**Dear Student: No, I Won’t Change the Grade You Deserve**



February 13, 2015

You’ve all heard the trope: Children today grow up believing it’s their effort that matters. Everyone gets a trophy, and everyone deserves to be praised just for showing up. As [one author](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/tim-elmore/from-entitled-to-empowere_1_b_4855109.html) put it: “Parents have moved from feeling they should give their children everything they *need*, to giving them everything they *want*.”

You can debate how much truth there is here. But plenty of professors have told me that when many of their students get to college, they lug into the classroom a sense of [academic entitlement](http://www.rootsofaction.com/avoiding-academic-entitlement-helping-youth-develop-realistic-expectations-for-college/)—a belief that their papers and exams should be graded on how hard they’ve worked, not how well they’ve mastered the material. When they don’t receive the grades they think they deserve, many take the matter up with the graders.

When that happens, one thing becomes clear: Their feelings about the quality of their work often don’t match the reality of their performance. Instead of seeing their grades as a reflection of how well they interpreted or executed their assignments, some students will come to a different conclusion: The assignment was too difficult. Or my professor doesn’t get me.

For many professors—especially faculty without tenure or the job security that comes with it—this poses a problem. Pleas to re-evaluate work can draw professors into annoying confrontations—or force them to explain the mechanics of grading to students, and sometimes angry parents, department chairs, or deans.

So I decided to ask a few professors, a learning consultant, and a graduate student how they would respond to these requests. Let’s say a student who received a C grade on a paper asks you to reread it and change their grade because they “worked so hard on it.” How would you respond?

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**Daryl Scott   
*professor of history*   
*Howard University***

Dear Student,

Thank you for your email requesting that I review your paper to determine whether you should have received a better grade. My policy for re-examining your work is as follows:

Please write a short letter outlining why you believe you have been graded harshly. Make your case for the higher grade. It is perhaps possible that I failed to consider the evidence supporting your thesis properly, or that I misunderstood the nature of your claim. Your case will be strengthened by rebutting the comments I made, incorporating them into your response. If your appeal for reconsideration merits a further examination, I will be happy to do so. Please be advised: I am often too generous rather than too stingy. Thus is possible that when I re-examine your paper your grade might be lowered. I await your response.

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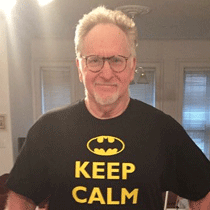
**Angela Jackson-Brown   
*assistant professor of English*   
*Ball State University***

Dear Student,

It always amazes me when students feel like their English paper grades should be based on effort. I sometimes wonder: Do you ask the math teacher if she will give you points for trying even though parts of your mathematical equation are incorrect? If you took an astronomy course, would you want partial credit because even though you identified a star as a planet, you at least recognized they both are in the sky? Get out of here with that, my friend. Your working hard should be a given. You’re in college, not kindergarten. Every single person on this campus’s default is to work hard.

Every single solitary day that I enter into my classroom, I find a room filled with hard-working students who pushed themselves beyond their capabilities. You, my friend, have the audacity to send me a sad, tired little email asking me to reward you for breathing in and out and taking up space in my classroom? A place where geniuses are birthing themselves into existence every single day, and not a single one of them is asking for the “I worked hard” epidural to make this journey easy. I have officially laid my head on the desk, which is the universal signal for “I’m done.”

Signed,   
You must not have read my syllabus because I covered this already

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**Mark Naison   
*professor of African-American studies and history*   
*Fordham University***

Dear Student:

No one respects hard work more than I do! But I can't change your grade because you have provided no verifiable evidence that you have put more than minimal effort into this paper. At the very least, you should have accompanied this email with (a) a videotape of your doing research for, and writing, this paper, in real time or (b) a sworn, notarized statement from one of your roommates indicating exactly how much time you spent on the paper.

In the absence of such evidence, please do the following so I can reassure myself that you have actually worked hard and I will consider raising your grade: Resubmit your paper with every incomplete sentence rewritten; with at least five new secondary sources and two primary sources; and with an annotated bibliography critically evaluating all your sources.

You do that and I assure you that you will receive a grade higher than C on the paper. And I will sleep well knowing you have actually provided concrete evidence that you are willing and able to work hard.

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**Takiyah Nur Amin   
*associate professor of dance*   
*University of North Carolina at Charlotte***

Dear Student Who Must Be Out Of Their Mind:

I hope all is well with you. Are you, by any chance, related to the student who failed my class and asked that I give them an A because they “liked the class so much?” I’m just asking because this question you’ve posed is just as silly as that one.

Pursuant to the detailed rubric provided for the assignment that we reviewed in class, the work you did on this paper was questionable. What you turned in was riddled with grammatical errors, spelling mistakes and formatting inconsistencies. Your paper didn’t respond to the prompts for the assignment at all and didn’t even reference the provided course content, let alone go beyond it in any meaningful way. The grade you received is reflective of the fact that what I got was a mash-up of poorly constructed sentences and last minute fooleywang.

And for real, I need you to focus less on the grade and more on the learning. Here’s the thing: had you focused on learning and on effectively completing the assignment, you would have gotten an A. Instead, you’re out here so focused on the grade that your submitted work was well below my expectations and your abilities.

Get your shit together. Please and thank you.

Sincerely,  
Dr. “I know you didn’t just come to me with this foolishness” Amin

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**Jennifer P. Simms   
*adjunct visiting professor of sociology*   
*University of Wisconsin at River Falls***

Dear C Student,

While I completely understand your frustration at working hard on something and having it not result in the grade that you desired, you should know that grades in college are based on performance, not effort. I know elementary school teachers, coaches, and your parents told you that all that matters is that you do your best. Unfortunately, they all lied to you. In the real world, of which my college classroom is a part, trying hard does not count for squat. Demonstrated mastery of the material, no matter how much or little effort it takes to achieve it, is what is important.

I know that it is unfair that some students spend no time at all on schoolwork and get A’s while others struggle and barely scrape C’s. I suggest you quickly cry a river, build a bridge and get over it. In the meantime, reflect on whether you want other students graded based on how hard they try. I don’t know about you, but I would much rather that papers for *Surgery 101: How Not to Kill the People You Cut Open* and for *Architecture 101: How to Build Bridges That Do Not Collapse and Leave People Plummeting to Their Deaths* were graded on students’ demonstration of correct understanding of the concepts, not how much effort they put into writing it.

So, despite sociology’s lack of such plainly obvious life-or-death consequences, no, I will not reread your paper or change your grade. Like any other field, sociology papers are graded based on demonstrated mastery of the material. No ifs, ands, or efforts about it.

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**Michele L. Simms-Burton   
*former professor; learning and training consultant***

Dear Student,

First let me commend you for the hard work that you expended writing your paper. We work hard on many things in life; however, sometimes our efforts do not merit the product that we envision. That is, hard work does not necessarily equate excellence. Sometimes working hard really does result in an average product. Nonetheless, per your request, I have reread your paper.

I want you to know that I worked really hard to assess your paper taking into consideration your hard work, too. I imagined you working on the paper while you equally worked hard at monitoring Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram updates. I imagined you checking your instant messages and email on your smartphone every few seconds while you were working hard on your essay. I imagined you drafting the paper in the midst of many distractions and then deciding that you had a final paper. I worked really hard at seeing you submitting a paper that had been outlined, drafted, proofread, and edited. I worked really hard at this.

Therefore, I want you to know that I worked as hard at assessing your performance as you did at writing your paper. I apologize for my error. I see that your paper does not meet the minimum requirements for this assignment. I am going to have to change your grade to a D. Please feel free to see me during my office hours if you have any questions.

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**Eir-Anne Edgar   
*Ph.D. candidate in English*   
*University of Kentucky***

Dear Student,

I’m glad to hear that you “worked so hard on your essay.” While I don’t have time to reread and rescore your paper—did you know that full-time graduate students are expected to spend 20 hours a week grading, teaching, holding office hours, and responding to student emails for two sections of students?—I would be glad to talk to you further about your grade.

What does it mean to “work hard” on an essay? How does one quantify blood, sweat, and tears? For my class, “working hard” means that you’ve spent time drafting your essay: You’ve workshopped your paper in my classroom, you’ve let a friend read and review your ideas, you’ve visited the Writing Center, and you’ve come to talk to me during my office hours about your draft. Perhaps not. Students who go through these steps in the writing process tend to have higher grades on their finished work, at least in my classroom.

It seems you also have negative ideas about receiving a C. A C is not to be scoffed at! A C indicates that you’ve met the minimum requirements in your essay and that your work is average. Perhaps in earlier phases of your education you were led to believe that a C is a dirty and bad thing. Hold your head high, student! As one of my former students (one who could have pushed himself to earn a B or even an A) once said, “C equals degree!” For the rest of the semester, I’d like to see you to continue to “work so hard” in the quantifiable ways that I’ve outlined above. I’m going to bet that your work will improve between now and finals week.

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**Kevin Heffernan   
*associate professor of film and media arts*   
*Southern Methodist University***

Dear Student,

Thank you for the note. I have reread your email several times, and I am very impressed with your committed engagement with one of the signature cultural issues of our age, college grade inflation. Your letter takes its place alongside many highly distinguished essays and investigative forays into the deforming of the classic “bell-shaped curve" into a top-heavy inverted cone in which the overwhelming majority of students reside in the topmost regions of excellence and the merely average are troubling outliers.

However, unlike historians of grade inflation such as Stuart Rojstaczer and Christopher Healy of *Teacher’s College Record* and Catherine Rampell of *The New York Times,* who spent years crunching big data to arrive at their conclusions, your letter is history as it unfolds, a subjective Hunter S. Thompson-like first-person account from “where the rubber meets the road.” Here we see grade inflation in the very process of unfolding, and I thank you for giving me the sort of close-up view of ongoing institutional processes that would be the envy of many professional historians.

If I may help you take a step or two back to see things more clearly, the geometric increase in awarded grades of A’s and B’s in university classrooms began and accelerated between the years of 1960 and 1974, a period which neatly coincides with America’s increasing involvement in Vietnam and the availability of the II-S draft deferment for full-time students making satisfactory progress toward a degree. As the definition of “satisfactory progress” was gradually expanded, middle-class male college students were spared the onerous task of serving in combat units, a job that was increasingly delegated to their working-class counterparts and male members of communities of color. With the abolition of the military draft in 1973, the rationale for protecting America’s suburban sons from death or injury on the battlefield had ended, but students’ horizons of expectations for success in college had been irrevocably altered. This continues up to the moment I find myself typing these words.

If we wanted to turn this educational experience into a full-on immersive “history lab,” I would ask you to bring signed enlistment papers to my office hours in exchange for a higher grade, but this violates academic standards of conduct. What I am willing to propose is that you bring me a pristine new hard copy of your paper tomorrow and that I take a look at it with fresh eyes. I will re-evaluate it in the cold, pitiless light of the late afternoon. If I conclude that I have judged you too harshly, I will relent and see if the assigned grade can be raised. If, on the other hand, I discover new problems with writing, argumentation, or sources, I will lower the grade accordingly. I advise you to ask around the university for stories of students who have exercised this option in my courses. I have been told that I’m somewhat of a campus celebrity on this score.

Thank you again, and I’ll see you in class tomorrow.

[Stacey Patton](https://chroniclevitae.com/people/620-stacey-patton) is a senior reporter at Vitae.



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