

Optional Writing Prompt B

Excerpted from “There’s nothing wrong with grade inflation. Grades don't matter anyway. Here's why.”

By Mark Oppenheimer, published in *The Washington Post* on March 4, 2016

According to a 2012 study, the average college GPA, which in the 1930s was a C-plus, had risen to a B at public universities and a B-plus at private schools. At Duke, Pomona and Harvard, D’s and F’s combine for just 2 percent of all grades. A Yale report found that 62 percent of all Yale grades are A or A-minus. According to a 2013 article in the *Harvard Crimson*, the median grade at Harvard was an A-minus, while the most common grade was an A.

The result is widespread panic about grade inflation at elite schools. Some blame students’ consumer mentality, a few see a correlation with small class sizes (departments with falling enrollments want to keep students happy), and many cite a general loss of rigor in a touchy-feely age.

Yet whenever elite schools have tried to fight grade inflation, it’s been a mess. Princeton instituted strict caps on the number of high grades awarded, then abandoned the plan, saying the caps dissuaded applicants and made students miserable. At Wellesley, grade-inflated humanities departments mandated that the average result in their introductory and intermediate classes not exceed a B-plus. According to one study, enrollment fell by one-fifth, and students were 30 percent less likely to major in one of these subjects. Yale and Harvard, while making noises about grade inflation, have never instituted tough rules to stem it.

In 2013, *Forbes* interviewed career-services directors at four top schools: Brandeis, NYU, the Rochester Institute of Technology and Purdue. They said employers want a GPA of 3.0 or even 3.5. But again, that standard would include almost every Harvard student — which suggests that GPAs serve not to validate students from elite schools but to keep out those from less-prestigious schools and large public universities, where grades are less inflated. Grades at community colleges “have actually dropped” over the years, according to Stuart Rojstaczer, a co-author of the 2012 grade-inflation study. That means we have two systems: one for students at elite schools, who get jobs based on references, prestige and connections, and another for students everywhere else, who had better maintain a 3.0. Grades are a tool increasingly deployed against students without prestige.

Since the elite schools clearly won’t fix their grading scales, the rest should ditch grades, moving toward more nuanced transcripts with comments.

When I think about getting rid of grades, I think of happier students, with whom I have more open, democratic relationships. I think about being forced to pay more attention to the quiet ones, since I’ll have to write something truthful about them, too. I’ve begun to wonder if a world without grades may be one of those states of affairs that Americans resist precisely because they seem too good, suspiciously good. Nothing worth doing is supposed to come easy.

Prompt: After reading “There’s nothing wrong with grade inflation. Grades don't matter anyway. Here's why,” write a 750-word essay in which you argue whether or not Cal Poly faculty should replace final letter grades with written comments about student performance on a transcript. If you believe that Cal Poly faculty should “ditch grades,” because their importance has diminished, and instead write “something truthful” about their students at the end of the quarter, develop your position with compelling arguments that expand upon or go beyond the points already offered in the article. If you do not believe Cal Poly faculty should replace final letter grades with a comments-based form of evaluation, then defend your position with compelling arguments. Your essay should show an understanding of the article without simply repeating it, and you should incorporate specific details from your own experience and knowledge into your response.