

How to Earn an “F” in Art

Rama Hughes

My students and their parents can barely believe it but, yes, it is possible to earn an F in my art class. I made a poster that lists all the ways that a student can do it. The list is meant to inspire my students and maybe make them laugh. Nonetheless, I am disappointed as anyone when one of my students actually earns an F.

Who’s to Blame?

A bad grade is a failure on my part as much as it is on the part of my students. My goal as an art teacher is to simplify art into sets of skills and ideas that any students can learn. It is my job to make those lessons compelling and comprehensible. An F represents my failure to do that.

Of course, it is my students’ job to approach their lessons with a willingness to learn. That means more than just drawing well; it means struggling with unfamiliar materials. It means practicing something difficult until it becomes easier. Students risk failure in my class by not risking failure in their artwork

Good Artist vs. Good Student

There is a difference between being a good artist and being a good student. Ideally, every art student would be both. In my experience, though, good students become rapidly more talented when they are presented with strong lessons. Talented artists don’t improve as much until they are challenged to become good students.

Effort isn’t enough either. Talent does play a role in the success of our students, but how important is talent if it goes unchallenged? If a student always creates beautiful drawings, does he or she deserve an A in art?



What if that student draws all the time to avoid learning how to paint? Should he or she earn an A without learning to sculpt? What about the student who doesn’t achieve beauty in his or her work but rises to the challenge of each lesson?

Art is an amazing subject because there are so many opportunities to succeed. One lesson can challenge a student’s drawing ability. The next one can challenge creativity. The one after that can challenge his or her grasp of history, knack for philosophy, or ability to communicate clearly. Each lesson presents students with a new opportunity to succeed in art. Or to fail.

Grades as Teaching Tools

A grade might motivate some students, but it is not a reward, and it is not a punishment. A grade is a teaching

tool. An honest grade starts conversations that often begin with an exclamation such as, “I can’t get a B in *art*!” My students are lucky to have parents who get involved when a grade falls any lower, which invites the questions:

What is my child studying in art? Why is that important? What is my child good at? With what does my child struggle? How can my child improve?

One of my proudest accomplishments as a teacher came from the turn-around that I witnessed after discussing a bad grade with one of my students. “I’m the worst artist in the class,” He told me. “If you really think that you are the worst artist in the class,” I responded, “then I expect you to work harder than everyone here.” And he did. In just a few weeks, he became a much better artist, thanks to that one F.

20 Ways to Earn an F in Art

1. Be afraid of new things.
2. Be late to class.
3. Blame it on lack of talent.
4. Do as little as you can.
5. Don’t ask questions.
6. Don’t even try.
7. Have someone else do your work.
8. Ignore instructions.
9. Ignore the people who know more than you.
10. Imagine that you will get better without practice.
11. Keep your ideas to yourself.
12. Let other students tell you what’s good.
13. Make excuses.
14. Make no mistakes.
15. Miss class and don’t make up the work.
16. Never fail.
17. Perfect it all.
18. Sit perfectly still and never make a sound.
19. Spend as much time as possible talking with your friends.
20. Stick to what you are good at.

Students risk failure in my class by not risking failure in their artwork.