

FIRST-YEAR FAST FACTS

Week 4 More to Consider

Understanding Grades • Academic Integrity

“Possibly the most important subject you will study while in college is yourself. You may find out what you value most, what motivates you, what you can and cannot do well and, perhaps most importantly, you will learn to reflect on such things honestly and accurately, and act on them responsibly.”
– Professor, Social and Decision Sciences

“Don’t drop out so readily. I was going to drop a course because I didn’t do an assignment and then decided not to.”
– Tricia, Computer Science

“Watch your course load. I dropped a course and then couldn’t drop another course even though I really needed to.”
– Paz, Art

TIP

If you are considering dropping a course, it never hurts to discuss it with the professor or your academic advisor.

By the fourth or fifth week, you should have received some feedback on how well you’re doing in your courses. You’ve probably had your first round of tests and maybe even turned in a paper or two. You’ve identified what courses you’re strong in and which ones are going to need a little bit more effort. Now is the time when you may start considering getting some help in understanding the material. You may even be considering dropping a course. Following are some tips on these and facing other issues that you may be facing.

Understanding Grades

Grades are a pretty good indication of how well you are absorbing the material in a course. But grades only indicate a sampling of what you’ve learned. During your first college semester, you will be learning how to interpret grades — and using that information to maintain or change your study and work habits

Adjusting to college grading

Your first step in understanding how your grade is calculated is to refer to your syllabus. A typical syllabus will spell out how much homeworks, quizzes, tests, papers, projects and the midterm and final exams count towards your grade.

Your professor might add more information in class regarding how grades are determined so keep your ears open for that. You can always ask the professor for clarification as well.

You also have to understand that how professors assign grades varies widely based on such things such as the professor’s philosophy of education, the goals and objectives of the course and the level of the students. Because you are unlikely to find two professors who grade in exactly the same way, you should talk to the professor if his or her grading policies are unclear to you.

A lot of times, grades seem to be a mysterious entity that you must accept passively. But you can learn to use the information that a grade conveys to your advantage to either maintain your current study habits or make some changes. Midterm grades in particular are a good indication of not only how well you are doing in your individual courses, but how well you are adjusting to college academics in general. Many students find that the first semester is an adjustment period where they learn how to “read” their grades for clues about what they’re doing right, and where they may need to work harder or differently.

FACULTY FEEDBACK

“At Carnegie Mellon, academic integrity is a core value and a central community standard. But sometimes doing the right thing in a course is not always clear. For example, when is it permissible to do course work with a group rather than on your own? Faculty will be happy to clarify this, and you should feel free to ask them to do so before you assume that you can work with others.”
— Professor, Chemical Engineering

“Recent surveys have suggested that cheating and plagiarism are on the rise at our nation’s colleges and universities. Make sure that you know what constitutes plagiarism before you begin to write your first research paper. Always give proper attribution to someone else’s ideas and work instead of incorporating them directly into your paper. Ask yourself how you might feel if you were not given proper credit for your thoughts, ideas and writings.”
— Professor, Psychology

“I didn’t realize my friend copied my homework. When the professor caught it, he accused me because I had the lower grade in the course.”
— Seth, Biological Sciences

To drop or not to drop?

In some circumstances, dropping can be the necessary action but, in most cases, better planning and earlier intervention could have prevented the issue from ever arising. Students often fail to realize that they need to carry 36 units to maintain full-time enrollment. While it is important to manage your course planning carefully and to have enough units to allow flexibility, overloading usually lessens the effort that you can invest in all of the courses and overall, performance often suffers.

Academic Integrity

Copying someone else’s homework, taking cheat sheets to tests — you know those things are wrong. But in difficult situations, students sometimes make the wrong decisions.

Carnegie Mellon is a challenging place. Perhaps high school was easy for you, but you are finding college coursework to be a lot tougher. Maybe it seems to you that you are the only one having trouble keeping up now. Maybe it seems like everyone else is breezing through while you’re sweating through homeworks and plodding through readings. Maybe it seems like it wouldn’t hurt anyone if you took a little short cut...

But, wait. Everyone is *not* breezing through. As the university’s founder, Andrew Carnegie, said, “My heart is in the work.” And there *is* work — and plenty of it — for everyone. Professors know about your workload; administrators know about your workload. They know

that overworked students are sometimes tempted to take shortcuts — and that’s one of the reasons why they spell out how far collaborations should go, and how carefully to cite others’ work in papers.

Avoid temptation.

Students who cheat once often find themselves caught in the cycle of cheating. Perhaps turning in someone else’s work (or a paper they wrote for another course) improved their grade — and the professor didn’t notice. Because it was easy the first time and got the desired results, students tend to cheat again and again. Not only does this behavior increase the chance of being caught, it also increases the low self — esteem that often bring on cheating to begin with.

Here are a few ways to avoid the temptation of compromising your academic integrity:

- *Study smarter, not harder.* If you feel like you are working hard but not learning the material, perhaps you aren’t using effective study methods. (See First Year Fast Fact 3 for tips on Studying)
- *Fight procrastination.* Getting behind in your work makes finding the easy way out (i.e. cheating) more inviting. Deal with why you are avoiding work — perhaps you are missing class, not asking enough questions or dealing with personal issues. You have to overcome your avoidance and get back on track. (See First Year Fast Fact 2 for tips on Optimizing Your Time and Managing Coursework and



More to Consider

Readings. See First Year Fast Fact 3 for Tips on Studying.)

- *Talk with your professors* (or TAs if you'd feel more comfortable) about their grading and homework policies if you feel they are unfair. Know the boundaries of collaboration. Collaboration that is acceptable — or even encouraged — in one course may be considered cheating in another.
- *Get help with the work.* There are lots of resources available to you to help you master course material and learn to work more efficiently. (See the Fast Fact on Getting Help If You Need It for tips)
- *Talk to someone about the underlying problems.* Maybe you are afraid of failure, are being pressured by your family or have unattainable self-expectations. If those issues are tempting you to cheat, then those things need to be worked out. Talk to a friend, your parents, your professor, your TA, your academic advisor, a counselor or anyone else you feel comfortable discussing these issues with.
- *Be aware that your academic integrity is also compromised when you help someone else cheat* by letting him or her copy your homework or read off of your test. Also be careful about what you hear from other students about academic rules, requirements and procedures. Rumors abound; some have a grain of truth, but also an abundance of fiction. Check with your instructor or advisor for accurate information.

Don't commit unintentional plagiarism.

But what if you don't know the rules? What if you don't know how much you can "borrow" when writing a paper, don't realize there's a fine line between collaboration on homework and turning in someone else's work as your own? This can happen to just about anyone but it is your responsibility to know what constitutes plagiarism because even unintentional plagiarism can cause grave consequences.

Examples of plagiarism include:

- Using a definition from a dictionary, manual or text without citing the source
- Quoting a phrase or verse from a song, poem or fictional work without crediting the artist who created it
- Presenting someone else's criticism or arguments as your own
- But these do not constitute plagiarism
- Discussing your ideas with friends or colleagues
- Using other's feedback to improve your work
- Incorporating someone else's ideas or words into your work and giving them credit

If you're in doubt about how closely to cite sources, it's always better to over-cite that to under-cite. And you can always ask your professor for advice.

If you still have questions, you can learn more by visiting the [Academic Integrity](#) webpage of the Division of Student Affairs Office of Community Standards and Integrity.

Carnegie Mellon University
Student Academic Success

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