

COVID-19 SD/UD Grade Policies & Law School Admissions

The UW-Madison COVID-19 Disruption SD/UD grading option for spring 2021 has raised a lot of questions about how alternative grades may or may not impact future law school goals. Below is guidance to consider when making a decision about whether to use the special grading option. Keep in mind, this advice is ONLY in the context of applying to law school. For questions on potential impacts to your major requirements or degree progression, contact your academic advisor. If you want to have an in-depth discussion about your spring grades and the impact on your law school applications, [please make an appointment with a CPLA advisor](#). CPLA will be open virtually and taking appointments all summer.

What do law schools think about taking COVID-related alternative grades, i.e. SDs/UDs? What is the impact on my LSAC-specific GPA?

- Previously, in the spring of 2020, law school admissions offices were clear that they will not penalize applicants for having alternative grades instead of letter grades. While we cannot be sure that this attitude will persist through spring 2021, we believe that law schools are aware of the continued impact of the pandemic.
- Review of an applicant's transcript is part of the holistic application review process implemented by the majority of law schools. Choosing to take one or two classes pass/fail is not usually a cause for concern. Similarly, the choice to utilize special COVID grading policies for some classes will likely not raise any flags. But, applicants should keep in mind the appearance of overall trends. For example, if a third of your grades are replaced with SD/UD or pass/fail, it can be difficult for schools to get a reliable picture of your academic record.
- An SD will have no impact on your LSAC GPA *but a UD will be numerically counted as a failing grade*. [Under LSAC's Transcript summarization process](#), grades marked as "P" or similar (such as an SD) will not be calculated into your LSAC GPA. A grade marked as "F" or similar (such as a UD) will be calculated as 0.0 in your LSAC GPA. Again, under UW's policy, a "pass" or SD only applies to a C or higher.

Should I take an SD?

- Consider taking an SD or UD in place of a letter grade that will hurt your cumulative GPA. While law schools do take a "holistic approach" in reviewing applications, the reality is that two hard factors are significant in admissions and scholarship decisions: your undergraduate GPA and your LSAT score. If your goals include going to law school, it is advisable to take a protective approach to your GPA.

- Do the best you can. If you have the ability to use this semester to boost your GPA and continue to develop your academic skills – that’s great! It is always a plus to have strong letter grades that reflect your effort and abilities. However, CPLA and law schools know the disruption of COVID is significant for many. Please do not feel self-conscious about taking an SD.
- Give yourself credit for good grades. If your grades are in line with your cumulative GPA or upward grade trajectory, keep them. It is helpful to show schools that you continued to perform well despite difficult circumstances. While it can be tempting to SD everything that doesn’t give you a 4.0, keep in mind that schools will likely assume any SD grades are in line with your past academic history. What does this mean? If you have a 3.0 but are on a strong upward trend and you take SDs this semester, schools will likely assume those grades are Cs.

When I apply to law school, will I need an addendum for my SD grades?

- If you opt to take SD grades this semester, you should be prepared to write an addendum. While the need for one will depend on your circumstances, it is good to keep in mind when you make your decision.
- While law schools were clear that addenda were unnecessary for spring 2020 alternative grades, we are unsure if that will apply to spring 2021. What is different about spring 2021? First, not many schools are continuing to implement a COVID grading policy. Additionally, while LSAC put a notation on all spring 2020 transcripts about COVID impacts and changed grading policies, that will likely not be the case for spring 2021.
- UW will alert readers that COVID continued to impact learning and university policy in spring 2021. The memo section of your transcript will have this language, “A global public health emergency in spring 2020, summer 2020, fall 2020, and spring 2021 required marked changes to university operations that may have significantly affected student enrollment, learning, and grading.” But, it might be smart to provide context for the application reader.
- UDs almost always require an addendum.

Questions or concerns? Please schedule an advising appointment with a CPLA advisor or email us at information@prelaw.wisc.edu. We are available year-round, including summer!