

Salad Days

Evan shuffled nervously into the hall outside his TA's office in the basement. He was there to ask for an extension on a lab report his calc I class was supposed to write up, making conjectures about the effect of parameters on graphs he was asked to draw using Mathematica. He had begun the assignment. His major was agronomy, and unlike most of his engineer classmates, he did not already know how to use the software; computers in general were awkward territory for him. He'd spent ten hours in the computer lab, learning how to use the program, but felt it would take another ten to complete the project. He was committed to participate in a mentoring internship program with the Future Farmers of America all weekend during the hours the lab would be open. His earlier attempts to visit the TA that week had been unintentionally thwarted by his roommate, Rick, who was deeply depressed, not handling the transition to university well, and needed, Evan felt, constant attention.

Exactly at three, Arnold, the TA, opened his door. "Come in Evan, what can I do for you?"

"Ah, well, I was hoping to ask you about the project. It's due next Monday?"

"Yes, that's right; we want a write up, with print-outs of some pictures you came up with, a conjecture about what happens for different values of n , and an explanation in clear English of how you arrived at your conjecture." Arnold was very pleased with this assignment; it had been his idea, and he thought it would give the students a real taste of mathematical exploration, not the usual plug-and-chug of the calculus sequence. He looked forward to seeing what people had done.

"Yeah, I was wondering if it would be possible to turn it in a little late, like say, on Thursday... I've never used Mathematica before, and I have to work this weekend."

Arnold, frowned, then said, "The grade goes down by a third of a letter grade for every day it is late. So an A paper received on Thursday would get a B. If you are willing to see your grade lowered like that, go ahead and hand it in Thursday."

Two weeks later, Arnold sat in his office, grading papers. He came upon Evan's project, not three but five days late. He had done a thorough job, and his comments were well-written, but the conjecture was slightly inaccurate. If it had been turned in on time, he would have given it a B+. Five days late, it was a C-. As he entered the grades in the grade book, he saw that that

Evan had received a low C on the first exam, and a high D on the second one, taken a week after the project was due. "That kid is going to end up taking this course again if he's not careful," Arnold thought to himself.

A month after that, Evan was back in office hours, this time studying for the third exam. As the TA patiently explained Riemann sums for the third time, Evan's head started to swim. He had been up all night helping one of his FFA advisee's sows farrow. Having lost track of the notation, he gave up listening entirely, and started calculating in his head how well he would have to do on this test and the final to pass the course with a C+, the minimum grade required for his major. He spoke up.

"So I need to get at least a B- on this test to bring my average up to a C+ before the final, right?"

Suppressing a sigh, Arnold finished explaining the problem to the other students there. After they left, he turned to Evan.

"If I remember correctly, you have a borderline D+ right now, although I remind you that this is only approximate; the grades will be averaged and curved at the end of the semester. In any case, you should certainly try to do the best you can. I would say that anything less than a B is cause for concern. I'm sorry, but I have another class now, so I have to go. Perhaps we can talk about this after class tomorrow."

Dazed, Evan heaved his backpack out into the hallway. The TA made it sound like he didn't think Evan had much chance at all of making it as things stood at the moment. He wished he had waited to take this course in the spring, when his internship was less demanding. He wondered if he could get out of the course somehow, and if that would affect his financial aid. He wondered what impact failing the course would have.