I find it useful to explain my grading policy in graduate courses. Grades are, or should be, information, to you and to the rest of the world. In practice, as our grades get used here, they are mostly information to you, since others pay less attention to them than I think we ought. However, that's a fact of life. If grades run too high, the information value is reduced, and they don't tell you what you need to know about the future. Not that any one person can predict the future with any confidence, but I try to use the grade to tell you where your work in this course might head, in my best estimate. Here, then, is what I use grades to mean. (I specify paper grades here. Class participation--quality, not quantity--will also be a component, and the quality is estimated along similar lines.) I try to grade undergraduates and graduates by comparable standards; graduate grades normally run higher both because the students are more highly selected and because the assignments are more demanding.

UNDERGRADUATE. The ideal 4.0 paper will be dense with interesting and original insights, grounded in energetic reading, well shaped and lively formulation. The typical 3.5 paper will have a productive topic, a number of sharp observations, good paragraph structure, and clear writing. The typical 3.0 paper will be governed by a single idea for which it gives a number of examples, probably one example per paragraph, with writing adequate to getting its material across but suffering from problems such as repetitiousness, inexact expression, inefficient arrangement, and mechanical errors.

GRADUATE. 4.0. Outstanding professional work. A strong insight, developed with ordered complexity, well researched (within the limits imposed by time constraints) written with energy and craft. Interesting to read, easy to follow, illuminating. Typically a 4.0 paper could serve as a writing sample in job applications to demanding colleges and universities. Often might become the basis for a strong publication. If I have to make a choice between penetrating originality and engaging clarity, I prefer the former, but the ideal is both.

3.9. First-rate graduate work. Typically a 3.9 paper is less complex than a 4.0 paper, or the research is more limited, or there are some real problems with writing or organization. With revision or development it can form the basis for a strong dissertation chapter and often can be used or can become a writing sample in job applications. A very polished performance that I don't find of great interest will get a 3.9, as will a really powerful idea whose development is more limited than it might be.

3.8. Good quality graduate work. Shows conceptual mastery and skillful reading, though typically spottier than a 3.9 paper. A grade of 3.8 is entirely consistent with an outstanding outcome in graduate work, though typically not in the field of this course.

3.7. I use this as an encouraging grade for first-year students. Promising work, not yet well disciplined. A typical 3.7 might be a good undergraduate paper such as a close reading, written and organized somewhat laboriously, without the kind of sophisticated insights or scholarly range you will develop in graduate study. A 3.7 later on in a graduate career means I think you'll finish a dissertation but I'm worried about whether the writing will be competitive on the job market.

3.6. Developmental work. Not really graduate level. Most often, the intelligence is there, but there's
not enough reading and not enough care with writing and organization. Typically 3.6 means that, in my judgment, you need to work harder in order to succeed.

I've given lower grades, though more in the past when the graduate programs were larger and less selective. Recently my medians have been 3.8, probably on the high side of 3.8.