correct answer—those provide the objectivity, but there's an element of subjective assessment because the graders are human. Graders make judgments—good judgments, if you consider how much experience most teachers have grading and how well we know the content. But still, we give partial credit for how much of the whole we think the student understands. We assign points to a performance based on what we see; but do we see everything? Points cloud the subjective elements inherent in the grading process. Regardless of our grading system, do we ever talk to students about the challenges involved in measuring learning?

Liability — Points reinforce the value of extrinsic motivation. What can you get a student to do for a point? Head into class, announce a three-point extra credit assignment, and ask who's interested in doing it. There will be a sea of hands, many waving frantically. I sometimes follow this announcement with an offer for two points and then one point. By the time I get down to half a point, students usually figure out the message I'm trying to send. Point systems encourage students to do things for points, not because they're interested, curious, or want to learn. They create token economies that imply if points aren't involved, the learning activity is, well, pointless.

Liability— Points encourage grade grubbing, leading to those conversations with the instructor where the goal is to get more points. Students will explain, argue, and plead that they deserve more points due to the time and effort expended on a project. They will say nice things about the teacher and the course—all in the interest of getting a few more points. But in their litany of reasons why they deserve more points, do they ever mention what they've learned?

Should you start or stop using point systems? If you use them already, are there ways to overcome or diminish their liabilities? The overarching issue or challenge is one raised in [a previous blog post](#)—how do we get students to focus more on learning? If you've discovered a way of using point systems to accomplish that goal, all of us would love to hear about it. Please share in the comments.

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