

February 16, 1978

TO: ALL INSTRUCTORS OF FRESHMAN ENGLISH  
FROM: FRESHMAN ENGLISH POLICY COMMITTEE  
RE: GRADE INFLATION

Most of us are aware that a grade inflation problem exists. Many of us have contributed to it; certainly all of us have felt the pressures that cause it.

In the 1960's draft deferments were issued to male students who maintained satisfactory grade-point averages; few of us could ignore the consequences of the loss of those deferments. Also in the '60's the NCTE and the CCC, reflecting larger social issues, endorsed "students' right to their own language." We have also felt pressure from students who believe that a high grade-point average is the ticket to graduate or professional school. We have further felt the impact of student evaluations. Moreover, some of us have begun using certain teaching techniques, such as encouraging repeated paper revision, that have tended to inflate grades. Finally, as teachers of relatively small writing classes, we face the problems arising when we get to know our students as individuals and sometimes friends.

A report recently released by the Faculty Senate Committee on Grade Inflation documents a rise, since the early 1960's, in undergraduate grade-point averages both nationally and at UT, and affords us some valuable insights into the scope of the problem. We do recognize, of course, that statistics such as these are often misleading. Many universities, for example, have recently begun to allow students who are not satisfied with a grade to retake the course and have recorded on their permanent records only the better grade. Nonetheless, we find the statistics significant and would like to share with you some highlights from this Faculty Senate report:

•A survey of half of the country's 50 leading federally-funded research universities and institutes of technology revealed that between 1963-1974, the percentage of undergraduate A's more than doubled--from 16% to 34%--while the percentage of C's dropped almost as sharply, from 37% to 21%. The average GPA jumped from 2.49 to 2.94.

•During this same period, grades at UT mirrored the national patterns: the percentage of undergraduate A's here almost doubled, while the percentage of C's dropped by nearly one third and the percentage of D's dropped by half.

•In 1958, 14.5% of UT's senior class graduated with honors; in 1967, 14.0%. In 1977, however, 35.1% of our seniors graduated with honors.

•In UT's College of Humanities last spring, the distribution of undergraduate grades was as follows:

A 31%	D 3%
B 32%	F 3%
C 16%	CR 4%

These percentages were close to the norm of the 11 UT colleges surveyed. The lowest percentages of A's and B's were found in the College of Business Administration, which reported these figures:

A 15%	D 9%
B 29%	F 5%
C 31%	CR 3%

•Of particular interest to us are the figures on grades in Freshman English during the period 1965-1975. Here is how grades were distributed, by percentage, in the first-semester Freshman English course (successively numbered 601a, 301, and 306):

	A	B	C	D	F	Other	Number of students
E601a							
Fall 1965	4	20	44	16	9	6	2111
Fall 1967	8	36	40	8	5	3	2068
E301							
Fall 1969	9	39	40	5	3	3	2851
Fall 1971	8	38	39	5	3	5	2295
Fall 1973	13	45	34	2	2	2	3086
E306							
Fall 1975	23	43	25	3	2	5	3006.

Note that during this 10-year period--a period which saw the national average SAT-Verbal score drop by 44 points--the percentage of A's almost sextupled (from 4% to 23%) while the percentage of B's more than doubled (from 20% to 43%). Note, too, that while only 24% of our students back in 1965 received a course grade of A or B, by 1975 the percentage had increased to 66%. All of these students who received grades indicating their work as "Excellent" or "Above Average" were required to take 306 or its equivalent because they had scored below a modest 550 on the ECT.

The grading system reflected in these statistics has ceased to function as an accurate indicator of student performance. We cannot pretend to teach responsible critical analysis and evaluation to our freshman only to practice the opposite ourselves. We cannot grade as if effort or good intentions were synonymous with competence. We cannot evaluate appropriately the work of truly talented students in our classes by giving equal evaluations to the work of less accomplished ones.

The FEPC, like the Faculty Senate, wants to restore some meaning to our grading system. We do not see any value in lowering grades so our statistics will "look better." Nor do we think the answer lies in bell curves or heavy-handed scare tactics. We do think, however, that progress will be made if each of us makes clear to his students, and perhaps to himself as well, that a grade indicates a certain level of competence and that competence in writing requires the mastery of specifically defined skills.

Below are six specific recommendations that we would like to offer. Please give them careful consideration:

(1) Caution your students that the grades you award will be literally consistent with the university's published definitions of their meaning:

A = "Excellent"  
 B = "Above Average"  
 C = "Average"  
 D = "Pass"  
 F = "Failure"

(2) Early in the semester, distribute to your students a list of the criteria you use in setting grades on themes. We suggest the following:

- F paper: Its treatment of the subject is superficial; its theme lacks discernible organization; its prose is garbled or stylistically primitive. Mechanical errors are frequent. In short, the ideas, organization, and style fall far below what is acceptable college writing.
- D paper: Its treatment and development of the subject are as yet only rudimentary. While organization is present, it is neither clear nor effective. Sentences are frequently awkward, ambiguous, and marred by serious mechanical errors. Evidence of careful proofreading is scanty, if nonexistent. The whole piece, in fact, often gives the impression of having been conceived and written in haste.
- C paper: It is generally competent--it meets the assignment, has few mechanical errors, and is reasonably well organized and developed. The actual information it delivers, however, seems thin and commonplace. One reason for that impression is that the ideas are typically cast in the form of vague generalities--generalities that prompt the confused reader to ask marginally: "In every case?" "Exactly how large?" "Why?" "But how many?" Stylistically, the C paper has other shortcomings as well: the opening paragraph does little to draw the reader in; the final paragraph offers only a perfunctory wrap-up; the transitions between paragraphs are often bumpy; the sentences, besides being a bit choppy, tend to follow a predictable (hence monotonous) subject-verb-object order; and the diction is occasionally marred by unconscious repetitions, redundancy, and imprecision. The C paper, then, while it gets the job done, lacks both imagination and intellectual rigor, and hence does not invite a rereading.
- B paper: It is significantly more than competent. Besides being almost free of mechanical errors, the B paper delivers substantial information--that is, substantial in both quantity and interest-value. Its specific points are logically ordered, well developed, and unified around a clear organizing principle that is apparent early in the paper. The opening paragraph draws the reader in; the closing paragraph is both conclusive and thematically related to the opening. The transitions between paragraphs are for the most part smooth, the sentence structures pleasingly varied. The diction of the B paper is typically much more concise and precise than that found in the C paper. Occasionally, it even shows distinctiveness--i.e., finesse and memorability. On the whole, then, a B paper makes the reading experience a pleasurable one, for it offers substantial information with few distractions.
- A paper: Perhaps the principle characteristic of the A paper is its rich content. Some people describe that content as "meaty," others as "dense," still others as "packed." Whatever, the information delivered is such that one feels significantly taught by the author, sentence after sentence, paragraph after paragraph. The A paper is also marked by stylistic finesse: the title and opening paragraph are engaging; the transitions are artful; the phrasing is tight, fresh, and highly specific: the sentence structure is varied; the tone enhances the purposes of the paper. Finally, the A paper, because of its careful organization and development, imparts a feeling of wholeness and unusual clarity. Not surprisingly, then, it leaves the reader feeling bright, thoroughly satisfied, and eager to reread the piece.

(3) Consider making available to your students anonymous sample A and B papers, preferably ones you have scored yourself and saved from previous semesters.

(4) If your policy is to assign a new grade to each rewritten (or revised) paper, explain to your students that you will average the new grade with the original grade in determining the grade that the student ultimately receives on that writing assignment. (This policy discourages hasty writing of the original paper; it also reminds the student of the editing assistance he got from you prior to drafting the re-write.)

(5) Consider sharing with your students the highlights of the Faculty Senate report cited in this memo. Consider, too, the possibility of designing a writing assignment--e.g., a hypothetical Texan editorial--on the subject of grade inflation. (The more thoughtfully students ponder the issues involved, the more likely they are to recognize the problems involved.)

(6) Finally, consider including in your final examination an objective section on grammar and mechanics. The committee member who proposed this recommendation explained her own practice as follows:

My sections of 306 receive two objective examinations: a mid-term and a final. In addition to grammar and mechanics, I include problems in syntax and prose style analysis. Each exam counts the equivalent of one essay; together, about 20% of the final course grade. I use the exams to encourage weaker students to master the fundamentals and to provide two almost purely objective grades to average with the eight or so essay grades.

Cordially,

The FEPC