

Everything You Need to Know About Standards-Based Grading

by Naomi Shak

Having been a student for the majority of my life thus far, I can say that one of the most frustrating things that a student can receive in school is a poor grade without understanding why. It's confusing to get a negative result without knowing why you did badly and without any knowledge of how to improve. Grades are markers of learning and progress and should ideally help the student improve; however, the simple A B C D F grades are very vague and do little to provide beneficial information to students. This frustration is one of the many reasons that "standards-based grading" emerged and is becoming the preferred method of grading across the U.S.

What is Standards-Based Grading?

Standards-based grading (SBG) is a system of education which focuses on student learning and grades based on demonstrated understanding of specific concepts. Instead of a simple letter, students receive grades in multiple different learning targets and can see which concepts they understood well and which they need to improve on.

Standards-based grading provides explanations of the concepts and material that students should know at each point in their education. These are called learning standards, which provide a baseline that is consistent across all students at this education level. Teachers' instruction is guided by these standards and they work to make sure their students learn all of the expected standards they need to before leaving their class. When students receive report cards, they receive a list of learning standards and a grade (normally on a 1-4 scale) on each standard of how well they mastered the material (see image to the right).

4 Advanced Understanding of the Standard	You add your own ideas, perspective, and style into what you do. You are confident and are reaching for the next level of proficiency.	
3 Meets the Standard	You consistently meet the target proficiency level, and you are ready to move on.	
2 Approaches the Standard	You can meet the target proficiency level in familiar tasks and situations. You know what to do to meet the target proficiency level, but you need extra help.	 
1 Does not Meet the Standard	You know what the target proficiency level is, but you are confused and probably frustrated. You need some help to get started. You miss opportunities to demonstrate what you can do because you are often distracted, not participating, or absent.	 

How standards-based grading benefits teachers and students

- Provides meaning to grades – Students understand why they receive each grade and the breakdown of how they did on each standard rather than a receiving a vague letter with no explanation.
- Keeps students and teachers accountable – With specific learning standards expected from the beginning of the class, the teacher knows what they are expected to teach. With the use of consistent formative assessments, teachers and students know how well they are doing on these learning targets and can adjust as needed to ensure proficient understanding by the end of the course.
- Better feedback for improvement – With grades broken up into different learning standards, students can immediately see which areas of learning they need to improve upon. Teachers can also use this information to improve instruction; if they see that a majority of the class has a lack of understanding in one standard, they can focus on that standard more moving forward.
- Provides information to differentiate instruction – With learning standards common to the class and frequent formative assessments, the teacher knows which students are each level for each standard. Using this information, they can differentiate instruction and give different leveled assignments to different groups of students based at the proficiency level they are at.
- Students become more self-motivated – With the goal of SBG being student mastery and understanding rather than getting the most points, students become more motivated to truly understand the material. The “Will this be graded?” question is slowly replaced with earnest questions to better understand the material.
- Tracks Standards Mastery – With standards-based grading, teachers are able to focus their instruction and progress analysis around how students are mastering the content required for each standard. Tracking standards mastery helps instructors make sure they are adequately preparing students for the content that will be tested during the state test.

4th grade teacher Dena Morosin talked about how she uses standards-based grading in her classroom. Her reasons resonated with some of the reasons mentioned above. Specifically, she shared that “It’s kind of a ‘safer report card’... It truly gives more data because instead of just getting an A in math, it says here’s my 10 standards. This is what they can do and this is what they can’t do. It gives valuable information to parents and to the student and to the teacher of, ‘okay if I’m meeting these standards and I’m not meeting these standards, then this is what I need to practice’ – not just an A in math or a C in math.”