

Understanding Cambridge University and its Grading Scheme

Samantha Farrell-Schmitt earned her undergraduate degree in 1996 from University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom (UK). For the purposes of placing this in the context of an American review, we wish to emphasize the reputation of her university and explain the grading system used in the UK and how it roughly translates to US scores.

The University of Cambridge (www.cam.ac.uk) is one of the preeminent universities in the world, founded over 800 years ago, and containing 31 constituent colleges and more than 100 academic departments. It has produced 91 Nobel Laureates, more than any other university in the world. The University of Cambridge is ranked by *US News and World Report* as the 6th best university in the world, ranked alongside Harvard, MIT, UC Berkeley, Stanford, and the University of Oxford (see <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-global-universities/rankings>). *Times Higher Education* ranks the university as 5th in the world, the Center for World University Rankings places it as 4th, ahead of both Princeton and Yale. Amongst the 31 colleges of the university is Homerton College, where Samantha studied. Homerton is generally regarded as the leading center for the study of Primary and Secondary Education in the UK.

As a UK university, Cambridge follows a grading system different to most US colleges and universities. Thus, the **scores and percentages** shown on Samantha's university transcript **must be read with an understanding of this distinction**. Samantha's degree shows that she has graduated with honors (honours, to use the British spelling). We are familiar with the US grading system, with grades for a given course ranging from A through F. In the UK, it is the entire degree that is assigned a ranking, called a *class*. These UK classes are (in rank order) as follows: First, Upper Second, Lower Second, Third, Pass and Fail. Another term for Upper Second is 2:1, pronounced two-one. Thus, Samantha's 2:1 is the second-highest degree class awarded, with the percentage of First class degrees so small - particularly so during the time-period of Samantha's study - as to surprise any American. In addition, her degree class awarded is a minimum requirement for entry to many postgraduate courses in the UK.

The Fulbright Commission – one of the most prestigious scholarship programs in the world – provides a conversion guide for UK grades, see <http://www.fulbright.org.uk/pre-departure/academics/marks>. They note that “percentage values differ greatly between the US and the UK.” The chart below is sourced from the Fulbright Commission. From it, we see that Samantha's scores are highly regarded.

| UK Class | UK Percentage | US Grade | US GPA |
|-----------------|----------------------|-----------------|---------------|
| First | 70-100 | A | 4.0 |
| Upper second | 60-69 | B+/B | 3.0-3.33 |
| Lower second | 54-59 | B/B- | 2.67-3.0 |
| Third | 42-53 | C | 2.0 |
| Pass | 38-41 | D | 1.0 |
| Fail | 0-37 | F | 0 |