

What to Do After a Bad Grade

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We've all been there. You get a paper back from your instructor or check your grades online, and there it is: a grade much lower than you wanted. Or, even worse, the grade you expected. Getting a poor grade on an exam or quiz creates an immediate sense of dread. You might be thinking, What did I do wrong? Am I in the wrong class? Maybe I'm not smart enough?

As every Ph.D. who ever tanked a test can tell you (really, it happens — just ask your professor!), tanking a test is not the end of the world, or even your major. But it is something you need to deal with.

What you do after receiving the grade is more important than the grade itself. One grade doesn't define your entire semester, your career, or most importantly, you as a person. Grades, however, are a source of feedback for understanding the material. So using that feedback in a positive and productive way will serve you well.

What NOT to do after a bad grade

The worst things you can do after receiving a bad grade are, unfortunately, the easiest. You may let the grade dictate the rest of your time in the course. You may place the blame on someone, likely yourself or your professor. You may even throw your test in the trash and walk away, never thinking of the grade again. If any of these responses occur to you, resist the urge; they're all reactions that put you on the fast track to self-doubt and giving up.

This is not to say you should ignore your feelings completely. Anger and sadness are common feelings that are completely normal. Feeling the disappointment can help you cope with failure and move on. But the disappointment doesn't have to dictate future grades or your experience with the course itself. Let yourself sulk for a bit, then work on moving forward.

How to move forward

There are several positive ways to deal with a bad grade. Here are some actions to take:

1. Adjust your expectations

Students often think a grade is bad even when it's actually much better in comparison to the class average. That's why having perspective is very helpful when dealing with disappointment.

One way to gain better perspective is by distinguishing between a failed effort and one that is simply not up to your standards. For many students, a bad grade is the first time they have ever been truly challenged in a course. This is especially common in students moving from high school to college. If studying and good grades have always come easily to you, and now you have to expend more effort than ever before on coursework, you will have to rise to the challenge to achieve your same standards.

Allow your grade to fuel your determination to advance in the subject.

2. See where you went wrong

One critical way to deal with a bad grade is to learn from it. You can evaluate how you studied or prepared. Maybe you covered definitions and theory, but the assignment was more about applications. In this situation, you will want to make sure you **practice** applying the material a lot before the next exam.

Certain practice materials, like homework and worksheets, allow you to make mistakes before performing graded assignments. You can work on sample problems from the back of the book and have a friend or tutor grade them; it's a great method to see what you know and what you need more work on.

It's also incredibly helpful to review the graded document and understand why you lost points, especially if you will encounter this material again later in the course, or build on it in the future. (Chemistry *is* a cumulative topic, after all.) Always keep your graded papers. And always take the time to compare them to the key, or read over your professor's comments so you can get a better understanding of where and why you lost points.

Spending time reviewing graded work helps you avoid repeating the same mistakes. Reviewing also reveals whether you made simple mistakes, or just didn't know how to successfully complete a question or an assignment.

3. Get help

Sometimes you don't know what to expect when taking the first quiz or exam with a new professor, and that alone can result in lower grades. Your professor may have a different way of asking or wording questions than what you anticipate or are accustomed to. Make sure to use the first grade as a way to prepare for the way in which your professor will present material on the next test.

If you still don't understand where you went wrong, talk to your professor and ask for advice. All professors have office hours, but if it doesn't fit your schedule, ask for an appointment — and keep it! Your professors want you to understand the lessons, and they appreciate when students make an extra effort to use feedback to improve.

Along with talking with your professor, you can seek out tutors and study groups and practice with your peers to build up your skills. Also, chances are good that you understand something that someone else is having trouble with, so you get to help others while helping yourself.

Facing reality

Sometimes you do all that you can and you're still not happy with your grade. If you know you didn't put in enough effort, you have to accept that you have made decisions that impacted your outcome. Your progress in a course is entirely up to you, so make the necessary shifts to improve.

If you *are* doing your hardest, however, and you're still not where you want to be, have a couple of serious talks with both your professor and your academic advisor. Your professor can help you get perspective on your progress in the course and determine if your challenges are normal or a real concern. Likewise, your advisor can help you decide if the course or major is where your passions truly lie, or if it's time to pursue something else.

Yes, some classes are difficult, and As can be hard to come by. But if you put in your best effort and use all available resources, you will be proud of the grades you earn. Knowledge isn't always accurately represented on paper by a number. Your effort, however, can always be a source of pride. As long as you stay determined to do your best and improve, and remember that you are more than a number, you can still achieve great knowledge and success.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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