

Instructions for Interpreting your Exam score

A typical exam in one of my classes has several components – a multiple choice section graded on a scantron, a short answer section (with tables, figures, fill-in the blank, short essay, matching, etc.) and at least one essay question.

I usually staple the scantron to the front of the test. The machine prints a score, usually in red, indicating how many questions were answered correctly. The correct answer may or may not be printed next to the missed questions (which otherwise get a “-“ or an “x”). I check the scantrons quickly to see that you didn’t miss any questions due to incomplete erasure, usually circling your marked, incorrect answer). I usually then verify the score by hand-writing it at the bottom of the form. If the questions were worth more than 1 point, I do that math here (so if the questions were worth 2 points each and you got 20 correct I would write 40 for your score).

On the rest of the test, I grade the questions, marking wrong answers with a slash and putting the number missed to the left side of the page. Sometimes I may feel an answer is wrong, but close enough that while I mark it with a slash, I don’t take off any points. Sometimes you will have two or more such “close” answers and I will draw a bracket and take off some points (but not all) to give you partial credit for several partially right answers. Sometimes I grade several questions at a time and take off multiple points for several missed questions all at once, instead of one at a time. At the bottom of the page in the lower left I right the total number of points you got on that page. If you add up the point values of all the questions on the page and subtract the number missed you should get the number at the bottom of the page.

I often do essays slightly differently, writing in the number of points you got right rather than the number missed (it’s easier for me to think that a low B answer is 20 points out of 25 instead of 5 points off). If the essay is the only question on the page, then the score for the essay question is also the total; if there is more than one essay question then the totals of the essay questions should be in the lower left corner. If there are short answer questions then the number in the lower corner should be equal to the number of points from the essay question(s) plus the total number of non-essay question points minus any that you missed.

I then total up the number of points on all the pages of the test and write that number at the top of the first page just to the right of where the scantron is stapled. I add that number to the number for the scantron to get the total number of points; that number goes to the right of the previous number and is usually circled. On some tests I might multiply the total by a constant to change the number of overall points (in some classes where I weight the exams more heavily I will multiply the score by 2, for instance, to double the number of points). Whatever score is to the right at the top of the page and is circled is the one that goes into the spreadsheet.

After the test grade is recorded, I look at the spreadsheet to determine your current percent grade in the class, and transfer that number back to the test form, usually on the right side lower than the other scores, in a different color of ink, with a notation like % or cl to indicate it is your class grade.

Grading Essay Questions

Essay questions can be a challenge to answer and grade. While one might not quibble about missing a multiple choice question, it is often hard to tell what you missed on an essay question. The primary reason I give an exam is evaluative – I need to evaluate how well you have learned the material so I can assign a grade at the end of the course. A second purpose is formative, to help you learn the material. In a large class, simply doing all the grading – particularly the essays – takes a lot of time and I don't have the opportunity to write as much as I would like. In addition, research in the area of learning has indicated that it is actually less helpful to simply have mistakes pointed out to you than it is to figure out what went wrong yourself. While I try to give some indication as to what you missed, it may not always be clear how that transforms into the number that is assigned as a grade. The table below might help with that:

Item	Grade				
	A	B	C	D	F
Content	Covers all relevant points	Covers most relevant points	Gets all main points	Misses some main points	Misses the point
Mistakes	No factual mistakes	1 or 2 factual mistakes	Several factual mistakes	Mainly factual mistakes	fantasy
Grammar	Perfect	Small mistakes	A few serious mistakes	Several serious mistakes	Numerous serious mistakes
Spelling	Almost perfect	Some mistakes	Some mistakes	Some mistakes	Some mistakes
Vocabulary	Extensive use of technical vocabulary	Good use of technical vocabulary	Avoids technical vocabulary in favor of lay terms	Vague terminology	See Jane run.
Examples	Good, specific examples for each main point	More general examples	Very general examples, if any	No examples	No clue.
Organization	Excellent	Good – may jump in one spot	Jumps around	Poorly organized	Run Jane see.
Penmanship	readable	readable	readable	Hard to read	Unreadable in places
Readability	Jumps off the page	Adequately done	Generally clear	Doesn't induce a headache	Reach for Tylenol

When I grade an essay I look at the items in the table. I don't weight them all the same; it's possible that an answer could get an A even if the organization wasn't perfect – but the other parts would have to be very good. For each question I have a list of the main points that should be covered. I expect an A answer to cover all of those points without making any factual mistakes. If an answer met all the criteria in the first column except one or two (and those were in the second column) it might still get an A, but a lesser one. For instance, if the question were worth 25 points, grades of 23, 24, or 25 are all A's, and to get the 25 you'd pretty much have to be in the left column for each item.

I do expect good grammar – if you can't communicate clearly it isn't apparent what is lacking – your knowledge or your ability to communicate it. Knowledge is useless if it can't be communicated clearly. I am more lenient on spelling, particularly of technical terms. However, it is really embarrassing to misspell a term that is written down (spelled correctly) somewhere on the test, and in some cases you may misspell a word so badly that it looks like another word and that may change how I perceive your answer.

A good answer will make extensive use of the technical vocabulary we use in class. This is one way you can demonstrate how well you've mastered the material:

A: Energy moves through the trophic levels from the primary producers to the herbivores to the carnivores.

B: Energy moves from the plants to the herbivores to carnivores.

C: Energy moves from plants to herbivores to other animals.

Good, specific examples will also help your case:

A: Batesian mimicry occurs when a harmless organism (the mimic) resembles an organism which is distasteful or harmful in some way (the model). A good example of Batesian mimicry is given by the syrphid fly and the honeybee; the latter can sting while the former cannot, yet the syrphid fly looks and acts like a bee.

B: Batesian mimicry occurs when a harmless organism resembles an organism which is distasteful or harmful in some way. An example of Batesian mimicry is the fly and bee; the latter can sting while the former cannot, yet the fly looks and acts like a bee.

C: Batesian mimicry occurs when a organism resembles an organism which is harmful in some way. An example of Batesian mimicry is when a fly looks like a bee.

D: Batesian mimicry occurs when a organism resembles an organism which is harmful in some way. An example of Batesian mimicry is when some insects look like dangerous insects.

F: Batesian mimicry occurs when an animal resembles another which is harmful in some way.

Note that F, while technically correct, gives no example, uses only one technical term, confuses animals and organisms (plants can be mimics too). The best example has a specific example and uses the technical terms accurately.

I don't take penmanship and readability too seriously unless they are so bad that they end up confusing what you are writing. If I can't make out a word – because it is misspelled, poorly written, or in a poorly organized sentence – I may not be able to give you full credit. On the other end, a very well-written answer, even if it is lacking a bit in terms of content, will get a slightly better grade.

Be specific when you write. Avoid vague statements:

1. A holistic community view states that the organisms in the community regulate their life processes together. [what the heck are life processes?]
2. There are more species in the tropics because it is a better place for organisms to live. [how is it better?]
3. The weather in the tropics is better for animals. [first, weather is short term, second, why is it better?]
4. A pyramid of biomass develops when there are fewer things at the top of the pyramid than on the bottom. [congratulations! You have successfully defined the pyramid!]
5. Primary succession is when succession occurs first where there is no community. [???
6. Humans have greatly altered the carbon cycle with many activities that affect the cycle and damage it. [many activities? Such as? Damage it? how?]
7. There are more species in the tropics because animals prefer to live there. [why? What about plants?]

All of these are technically correct (except perhaps #5 – I have no clue what that actually means) – but none of them show that the writer has any clue about the phenomenon at hand, other than a weak ability to rephrase the question. A good answer might restate the question (a great answer does so in the context of a topic sentence that restates the question without appearing to do so) then get to the main points, backing each point up with a specific example or supporting observation. There might be a quick summary at the end. Weak answers spend the first half restating the question and the last half summing up – what, I don't know, since they never really get beyond stating the question.

When I grade the questions you may see a number of marks. An "X" indicates a factual mistake. Numbers or dashes are my way of ticking off the major points I am looking for. An underline may indicate a key point that you made. Crossing out an area is an indication it is wrong, or at least not relevant. Circles generally indicate a spelling problem. I might write a comment like: vocab specific examples, specify, organize, etc. to call your attention to weak aspects of your answer – and I might list some points you missed. I don't always have the time to mark up questions extensively, so don't expect each problem to be indicated.

There is also a bit of gamesmanship involved when you choose what question to answer. I usually proved several choices. Usually one of these is pretty much straight regurgitation. Others are more involved and require you to synthesize some new ideas and apply your knowledge. Some are way out there. Generally, I cut a little more slack to people who try the more difficult questions, and expect more from those who answer the regurgitation questions. Likewise, if I've previewed a question on a previous quiz, test, study guide, email, etc., I will expect better answers than I would on questions that are novel.