Frequently Asked Questions

Although I enjoy talking with students, I often get the same questions about policy not explicitly covered by the syllabus.

1. Q: How should we refer to you?
   A: I prefer ‘Steven’, ‘Professor Spallone’, or ‘Doctor Spallone’. On my door it says ‘Dr. Steven Spallone’; the title ‘Professor’ is sometimes reserved for professors with tenure. On the other hand, I would still have a doctorate if I were unemployed, but I wouldn’t be a professor. Since by teaching your class I am actively professing mathematics, I think ‘Professor’ is appropriate. By the way, it would be silly to say ‘Mister Spallone’.

2. Q: Do you curve the grades?
   A: Yes, I will give 30% A’s, 30%B’s, 20% C’s and the rest below.

3. Q: Could I meet with you in your office sometime?
   A: Certainly. We can usually figure out times to meet. If you ask me in class, one of two things can happen. If we have a clear idea of our schedules, we may figure out a time immediately, and I’ll ask you to e-mail me to remind me. Done. If we don’t, I may ask you to e-mail me to set one up. Bear in mind that I don’t have internet at home, so we may not be able to exchange many e-mails before the meeting time. So try to be efficient by either suggesting a time or a time interval with your first e-mail. The same principle holds if you don’t ask me in class, but just e-mail me. By the way, I don’t wait more than 10-15 minutes if you’re late (a good general rule, not just for academia).

4. Q: My alarm didn’t go off. When is the makeup midterm?
   A: Earning a passing grade in a college class means more than just mastering the material, it also means that you are responsible and can make important appointments. I’m sorry, but this will be reflected in your grade.

5. Q: I need to get a [good grade] in order to [stay enrolled/get scholarship/get into program]. However I’m getting a [bad grade] because of [unpleasant personal situation]. Can you help me out here?
   A: I’m sorry to hear about that. My job as grade recorder is very straightforward and I plan to follow the syllabus. I drop the lowest homework or quiz grade to account for personal problems. Students can also withdraw up to a certain period. I think it would be more appropriate to explain your [unpleasant personal situation] to the [enrollment/scholarship/program] people and ask them to bend their rules.

6. Q: What’s this on my homework? “Slightly late?”
   A: When homework is due, you should turn in your homeworks at the beginning of class, or as you come in. Otherwise I will write “slightly late” on the homework and
the grader will take off a small amount of points. I do this because I don’t like students to do their homework in class. Also, if you left your homework at home or whatever, you can slide it under my office door by 5PM and it will be similarly “slightly late”. However let me know if you are planning to do this!

7. Q: I’m going to have to miss class on [day] because of [pretty good reason]. Please don’t take off points.

A: Make sure you get the notes. I don’t always cover things in the same way as the book, and I structure the homework and exams around my lectures, not around the book. As you can see from the syllabus, I don’t allot points for attendance. I do take attendance, mostly to help me distinguish borderline cases at the end of the semester, especially for students at the bottom of the spectrum. I’ve noticed that a small number of students pretty much only show up to exams or review sessions. These students always get the same grade.

8. Q: What exactly does ‘extra credit’ mean?

In terms of grades, if a homework problem is called ‘extra credit’, it means that it counts for the numerator but not the denominator in figuring your grade for that particular homework assignment. In the numerator, it counts as much as any other homework problem. It is therefore possible to get more than 100% on a given assignment. However at the end of the semester, if you have more than 100% in the homework/quiz category, then the homework/quiz grade goes down to 100%. (You still need to do well on exams.)

In terms of difficulty, an extra credit problem is typically one which doesn’t follow straightforwardly from the methods from class. Or you may get fewer points than for comparable effort put elsewhere. Thus, you are working on it because it’s interesting to you.

9. Q: I was taught the quadratic formula a really long time ago. Do I still need to know it?

A: Yes. You learned it a long time ago because it is a fundamental tool in mathematics. We will use it prominently in class, and there will be homework and exam problems that use it. To get the best grade, you should memorize the quadratic formula.

10. Q: What do we need to know from trigonometry?

A: Here’s what you need to know. Know the definitions of the six basic trig functions. Know the sine and cosine values of the 16 points on the unit circle. (If you use the three symmetries, you’ll only need to know a couple values which follow from 45 – 45 – 90 and 30 – 60 – 90 right triangle theory...) Know the Pythagorean Theorem:

\[ \sin^2(x) + \cos^2(x) = 1. \]  

(1)

Know the sine and cosine addition formulas:

\[ \sin(x + y) = \sin(x) \cos(y) + \sin(y) \cos(x) \]  

(2)

and

\[ \cos(x + y) = \cos(x) \cos(y) - \sin(x) \sin(y). \]  

(3)

Know the parities of sine and cosine: Sine is odd and cosine is even.

All of trigonometry can be deduced from the above.
11. Q: *Will you be posting solutions to the homeworks/midterm?*

A: No. I’d be happy to explain the solutions to you in my office or during review days. (If a midterm, I go over it in class when I return it.) However there are a couple reasons I don’t like to post solutions. First, I don’t like to encourage memorization. If there are on-line solutions to problems, students feel obligated to memorize them, and then feel entitled to get a good grade because of that effort. Second, I would like to use these problems in future classes, and in this computer age it would be very easy for a future student to download those solutions and ruin the process.

12. Q: *How should I study for the test?*

A: Studying for a test should be an enjoyable experience. There is no homework due, so you can finally spend some quality time poring over several weeks of your favorite class. You’ve put a great deal of effort into learning this stuff, and it’s about to pay off. So find your favorite studying spot with no distractions and bring your textbook, course notes, graded homeworks, a pencil and plenty of paper.

Open up your textbook and class notes to the first pages of relevant material. How do they compare; is the emphasis different? Try one of the examples, but first cover up the solution! Did you get it right? Try some homework problems, try problems in the book adjacent to these homework problems. Did you get the answer in the back? Look at the grading on your homework. Can you fix your mistakes? Make a list of anything that’s troubling you. If you’re feeling strong, give yourself a practice exam by picking five problems in the text and giving yourself an hour to do them with no notes or book. Indeed, how would you write the exam?

But don’t expect most of the exam to be familiar homework problems; you should expect some variations. To prepare for this, try to write and solve your own problems. Are the problems in a given section all ‘contrived’ so that the math works out nicely? Can you ‘contrive’ problems in the same way?

Try looking at the big picture; what larger ideas were driving the course? If you’re an engineering student, find an upper-level book in your field which applies the results from class. Surely it has different notation and language; do you understand the theory enough to bridge the gap? Talk to your classmates; how much can you discuss the material without writing anything down? Compare your trouble lists. Can you help each other out?

Be sure to get plenty of rest the night before an exam. You can stay up all night memorizing everything in a box, but that’s not going to convince me that you have mastered the course enough to retain it several years from now. Much better to be alert and flexible enough to troubleshoot if the problems aren’t going exactly as you planned.

13. Q: *How should I take the test?*

A: There’s not much to say here, because the important part was covered by the previous question. Remember to always doublecheck your answers. You need to work quickly and correctly. Make sure you doublecheck your answers. Although I do give partial credit, if you fundamentally change the problem early on, you won’t get many points. This is why it’s important to doublecheck your answers. Write neatly,
and it’s good to occasionally use words to help guide the grader (me) along. Finally, if you have extra time, you really should doublecheck your answers.

Good luck!

14. Q: It’s the end of the semester and I’d like an idea of how I’m doing in the class. What grade do you think I’ll get?

A: Take the average of the letter grades you got on the midterms. Generally, go one grade up if you ace the final, and one grade down if you mess up the final. If your homework scores are not so great (resp., are really great), then change “ace” to “do an all-star job on” (resp., “do really well on”) and change “mess up” to “flub” (resp., “bomb”).