



teaching learning committee  
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**Grade Book**

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Finding a way to handle grades is a personal decision like choosing a wardrobe. Different people are happiest with different solutions. To utilize suggestions below, please take a moment to think about the following questions:

What grades will be recorded (essays, exams, homeworks, projects, ...)?

What scoring system will be used (A—F, 0—10, 0-100, ...)? Keep in mind that numbers are easy to average together, and can be converted to letters at the very end. They also carry less emotional baggage than the traditional A—F letters. If you convert letters to numbers, do think about whether or not the letters are equally spaced. Is the difference between A and B the same as the difference between D and F? Is a zero for missing an assignment the same as an F, or should an F be one more than zero?

How often will grades be assigned and recorded (daily, weekly, ...)? From the student's perspective, more often (with an allowance for an occasional missed assignment) is preferred, but this will be more work for the teacher. Pedagogically, it makes sense to give students an opportunity to practice every skill we want them to develop, and to demonstrate their effectiveness.

Paper or silicon? The paper grade book is the standard for comparison. Many people have developed methods which work for them on paper. Others prefer using the computer. Often the use of a computer program requires more time during the term, but pays off at the end in quicker summarization.

How will it be secured and backed up? Whether one uses paper or the computer, loss of the grade book is catastrophic. Make sure you keep a spare copy, and keep all copies secured.

## The Medium: Paper or Silicon?

The paper grade book is tried and proven technology, If you've never kept grades before, paper is a good beginning point because it allows flexibility throughout the term. By recording grades with pen(cil) on paper, one learns how to best organize them. If this is your first semester of teaching, I recommend that you just use paper, because there will be many other demands on your time. Unless you're already fluent in the use of a spreadsheet or another program, wait a semester or two to tackle a computerized grade book. You will be able to take advantage of what you learn from the paper grade book.

**Startup:** No matter how you will record your grades, it helps to start with a list of students names and Banner ID numbers from the MSU registrar. I recommend waiting until the second week of class, then downloading the class roll from the [Info Page](#). A simpler format is available from the course [downloads page](#), but you do have to sign up for that service and obtain a userid and password. Allow at least 24 hours for your request to get processed. Whichever format you request, the data from the MSU registrar is very clean, and any errors should be reported to the registrar. Do ask students what name they use, because many have nicknames which do not show up in the data base.

**Special grade book programs** are available to automate the task of grade computation. I have not used any of these for a long time, so I am not going to recommend one. If anyone wants to add a plug here for their favorite, please [email to me](#) (but take off the NOSPAM suffix) and I will include it in the next revision. This web site includes several grade book programs in the annotated links at the end of this paper.

The ever-present **spreadsheet** works very well for numerical grades, and can store letter grades as well. The classroll page offers a choice of a "csv" (comma separated values) download, which is easily imported into Excel or any spreadsheet. Define a column for each grade, and at the end of the term you can easily average columns together.

To emphasize the diversity of approaches, [at this link](#) you can see how I use text files and the Emacs editor in unix to process grades. I would only recommend that to someone who at least familiar with unix, or wants to learn about it.

### **Backing Up**

**The importance of a backup** cannot be overemphasized. As Murphy warns, anything which can go wrong will, and loss of a grade book is a disaster. When using paper, the Xerox should be applied weekly, or after every major grading period. Keep paper copies in a secure location. With computer programs, keep a current copy on a floppy disk in a secure location. Get in the habit of backing it up every time you record a set of grades. If your computer is connected to the network, ask your systems person to make sure that the directory where you store grades is protected from all but yourself. Be sure to keep your virus protection updated, because a virus can wipe out all information on your hard drive.