# How do markers decide on a grade?

Students sometimes ask how we determine what grade they receive. At first glance, this seems like a simple question. Many people assume that marking is like scoring for gymnastics or diving: For example, that markers list all attributes of the perfect essay or lab report, give your assignment a score on each attribute, and combine them for the final mark.

Marking essays and other coursework doesn’t and can’t work this way. The reason is that teachers in higher education haven’t found a simple, rules-based system that reflects the quality of students’ achievements.

We are clear on what we expect, though. And if we cross check between markers we get good agreement for individual grades. This document describes what markers look for, and gives practical tips for improving your work.

## Strengths increase your mark; weaknesses are missed opportunities.

Our policy is to reward students for what they achieve, and to encourage and support them to improve. We do not subtract marks for mistakes or misunderstandings. Mistakes are important learning experiences, and provide the opportunities for growth.

However, in our feedback we often note weaknesses or limitations, because these were *missed opportunities* and will have *limited* the maximum mark we could award. Your mark will be determined by strengths and weaknesses in 4 areas:

* Evidence based argument
* Effective communication
* Knowledge and understanding
* Originality and creativity

These areas are listed in the order of importance for a first year student, because our expectations change over the course of the programme:

* In stage 1, we are most concerned that you make arguments that are supported by evidence, and communicate these effectively.
* As your knowledge and understanding grows in Stage 2 we expect this to be reflected in the work you produce.
* By Stage 4 we expect more robust evidence based arguments, clearly presented, with a depth and breadth of psychological understanding. Our strongest students also show they are thinking creatively — making links between different modules of the course, and bringing a fresh perspective to the questions they encounter.

# Common questions about grades answered

Understanding how we evaluate your work may help to answer some of the most common questions students have about their grades. These include:

1. My marker didn’t list many (or any) things that were wrong with my assignment, so why didn’t I get an A+?

Although the marker may not have been able to identify *specific* *weaknesses* in the work (e.g. you used a spellcheck, answered the question, and provided suitable citations), it’s likely the work does not include sufficient strengths (e.g. insightful evaluation of evidence; thoughtful links to related literature) to be considered of the highest quality. As an aside, this is actually the hardest sort of work for us to provide concise feedback on: In these cases it’s often a good idea to discuss with your tutor or lecturer and explore gaps in your understanding of the topic.

1. How many marks did I lose because I didn’t [reference properly/use a spellchecker/format my tables properly/include axis labels on my graphs]?

The answer is that you don’t *lose* any specific number of marks. But submitting work with lots of grammatical or spelling errors (for example) will tend to *limit* the maximum mark achievable because this prevents you communicating effectively and professionally.

1. In my first year I used to get 70%+ for my coursework, but now I only get 55%. I’m not doing anything differently now, so what happened?

The key here is the phrase “*I’m not doing anything differently now*”. Expectations of students change across the stages of the programme. If we marked first year essays and lab reports to the same standard as stage 4 essays and projects, most of them would fail — but that’s OK because (hopefully) you will learn during your study! However, it does mean you can’t stand still: You need to read and act on the feedback you are given in stage 1 and 2 if you hope to perform well in stage 4.

# Marking criteria

**Evidence-based argument**

Put crudely, we care less about *what* you think than *why* you think it. Using evidence to build a persuasive case is an important skill to master early in your degree (and most careers). Our expectations for the quality and depth of your arguments will increase as you progress, so this is something to return to and hone your skills each time you complete an assignment.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *What we expect* | *Missed opportunities* |
| *Appropriate evidence*: Your writing should make an argument supported by evidence from the *academic* literature. You must explain this evidence and be explicit about how and why it supports your argument.  *Critical thinking*: The best work pulls the evidence apart, identifies gaps in our understanding, and explores alternative explanations for the data. | *Not answering the question:* Well-referenced, clearly argued essays will *never* be given high marks if they answer the wrong question. If you don’t make frequent, explicit links between the *question* *posed* and the evidence this must be fixed. Essay planning techniques and practice are the best ways to improve.  *Not providing enough detail:* Markers are untrusting readers: we need enough detail to properly evaluate the quality of the evidence you present.  *Providing too much detail*! If you include irrelevant details it can be hard to see the wood for the trees, and you weaken your argument. Be selective.  *Not doing enough work*: Students who don’t read widely or carefully lack the evidence to support their argument. |

**Effective communication**

Writing clearly and accurately is a valuable skill in it’s own right, and crucial for your future career.

But clear communication also works as a ‘multiplier’ for the strengths of good work. When you have an original idea, present strong evidence for your argument, or gain real understanding of a complex concept, you are more likely to be given credit if you also communicate this clearly, in plain English.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *What we expect* | *Missed opportunities* |
| *Organisation*: Are the steps in your argument clearly articulated. Is the evidence presented in a sensible order? Does the reader have to work hard to make sense of the argument, or does it follow naturally?  *Clarity and concreteness*: Are complex ideas expressed in plain language, with concrete examples to support them?  *Precision and professionalism*: Do you use technical language correctly and jargon sparingly? Can you convey complex ideas to non-experts and the public?  *Style*: Do you avoid cliché? Do you employ effective rhetorical devices to engage the reader’s interest; do you surprise and entertain the reader as well as inform and persuade them? | *Surface-level defects:* Poor spelling, or grammar, or other surface level features like a failure to use APA referencing style properly.  These surface-level errors are easy to spot, and markers find them irritating. This means that we often give plenty of feedback on them, which can sometimes distract students from addressing other more important concerns (e.g. with structure or understanding). But if you find spelling hard, or struggle with writing and referencing, you must seek help to address this. Your personal tutor and the Writing Café are the first ports of call.  *Poor planning*: Writing without a plan works for some people — but it takes a lot of practice. Most students benefit from an explicit plan for their essay or lab report — even if they edit and amend this later.  *Poor engagement*: e.g. work submitted incomplete or in note-form only. |

**Knowledge, understanding and technique**

*As you progress through the course it becomes more important to show that your knowledge and understanding is growing wider and deeper, and that you are acquiring new skills — for example in data handling and analysis. The relative importance of demonstrating your knowledge, vs. showing understanding will vary from case to case. Some concepts are just difficult to grasp, so for these we tend to reward understanding of the core ideas. For lab reports and projects technique is central. For other assignments the question could be straightforward, but the evidence base might be large and complex, and so getting to grips with the details is more important.*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *What we expect* | *Missed opportunities* |
| *Errors are easy to spot, but it’s harder for markers to know whether you really understand something. These are some good ways of showing you ‘get it’:*  *Simple explanations*: A strong clue that a student understands a concept is when they explain it in plain English, in their own words. Excessive jargon or technical language is often a giveaway that understanding is weak.  *Concise explanations*, with priority given to key concepts and evidence are another clue: Only students who understand a concept can be selective and prioritise important facts and ideas over irrelevant details.  *Embracing uncertainty:* Sometimes the literature can’t tell us much about a phenomenon. Good students, make the limits of our knowledge clear, embracing uncertainty as an opportunity for future research.  *Breadth of knowledge*: Quality is more important than quality, but reading widely helps build a more secure foundation for your argument.  *Mastery of technique:* Psychology can be a highly technical discipline; your work should demonstrate understanding, skill and integrity as you collect and analyse data. | *Errors of fact or application of technique*: We don’t penalise errors or subtract marks — making mistakes is a good way to learn after all, provided we respond to feedback. But factual errors are *a missed opportunity* to demonstrate that you understand and demonstrate your knowledge. Likewise, errors in data handling or analysis are missed opportunities to demonstrate your skill and judgement.  *Important gaps*: If you omit important details from the evidence you present, or skip important evidence completely, we will take this as evidence of a lack of knowledge or understanding.  *Lack of engagement/effort*: Failure to read core texts or very limited reading; missing citations.  *Lack of intellectual integrity*:  Other forms of plagiarism or failures of intellectual integrity can be difficult to prove, but are immediately obvious to experienced markers. For example, where students paraphrase or borrow too heavily from other texts the ‘voice’ of their work will be inconsistent or not the students’ own. These students miss the change to show that they understand the material.  *Academic dishonesty*: Although rare, deliberate academic dishonesty always results in a zero mark and can lead to more severe sanctions. |

**Originality and creativity**

*As a school we value creativity and originality highly, so it’s may be surprising to hear that i) empirically, you don’t need to have original ideas to get high marks in a Psychology degree (anywhere – not just at Plymouth). And ii), even creative and original work can still get poor grades.*

*This is because no matter how creative you are you must still answer the question set, support your argument, communicate effectively, and so on. That said, markers do reward originality, and it can help to distinguish between good and really exceptional work. And creativity is its own reward — so keep thinking sideways!*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| *What we ~~expect~~ hope for* | *Missed opportunities* |
| *Making connections*: Ideas don’t have to be earth shattering to be creative or original. Simply making relevant connections between different parts of the programme.  *Fresh perspectives*: Reflecting on the evidence from a perspective not presented in lectures, would be considered as a strength. | Probably an interesting topic for research*.* |

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Evidence-based argument | |
| *It’s not what you think than why you think it… This is the core skill to master in Stage 1, and refine forever more.* | *We expect*:An **answer** to the question; appropriate evidence and citations; critical thinking; relevant detail; acknowledged uncertainty and alternative explanations.  *Missed opportunities:*Not answering the question. Not enough detail, or too much detail (failure to prioritise relevant information). Fallacious or incomplete arguments: does each step follow from the last? |
| Effective communication | |
| *Writing well is a ‘multiplier’. If you have a strong argument and convincing data you get more for credit for it if you communicate this effectively, in plain English.* | *We expect:* Organised ideas and logical arguments; plain language; concrete examples; professionalism and attention to detail; consideration for the reader.  *Missed opportunities:* Errors in spelling or grammar, silly mistakes in referencing or formatting, and other indicators of insufficient care for and pride in your work. Poor planning. Unnecessary jargon or incorrect use of technical terms. |
| Knowledge, understanding and technique | |
| *Studying psychology requires engagement with difficult concepts and techniques, and a complex evidence base. Each year, your work must reflect your growing knowledge and understanding and demonstrate newly acquired skills and technique.* | *What we expect:* Simple and concise explanations of complex ideas. Accuracy and attention to detail. Skilful application of new techniques. Breadth of knowledge, and an awareness of the limits of current psychological understanding.  *Missed opportunities:* Factual errors; important omissions; errors in data handling or analysis; insufficient engagement with the literature; lack of academic integrity. |
| Originality and creativity | |
| *Original and creative thinking can help to distinguish good and really exceptional work.* | *What we ~~expect~~ hope for:* Students who really *think* about behaviour and cognition, make connections across modules, and bring a fresh perspective to old questions.  *Missed opportunities:* Creative and original ideas that are not supported by the evidence, or are communicated without care and skill. |

# Using feedback to make progress

We hope that, as you move through the programme, you will tend to eliminate weaknesses from your work in response to the feedback we provide.

We find that, for our best students, we rarely need to point out specific weaknesses or limitations in their coursework. Instead the focus of our feedback is on enhancing students’ understanding, pointing out additional evidence they might have used, challenging where their argument or interpretation could be improved, and helping them to communicate all this more effectively. Sadly, it is also true that some students fail to take account of feedback, even on simple issues like errors in spelling and grammar; these students often fail to make the progress they would like.

Research (and our experience) shows that students who are concerned only with their grades suffer if they fail to fully engage with qualitative feedback on their work. Some colleagues even go so far as to think we should *withhold* grades until the end of each academic year, to avoid distracting you from the qualitative feedback that helps will help you learn and progress!

**In short, you should be clear that grades alone are a very poor tool for you to improve your performance**.

There is not enough information in a single letter grade to guide the changes you need to make to learn and improve your work. It is only byactively *engaging* with and *responding* to the qualitative feedback we provide that you can expect to progress. For this reason on the CW cover sheet we ask you to:

* Reflect on how much time you have spent on the work.
* Reflect on the strengths and weaknesses of your work, as you submit it, and request feedback on specific areas of your learning that you are working on.

# How to get a good grade: 60 second summary

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| ***Answer the question*** | “Yes”, “no”, “sometimes” and “maybe“ are all reasonable answers. But tell us *why* and … |
| ***Argue your case*** | Evidence trumps opinion. Be persuasive. Don’t assume too much – write for an intelligent non-expert. |
| ***Use evidence*** | Quality over quantity (but don’t be lazy). Peer review trumps the internet. |
| ***Prove you understand it*** | Explain in your own words. Give concrete examples. Embrace uncertainty. |
| ***Make connections*** | Why does it matter? What have we learned? What is the big picture? |
| ***Take pride*** | Presentation matters. Sweat the details. Work on your weaknesses. Proofread. Allow time to edit and improve. |
| ***Don’t stand still*** | Expectations increase across the course. Reflect on feedback, make changes, and ask for more. |