

How Colleges Look At Your GPA Scale

By Howard and Matthew Greene

How do colleges look at grades from different high schools? How do you translate a 4.0 (or 4.3) to percentile or letter grades? What about weighted and un-weighted grades? What are the typical college GPA requirements?

The GPA and college admission: different systems require translation

This is one of the most confusing topics for students planning their college applications. Partly, it's an issue of translation. If every high school utilized the same grading system, we would have a lot less trouble comparing Grade Point Averages (GPAs) from different schools!

Of course, high schools don't use the same GPA scale — and even when they do, many use weighted systems (perhaps giving extra "points" to grades from honors, accelerated, International Baccalaureate, or Advanced Placement classes), and employ varying methods of calculating a cumulative GPA.

Apart from some independent day and boarding schools that continue to use grading systems based on a 6-, 10-, or 11-point scale, there are three prevailing grading systems:

- The 4.0 scale
- The percentile system
- Letter grade methods

That is, unless you step outside the United States...but that's a topic for another time.

The 4.0 standard

The 4.0 system has become the standard at most colleges, and many high schools have adopted this GPA scale as well. Teachers typically award a letter grade, which is then translated into a scaled score. This score is multiplied by the amount of credits the course is worth. A cumulative (total) GPA is then arrived at.

Of course, there are variables. Some schools don't give plus and minus letter grades. Some schools include non-academic courses, such as physical education, in the calculation. Some weight the grades in advanced courses to give students extra credit for taking challenging classes. (They usually then report both weighted and un-weighted GPAs.) Some high schools, particularly independent schools, use a letter grading system, but don't convert grades to a 4.0 system or supply a cumulative GPA. Other schools maintain a percentile-based grading system whereby students receive grades on a 0-100 point scale.

It gets better. When considering your GPA, college admission officers might un-weight and then re-weight it according to their own scale. Why? In order to arrive at a better comparative method!

Translating your GPA scale

Here is a common method for translating grades from one scale to another:

- A+ = 4.0 = 97-100
- A = 4.0 = 94-100
- A- = 3.7 = 90-93
- B+ = 3.3 = 87-89
- B = 3.0 = 84-86
- B- = 2.7 = 80-83
- C+ = 2.3 = 77-79
- C = 2.0 = 74-76
- C- = 1.7 = 70-73
- D+ = 1.3 = 67-69
- D = 1.0 = 64-66
- D- = 0.7 = 60-63
- F = 0.0 = 0-59

If you know how to interpret this information, you can learn a lot about college GPA requirements. Many colleges list average grades of their entering students (on the 4.0 GPA scale) to give a sense of how competitive the college is. Sometimes you will see what percentage of the entering class had grades above 3.0 or 3.5, for example. We find that to be most helpful; the 3.0 (B) has become a standard measure of achievement in these days of grade inflation.



College GPA requirements

Many colleges set a 3.0 as a baseline for freshman and transfer admission, though they might still consider students with lower GPAs. The trouble is that the GPA measure is terribly imprecise and hard to compare, as evidenced by the discussion above. Your GPA is very much dependant upon your high school setting and grading policies and the classes you have taken.

What you need to realize is that nationally, maintaining a B average has become routine. As you climb up the college selectivity ladder, you will find colleges expecting the B as a minimum GPA, and then evaluating thousands of applications from students with B+, A-, and A averages. Add in the weighting that many schools apply, and you will see students with 4.3 and 5.0 averages!

A little perspective on your GPA in the college admission process

So what should you do if you're taking a demanding academic program at a public high school that does not weight grades, or a private school that is notorious for giving out tough grades and not weighting them? We urge you to adopt a more positive outlook on the grading morass. What is most important to colleges, and should be most important to you, is the quality of your courses.

If you challenge yourself by taking the toughest classes you can handle, especially in your areas of strength and interest, colleges will pick up on what you have accomplished. They will reward you for stretching yourself, and will find a way to give you "credit" for doing well in a strong academic program.

Howard and Matthew Greene are the hosts of two PBS college-planning programs and authors of the Greenes' Guides to Educational Planning series and other books.

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