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# AP<sup>®</sup> Research Academic Paper

## Sample Student Responses and Scoring Commentary

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AP® Research — Academic Paper 2021 Scoring Guidelines

The Response...				
<b>Score of 1</b> Report on Existing Knowledge	<b>Score of 2</b> Report on Existing Knowledge with Simplistic Use of a Research Method	<b>Score of 3</b> Ineffectual Argument for a New Understanding	<b>Score of 4</b> Well-Supported, Articulate Argument Conveying a New Understanding	<b>Score of 5</b> Rich Analysis of a New Understanding Addressing a Gap in the Research Base
Presents an overly broad topic of inquiry.	Presents a topic of inquiry with narrowing scope or focus, that is NOT carried through either in the method or in the overall line of reasoning.	Carries the focus or scope of a topic of inquiry through the method <b>AND</b> overall line of reasoning, even though the focus or scope might still be narrowing.	Focuses a topic of inquiry with clear and narrow parameters, which are addressed through the method and the conclusion.	Focuses a topic of inquiry with clear and narrow parameters, which are addressed through the method and the conclusion.
Situates a topic of inquiry within a single perspective derived from scholarly works <b>OR</b> through a variety of perspectives derived from mostly non-scholarly works.	Situates a topic of inquiry within a single perspective derived from scholarly works <b>OR</b> through a variety of perspectives derived from mostly non-scholarly works.	Situates a topic of inquiry within relevant scholarly works of varying perspectives, although connections to some works may be unclear.	Explicitly connects a topic of inquiry to relevant scholarly works of varying perspectives <b>AND</b> logically explains how the topic of inquiry addresses a gap.	Explicitly connects a topic of inquiry to relevant scholarly works of varying perspectives <b>AND</b> logically explains how the topic of inquiry addresses a gap.
Describes a search and report process.	Describes a nonreplicable research method <b>OR</b> provides an oversimplified description of a method, with questionable alignment to the purpose of the inquiry.	Describes a reasonably replicable research method, with questionable alignment to the purpose of the inquiry.	Logically defends the alignment of a detailed, replicable research method to the purpose of the inquiry.	Logically defends the alignment of a detailed, replicable research method to the purpose of the inquiry.
Summarizes or reports existing knowledge in the field of understanding pertaining to the topic of inquiry.	Summarizes or reports existing knowledge in the field of understanding pertaining to the topic of inquiry.	Conveys a new understanding or conclusion, with an underdeveloped line of reasoning <b>OR</b> insufficient evidence.	Supports a new understanding or conclusion through a logically organized line of reasoning <b>AND</b> sufficient evidence. The limitations and/or implications, if present, of the new understanding or conclusion are oversimplified.	Justifies a new understanding or conclusion through a logical progression of inquiry choices, sufficient evidence, explanation of the limitations of the conclusion, and an explanation of the implications to the community of practice.
Generally communicates the student’s ideas, although errors in grammar, discipline-specific style, and organization distract or confuse the reader.	Generally communicates the student’s ideas, although errors in grammar, discipline-specific style, and organization distract or confuse the reader.	Competently communicates the student’s ideas, although there may be some errors in grammar, discipline-specific style, and organization.	Competently communicates the student’s ideas, although there may be some errors in grammar, discipline-specific style, and organization.	Enhances the communication of the student’s ideas through organization, use of design elements, conventions of grammar, style, mechanics, and word precision, with few to no errors.
Cites <b>AND/OR</b> attributes sources (in bibliography/ works cited and/or in-text), with multiple errors and/or an inconsistent use of a discipline-specific style.	Cites <b>AND/OR</b> attributes sources (in bibliography/ works cited and/or in-text), with multiple errors and/or an inconsistent use of a discipline-specific style.	Cites <b>AND</b> attributes sources, using a discipline-specific style (in both bibliography/works cited <b>AND</b> in-text), with few errors or inconsistencies.	Cites <b>AND</b> attributes sources, with a consistent use of an appropriate discipline-specific style (in both bibliography/works cited <b>AND</b> in-text), with few to no errors.	Cites <b>AND</b> attributes sources, with a consistent use of an appropriate discipline-specific style (in both bibliography/works cited <b>AND</b> in-text), with few to no errors.

## Academic Paper

### Overview

This performance task was intended to assess students' ability to conduct scholarly and responsible research and articulate an evidence-based argument that clearly communicates the conclusion, solution, or answer to their stated research question. More specifically, this performance task was intended to assess students' ability to:

- Generate a focused research question that is situated within or connected to a larger scholarly context or community;
- Explore relationships between and among multiple works representing multiple perspectives within the scholarly literature related to the topic of inquiry;  
Articulate what approach, method, or process they have chosen to use to address their research question, why they have chosen that approach to answering their question, and how they employed it;
- Develop and present their own argument, conclusion, or new understanding while acknowledging its limitations and discussing implications;
- Support their conclusion through the compilation, use, and synthesis of relevant and significant evidence generated by their research;
- Use organizational and design elements to effectively convey the paper's message;
- Consistently and accurately cite, attribute, and integrate the knowledge and work of others, while distinguishing between the student's voice and that of others;
- Generate a paper in which word choice and syntax enhance communication by adhering to established conventions of grammar, usage, and mechanics.

To what extent does grade inflation negatively impact students in the U.S.?

Word Count: 2,940

According to Merriam-Webster, grade inflation is “a rise in the average grade assigned to students.” Grade inflation has been around for many years and researchers have started to look into it more recently. The researchers are noticing the trends of grade inflation in the U.S. and are bringing them to light. Grade inflation can be traced back to the 1960s, that’s how old grade inflation is. It has been a problem for that long and there are many causes of grade inflation. Whether that be pointing out the negative impact grade inflation has on students, or ways to put an end to it, and to what extent does grade inflation negatively impact students.

First and foremost, grade inflation is seen in different lights by different people. Some teachers and staff believe grade inflation is the right way to go when it comes to the grading system in the U.S. According to Stuart Rojstaczer, in the article *Grade Inflation at American Colleges and Universities*, “Faculty attitudes about teaching and grading underwent a profound shift that coincided with the Vietnam War.” This supports the fact that the thinking of the professors and teachers in schools and universities changed to where they would prefer grade inflation rather than keeping the original grading system they had. Another piece of information from the same article elaborates on this when it says, “Many professors, certainly not all or even a majority, became convinced that grades were not a useful tool for motivation, were not a valid means of evaluation and created a harmful authoritarian environment for learning.” Many professors were of the impression that their students were not receiving fair grades based on the amount of work that they did and the quality of the work they completed, along with the harmful environment they were surrounded by. On the contrary, a lot of recent faculty seems to be in denial about grade inflation. As mentioned in *Faculty Perceptions, Reality of Grade Inflation Tell Two Different Stories*, “However, even though faculty believed that grade inflation was

occurring, they were equally convinced it was not happening in their departments and very sure that it was not happening in their courses.” This shows that some teachers and faculty did not notice this change and were oblivious to it and although it may not always be prominent or noticeable in the full scope of things, taking a closer look at trends in grade inflation can help create a better understanding of the term and ways to manage it.

Grade inflation is not just a concept. There have been studies that were conducted to prove that grade inflation does exist, and grade inflation is not having much of a positive impact on high school and college students in the United States. According to the study *Study Focused on High School Grade Inflation Exposes Inequities*, “While the GPA increased at all schools, it increased 0.27 points at schools with more affluent students, compared with 0.17 points in less affluent schools. The study found grade inflation accelerated after 2011, mostly in schools that have more affluent students.” GPA increased by at least 0.17 according to this and that means that grade inflation is occurring in many schools especially ones with wealthy children. Additionally, Michael Carter included a few studies and statistics in his paper, and said, “These findings offer some optimism to those who fear that grade inflation will continue unabated, though the fact that two-fifths of the universities examined in this study still inflate grades may quickly quell that optimism (and it is possible that the universities that did not inflate grades could return to the practice in the future).” (Carter 347) Grade inflation is not some big secret. Basically, although what they found is positive and implies grade inflation will be restricted, there are a lot of schools who participate in it and those who do not may turn to it in the future. The article *Study Finds Clear Evidence of Grade Inflation* mentions grade inflation being present, and that it is not always tied to minority students. This shows that grade inflation overall was not targeting a specific race and would spread out among them all. In fact, grade inflation

was around when minority students only made up a small percent of the total number of students in the U.S.

Sometimes, grade inflation is not a result of the grading system, rather the teachers themselves. B.L. Wright spoke to students and included this in their article, “Bridges-King graduated at the top of her class at The English High School in Boston. Her statement is upsetting, yet not really surprising, due to an all-too-common problem at low-income high schools nationwide: Inflated grades that wrongly and harmfully signal to graduates—even valedictorians—that they’re ready for college.” (Wright) This basically says that because of grade inflation, even students at the top of their class are not truly prepared for college and once they graduate, they are completely lost. Some high school students seem to be more affected by this than others, and this may be a direct result of teachers mistreating them for their ethnicity. Jewell, R. Todd, and Michael A. McPherson did a study to estimate GPAs of different students based on their gender, ethnicity, race, etc. They were able to link teacher biases to this and those biases affected the GPAs of those students. As grade inflation can be directed at a group of people through individual teachers and their bias toward a specific race, ethnicity, or even gender. There should be more studies conducted to investigate the number of high school and college students being directly impacted by the teachers’ and professors’ grade inflation.

While there is a large number of students being affected by grade inflation, grade inflation might not be as bad as the media makes it out to be. News articles and journalists love to exaggerate, so grade inflation may be over-exaggerated, but it still exists and has become more prominent over the years. Richard Kamber and Mary Biggs speak about the misuse of the term “grade inflation,” and the stigma surrounding the term. Another piece of evidence for this comes from Michael Carter and Lara Patricia when he says in his article *Grade Inflation in*

*Higher Education: Is the End in Sight?* that “Considering the common grading scale’s upper limit, grades cannot inflate forever; at some point inflation must—theoretically—stop. A look at recent data shows that such an end may be in sight.” This means that grade inflation will continue to grow until it reaches the grading scale’s upper limit where it would have to stop. They believe it has been blown out of proportion. This brings in the question of whether grade inflation is truly the problem. Alfie Kohn speaks about the grades themselves being the problem, rather than the inflation of them.

## **Gap**

Grade inflation is negatively impacting high school and college students in the United States. Grade inflation does exist and has existed for some time now. Students are being directly impacted, and teachers and professors are another reason why students are being negatively impacted by grade inflation. There has been no research conducted that supports the claim that students at ██████ High School are being negatively impacted by grade inflation, but the assumption can be made based off the information provided by the various sources and data collected that, yes, students at ██████ High School are dealing with the negative impacts that grade inflation is said to have on high school and college students in the United States.

## **Methodology**

I began my non-experimental content analysis by researching the data containing the information of grade inflation of high school and college students in America from the years 2000 to 2015. I will then analyze the content and form a conclusion based on it. I chose to do a quantitative research study in order to correctly represent my case because the study asks of how much instead of how or what. The research design falls under a non-experimental research

method due to the fact that I am unable to forcibly affect an individual's experience with grade inflation. Thus, I have to rely on gathering the research and data from other sources revolving around grade inflation as well as interpreting the qualitative data from these sources. My subjects of study include females and males of varying ages and not specified to any grade level.

### **Subjects of Study**

In order to perform this properly, I will look at multiple subjects' grades and several sets of data. My subjects will include high school students in America, as well as college students in America and their grades from the year 2000 to the year 2015. My subjects will include both male and female American high school students. I will also not limit the participants to a favorable grade or athletic sport because grade inflation can affect all grade levels. I will be looking at studies focused around grade inflation and how it viewed in different lights by different people, how grade inflation is not having a positive impact, and how the staff themselves are at fault rather than the actual grading system itself. The subjects of the studies that I researched will most likely remain anonymous in order to ensure their privacy. The goal of making the studies anonymous is most likely to get more participation and increase the accuracy of the data, since most individuals will most likely be willing to answer if their identify remains unknown.

### **Instruments**

The instruments I will be using are my computer, data, grades, and research on my topic. The research requires the researcher to research and collect data from multiple sources that involve the grades and grade inflation of high school students in America from the years 2000 to 2015. I will use sources that are credible and trustworthy to collect my data in the most accurate

way possible. The data collected will then be analyzed in order to compare the data gathered from the multiple studies and individual surveys that other people have done over the years.

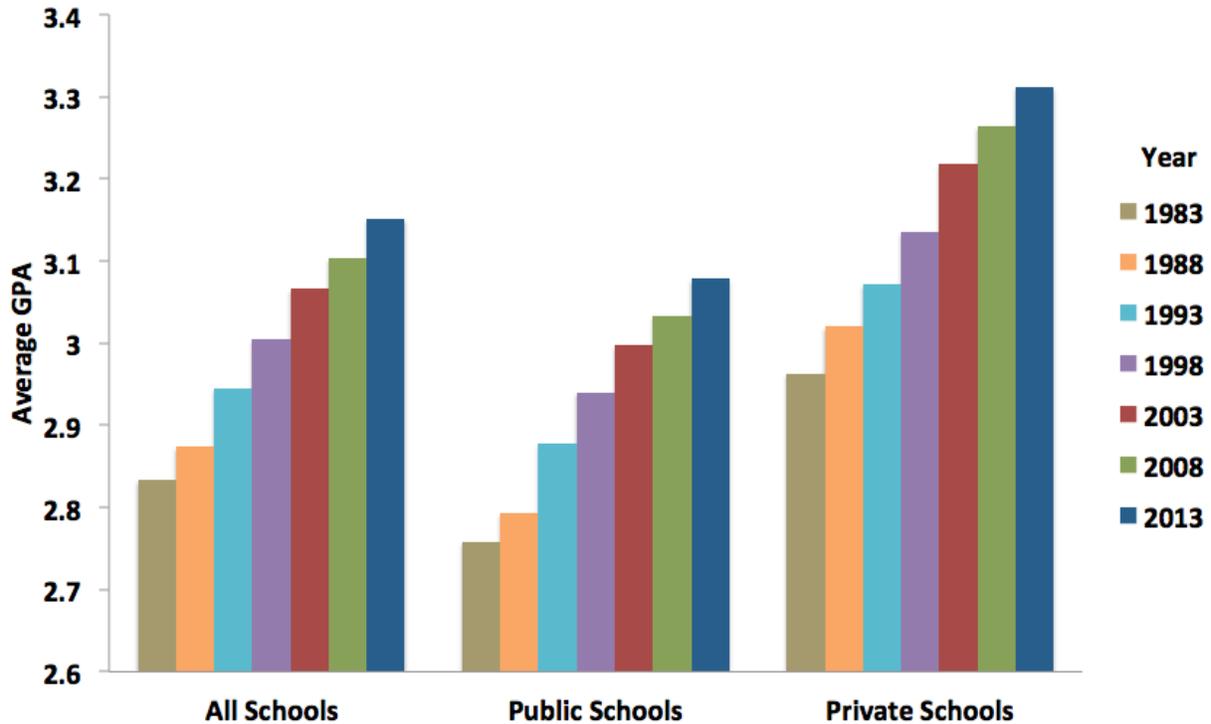
## **Hypothesis**

Using the data that was collected, I will carefully go through the researched sources so that I can make sure they are trustworthy and accurate and can connect well to my research topic and each other. I will draw conclusions from what other participants answers to the different surveys and studies that I have researched and analyzed. I will analyze the data I collect and come to a conclusion. I believe the amount of grade inflation from the year 2000 to the year 2015 will increase and the harmful effects that grade inflation has on everyone involved will become more prominent and identified.

## **Results**

The method and research structure were largely influenced by the example studies “Grade Inflation at American Colleges and Universities” and “Study Focused on High School Grade Inflation Exposes Inequities.” Although these sources do not directly involve themselves with individual students, both provide valuable information and context surrounding grade inflation and the effect that grade inflation has on high school and college students in America. Due to their ability to produce a desired or intended result in the aforementioned studies, I will focus on these studies to gain a better understanding of grade inflation and the context surrounding it.

### Recent GPA Trends Nationwide Four-Year Colleges & Universities



According to the study *Grade Inflation at American Colleges and Universities*, the figure above shows the average undergraduate GPAs for four-year American colleges and universities from 1983-2013 based on data from: Alabama, Alaska-Anchorage, Appalachian State, Auburn, Brigham Young, Brown, Carleton, Coastal Carolina, Colorado, and , Columbia College (Chicago), Columbus State, CSU-Fresno, CSU-San Bernardino, Dartmouth, Delaware, DePauw, Duke, Elon, Emory, Florida, Furman, Gardner-Webb, Georgia, Georgia State, Georgia Tech, and an astonishing number of other four year colleges and universities in America. The study collected data on trends in grading from about 30 colleges and universities. They found that grade inflation, while waning beginning in the mid-1970s, resurfaced in the mid-1980s. The rise continued uninterrupted at almost every school for which data was available. The article also mentioned that the Vietnam War was a main part to the start of grade inflation. It was a main part

because due to the fact that if a college student failed, they would most likely end up as a soldier on an extremely deadly battlefield and so teachers and professors would have the grades of the students rise so they could keep their fulltime status in school.

Also, according to the study *Grade Inflation at American Colleges and Universities*, “As stated by Princeton’s new president, Christopher Eisgruber, the grading policy was “a considerable source of stress for many students, parents, alumni, and faculty members.” In other words, customers complained, and the customer is always right.” This basically says that a grading policy without grade inflation being implemented causes immense stress for the students, parents, and many others who are involved but at the same time, a grading system with grade inflation is not an honest system and persuades students into thinking they are ready for the next step but once they reach it, they realize they aren’t. Seth Gershenson says in the article *Study Focused on High School Grade Inflation Exposes Inequities*, “Grades are a very subjective and important piece of information that students and their parents get, as well as other teachers and principals,”. Gershenson also says that “They use that information to make decisions that can have long-lasting consequences on kids’ education outcomes.” This also supports the idea that a grading system with grade inflation is not an honest system and so they should get rid of it since parents and students make extremely important and long-lasting decisions based on what grades they get as it’s pretty much the deciding factor of many things.

According to the study *Study Focused on High School Grade Inflation Exposes Inequities*, “Grade inflation is a growing problem and one that is more prevalent in high schools attended by affluent students, according to new research by AU School of Public Affairs Associate Professor Seth Gershenson.” Seth Gershenson holds a PhD from Michigan State University in Economics with a primary focus on education policy. While at Michigan State, he taught several courses and

received an Outstanding Teaching award, so he is more than qualified to have a perspective in this situation. A recent study of his analyzed data from 2005 to 2016 of more than a million students in North Carolina specifically. This study found that grade inflation accelerated rapidly after the year 2011 and mostly in schools that had more wealthy students. Also, according to the study *Study Focused on High School Grade Inflation Exposes Inequities*, “The study suggests that earning a good grade in a course is not a guarantee a student has learned what the state expects — and that has serious implications.” This means that teachers in these schools are purposely making it easier for these students to get A’s and B’s in their classes and so they are not actually preparing them for the end-of-course exams that they are required to pass.

## **Conclusion**

Through the Analysis of the research I have collected, it is evident that a grading policy without grade inflation being implemented causes immense stress for the students, parents, and many others who are involved but at the same time, a grading system with grade inflation is not an honest system and persuades students into thinking they are ready for the next step but once they reach it, they realize they aren’t. Additionally, I have discovered that there are many ways in which grade inflation affects students. One way is that due to the difficulty of the classes being dropped and children getting A’s and B’s easier, the children are unable to fully learn what they need to know for the state issued end of course exams for those classes. Thus, they either fail them or get a bad grade on them even though they have been getting straight A’s or a mix of A’s and B’s relatively easily. Although there are some benefits to this like the validation of high grades and students being more comfortable in knowing that they are receiving these high grades, it does not out way the negative implications of grade inflation. There is a noticeable trend where there will be videos about jokes saying they never learned a certain question on an

exam or that the exam is way too difficult compared to the material learned in the classroom and this is another negative impact of grade inflation.

### **Limitations, Implications and Future Directions**

One of the future directions this research can go in is to research individual people in a more detailed manner such as with interviews or surveys. Interview and surveys of different individual students at my high school or other high schools and colleges or universities of varying degrees of race, gender, and ethnicity as well as in a more detailed manner which I chose not to do for this paper may also be an opportunistic decision. Someone can try it with the aim to compare it with different races, genders, and ethnicities to gain a broader understanding so that we can understand the different impacts of grade inflation on different people. One limitation of this research that I faced was that I am not an expert when it comes to this topic and thus, I had to rely on the studies of other people such as Stuart Rojstaczer and Seth Gershenson. The results of this overall research paper can go in many different directions and can be carried on by other researchers to achieve more accurate and significant results.

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schoolers. Retrieved October 07, 2020.

## Academic Paper

**Note:** Student samples are quoted verbatim and may contain spelling and grammatical errors.

**Sample: J**

**Score: 1**

This paper earned a score of 1 as the topic is overly broad (studying high school and college students over a 15-year period). The paper mentions a method of “non-experimental content analysis” on pages 5-6 but describes a search and report. Specifically, the paper states, “I will be looking at studies focused around grade inflation and how it viewed in different lights by different people, how grade inflation is not having a positive impact, and how the staff themselves are at fault rather than the actual grading system itself.” The student attempts to analyze some articles of varying perspectives on page 9, but without a clear method, this is part of the literature review.

The paper did not earn a score of 2 as the topic of inquiry does not narrow and remains broad. Additionally, while a method is mentioned on pages 5-6, the paper describes a search and report process. The paper did not earn a 0 as there is a topic, albeit quite broad.