

The Language of Performance
wayne.smith@csun.edu
[updated: Monday, August 15, 2011]

“There are no internal measures in an organization. There are only external measures.”
(paraphrase)
---Peter Drucker (1905-2005)

Purpose:

The purpose of this handout is to help students appreciate the importance of using the proper language when referring to scores and grades (that is, performance measurement). In general, a proper use of language is essential to social and economic success in a culture. More specifically, a deep understanding of rigorous and relevant performance assessment is a characteristic of successful business professionals.

Language:

Students must use the term “earn” or perhaps “achieve” when referring to scores, and therefore, grades. The use of other terms, while similar in nature, may inadvertently lead a student to misconstrue *perceived* performance for *actual* performance. While perceived performance is interesting, it is actual performance that is compelling and is therefore fundamentally what is measured in class. An even more insidious problem is that frequent and persistent substitution of perceived performance for actual performance leads to a serious misunderstanding of expectations over the long run. Phrases such as the following are detrimental to gaining an understanding of actual performance measurement:

“I am a A student, I don’t deserve a C.”
“My other professors don’t give D’s.”
“I am in <so and so> major. Can you change my grade to a B?”
“I can’t get a C in this class.”
“Everyone wants an A.”

The terms “deserve”, “give”, “change”, “get”, and “want” are not semantic equivalents of the term “earn.” There are no good synonyms for the terms “earn” or “achieve.”

Individual “Grades”:

While no individual score on an individual quiz or exam can perfectly determine anyone’s final grade in a class, an unstandardized (raw) score, or better, the standardized (z-) score, can be used as a comparative estimate of “how well an individual student did” on any one quiz or exam. For example, if a student earned a z-score of 0, that student would be approximately in the “middle of the distribution.” The middle of the distribution is “average.” According to the CSUN catalog, a “C” grade is average (and in fact, even a “D” is passing). So, as a rough gauge of performance, that student earned a “C” (not a “C+” or a “C-“, but a “C”). Within a letter grade, relatively stronger students may earn a “plus” suffix while relatively weaker students may earn “minus” suffix.