

# Grading Dilemma: Should We Round Up?

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Among the trickiest decisions teachers make is whether to round up the final grade for a student who is just a few points shy of a passing score.

Although some students need a “second lap” to master academic skills needed for later coursework, repeating courses makes it harder for students to progress toward a degree. Time is money (literally, in higher education), and when students are asked to spend more of both on a class they already took, they may get discouraged or drop out. This is a consequence we need to take seriously, as nearly half of students do not complete a bachelor’s degree in four years.

So, how should we decide what to do?

One heuristic I use is to consider a series of questions about various aspects of a student’s performance in line with course objectives. Each answer provides a snapshot of the student’s work over the course of the semester, and the composite picture clarifies whether it makes sense for the student to pass or retake the course.

In this essay, I describe the questions I use, in the context of teaching first-year writing, and work through a case study to demonstrate the heuristic’s use in finalizing grades.

## **How**

### **did students perform on important assignments?**

Especially in first-year courses, some assignments, such as papers, measure students' progress toward course objectives more fully than others. I focus on these assignments when deciding whether to round up a student's grade. If a student receives a low grade due to poor homework performance, I often round up, whereas if major projects are consistently below passing, I round down, so the final grade reflects the work done on core assignments.

Indeed, a student who consistently passes major assignments, even if she struggles on minor assessments, shows the ability to exercise higher-order thinking skills in the context of class work. This ability is more important to a student's continued success in the subject area and often reflects her learning more accurately, especially since some students struggle with timed quizzes or high-pressure tests.

## **Did**

### **the student improve over the course of the semester?**

A student who makes noticeable strides in her academic work shows she gets the basics of the subject, even if she does not yet follow all its complexities. Equally importantly, sustained improvement shows that a student has the initiative and metacognitive abilities to spot her own errors and correct them. These learning habits will help a student overcome challenges in subsequent courses, and I may round the grade up.

I also ask about any personal difficulties the student faced, such as an extended illness that might cause a temporary setback in academic performance.

## **Did**

### **the student meet the course objectives?**

Course objectives are the finish line of a race: like a marathoner who leaves the course at Mile 20, a student who does not reach the objectives has not fully completed the course. If a student falls short of a significant number of the objectives, she should retake the course, so that she has the opportunity to acquire important skills.

Yet if a student meets most objectives, it may make sense for her to pass, despite a weaker performance on one or two objectives. This is especially true for objectives such as the common institutional

requirement that students learn a formatting style such as MLA or APA; if a student writes focused essays that clearly cite credible research, her inability to format those citations in a particular style is likely no reason for her to retake the entire course.

## **Case study**

Carla\* was a student in English Composition during Spring 2018.

She enthusiastically attended every class, though she sometimes arrived up to 20 minutes late (in a 50-minute class) and often skipped homework. She missed a week of class in mid-April due to the flu.

She also submitted a paper late, and per the late policy, its grade was reduced by 15 points out of 100. While Carla quickly grasped writing skills such as identifying credible research, she struggled to maintain focus in her papers and consistently failed to proofread her work.

When the semester ended, Carla's grade stood at 289 points, 11 points below the 300 required to pass. So, I worked through my heuristic:

- Carla missed a lot of homework assignments but consistently passed major assignments.
- When Carla returned after the flu, she felt confused and overwhelmed. With my help, she rallied and turned in her final project on time, though it received a lower score than her other projects.
- Carla met key objectives, such as using research to persuade a narrow audience, yet she continued to have difficulty with objectives, such as focusing her paper and proofreading it.

Ultimately, I rounded Carla's grade up. Although her writing skills remained weak in important areas, passing every paper and mastering the most important course objectives suggested she had the abilities needed to succeed in subsequent coursework.

## **Conclusion**

Even with assessment tools such as rubrics, grading is unavoidably contingent; any final decision always depends upon the individual student's situation. The value of this heuristic is that it introduces structure and the opportunity for reflection into this contingency. The heuristic raises us out of the minutiae of quiz scores and attendance records

to provide a clear, holistic picture of a student's performance in light of course expectations, and of her own learning experiences. In turn, this picture helps us teachers maintain just, equitable grading practices that support our students as they progress towards graduation.

\*Carla is a hypothetical student. All details about the student, course, and grades are fictional and illustrative

#### Reference

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