

Brian's Guide to Comic Book Grading



The Art of Grading Comic Books

Thing to know

- Inspect the cover cover closely, looking for creases, water damage, and color fading. Then, check the spine for folding and tears.
- Count the pages to make sure none are missing. Look for damage on the pages, like tearing, creasing, and discoloration.
- Assign a 9-10 score to comics with no obvious wear, 5.5-8 if they're discolored but cared for, 1.5-5 if they're well-loved but readable, and lower if they're very worn. But use the rule of thumb that; to be a perfect 10 is unobtainable. This will make the final score more reasonable.
- As grading is very much a subjective exercise, it is all too easy for the novice (and indeed experienced collector) to allow wishful thinking and optimism to influence the appearance of a comic and make it better than it really is.

Examining the Cover and Spine

1. Look for cover damage.

When grading a comic book, the first thing you'll see is the cover. Take a close look, ideally with a magnifying glass, and make careful notes of any apparent damage, including:

- Bends, folds, or dents that warp the shape or surface of the book, but don't affect the color
- Coackling, a bubbling effect on the cover usually caused by printing defects
- Creases, more severe folds that remove ink or otherwise create distortions in the coloring
- Tears
- Moisture, water damage, or "foxing" (bacterial or fungal growth on the paper)
- Fading, lack of gloss, or "dust shadow" (partial exposure to dust or air resulting in uneven fading)
- Fingerprints, especially those which in which skin oils have led to discoloration of the ink
- Chew (rodent damage)
- Writing or other soiling of the cover.

2. Make note of attempts to repair the book.

Note that more sophisticated efforts to restore a comic book, such as color restoration or re-glossing are often undetectable by amateur graders (and sometimes even professionals), but

can also have a negative effect on value if noticed by a potential buyer. Such restorations should be noted upfront before attempting to sell a comic book.

3. Examine the spine

Less obvious but equally important to the surface of the cover is the spine of the comic book. Inspect it closely, making note of any of the following:

- Spine stress/bindery tears, small creases, folds, or tears (under 1/4 inch) running perpendicular to the spine
- Spine roll, a curvature of the left edge of a comic toward the front or back, caused by folding back each page of the comic as it was read
- Spine break, spine stress that has become a full tear (usually through multiple pages), typically found near the staples.
- Spine split, a clean, even separation at the fold, usually (but not always) right above or below a staple

4. Inspect the staples.

The staples themselves must also be inspected closely. Make sure no staples are missing at that the staples are in good condition.

- Look for signs of rust on the staples, as well as "popped" staples. A popped staple occurs when one side of a cover has torn right next to the staple, but remains attached by the paper beneath the staple. This condition can easily lead to detached staples.

Page Quality

1. Count the pages.

Once you've had a chance to thoroughly examine the cover, carefully open the book to examine the pages. For very collectible books, the use of tweezers is recommended to minimize contact with harmful skin oils. Your first step is to count the pages.

- Make sure there are no missing pages in the comic book. Missing pages severely impact a comic's value.

2. Note any loose pages.

With older comics, it is common for the center-fold pages (and sometimes other page as well) to become detached from the staples.

- Make note of how many pages (or "wraps") are detached, either fully or partially.

3. Look for damage to the pages.

In addition to damage caused by readers, paper stored improperly can easily degrade. There are several common problems with the pages you should watch out for and make note of:

- Tears, creases, or cuts (such as clipped coupons)
- Tape, glue, or other attempts to repair pages
- Writing or other soil to the pages
- Water damage, often leading to a stiffness or rippling of the paper
- Staple migration, a condition that occurs when the rust from staples stains the paper around it

4. Assess paper integrity.

Today's comics are printed on a higher-quality paper that withstands aging reasonably well. With older comics, this is not the case-- the quality of the paper is likely to have degraded some from age.

- Look for discoloration or brittleness. Especially in comics from the 1980s and earlier, the paper can become yellow or tan as it oxidizes, and loses some of its structural integrity.
- A certain amount of discoloration is expected and acceptable in very old comics, but the less the better.

Assigning a Grade

Comics are graded using both descriptive categories and a 0-10 rating system. If your comic is in flawless or nearly flawless condition, it might merit a grade of "mint" or "near mint." This condition applies to perfectly flat comics with supple paper, a glossy cover, and no obvious wear.

1. Consider a "Mint" grade.

- "Mint" grades include "Perfect/Gem Mint" (10.0) and "Mint" (9.9). These describe comics that have no detectable imperfections. A 10.0 book is absolutely perfect in every way. Very few comics meet this criteria, even those still sitting on the shelves in a comic store.
- "Near Mint+/Mint" grades include "Near Mint/Mint" (9.8) and "Near Mint+" (9.6). These grades describe comics that have only the slightest wear. A small number of stress lines and very slight discoloration are acceptable defects. Most people would consider these to be perfect, but the trained eye may notice tiny imperfections.
- "Near Mint" (9.4) and "Near Mint-" (9.2) describe comics that have minimal stress lines and discoloration. The spine and cover are flat. The cover may have a small amount of surface wear, but the colors are still bright. A 9.4 Near Mint book is the standard condition of a new book sold at a comic store as is considered "new" condition. A 9.2 indicates only the very minor wear, typically a minimal stress mark on the spine (non-color breaking) or other similar marks.

2. Assess whether it might deserve a "Fine" grade.

A comic which is well preserved but not "mint" is typically described as "Fine" or "Very Fine." These are comics that have been read and enjoyed, but with care. They may have some discoloration, but pages should still be supple and the cover should still be glossy and attractive.

- "Very Fine/Near Mint" (9.0), "Very Fine+" (8.5), "Very Fine" (8.0), and "Very Fine-" (7.5) are grades that allow for some wear, as they have typically been read a few times. A few stress lines are acceptable. While the cover can have some wear, it should still retain its original glossiness.
- "Fine" grades include "Fine/Very Fine" (7.0), "Fine+" (6.5), "Fine" (6.0), and "Fine-" (5.5). These grades describe comics with a fair amount of stress lines and creases. A low number of small tears and missing pieces, usually 1/8 to 1/4 inch (about 3.1 to 6.3 mm) in length is also acceptable at this grade level.

3. Determine whether it might merit a "Good" grade.

Below "Fine" is the grade of "Good." This is somewhat deceptive, as a grade of "good" is actually not particularly good, but more like average. These are comics that have been well-loved by a reader. Still, books in this condition must be intact and readable.

- "Very Good" grades include "Very Good/Fine" (5.0), "Very Good+" (4.5), "Very Good" (4.0), and "Very Good-" (3.5). These grades describe a comic that has all of its pages but is noticeably creased, rolled, and scuffed. Missing pieces on the cover can be as large as 1/4 to 1/2 inch (about 6.3 to 12.5 mm).
- "Good" grades include "Good/Very Good" (3.0), "Good+" (2.5), "Good" (2.0), and "Good-" (1.8). These grades describe comics that are in somewhat worse condition than the "Very Good" grades. The cover may have some missing pieces and the book is generally scuffed, abraded, and faded. Moderate spine split is permissible. The comic still has all of its pages, however.

4. Consider a "Fair" grade.

A "Fair" condition comic is ragged and unattractive. It may have pieces of pages missing that make the story more difficult to follow (e.g. clipped coupons that cut into panels on the reverse side of the page).

- "Fair" grades include "Fair/Good" (1.5) and "Fair" (1.0). These grades describe comics that are worn and in general disarray. Despite their condition, they still retain all of the pages and most of the covers. These comics may be torn, stained, faded, and brittle.

5. Give a "Poor" or "Incomplete" grade if necessary.

"Poor" comics are what the name suggests--heavily damaged. They may be defaced, torn, stained, or have missing chunks. "Incomplete" comics are those missing covers or pages.

- "Poor" (0.5) describes comic books that are missing pages and up to 1/3 of the cover. The comic may be brittle and defaced by other materials such as paint and glue.
- Some people will not grade a comic missing its cover, but some give "Incomplete" comics a score between 0.1 and 0.3.

THE PROCESS OF GRADING

These principles can apply to both American and British comics.

1. Grade from the inside out

Open the comic carefully. Lay it on a flat surface or hold it in the cup of the hand. Do not bend back or flatten out the comic. Check that there is a centerfold and that it is attached by both staples. Check for missing pages, panels or coupons that may have been cut out. Check for tears in pages, writing, scribbling or any kind of water or ink stains. Check outer edges of pages for any signs of browning or brittleness. One may check the smell of the comic for any hints of acidity or dampness.

2. Check inside front and back covers,

particularly opening the cover page to see how it strains against the staples which may have resulted in a slight tear at the staple. Check that the cover hasn't become detached at the top or bottom staple.

Older UK comics tend not to use stainless steel staples so rust is more prevalent. Rust can be so bad that the staples are practically disintegrating. This is particularly prevalent with British comics from the 1950s and early/mid 1960s.

Check for any unusual whiteness compared with the page color as this may indicate cover-bleaching or stain removal. Check for any staple re-enforcement.

3. Check back cover

for any tears and/or pieces out. Check for any wear or soiling along the back cover spine.

4. Check the front cover.

This is the most important part of the comic as it is most seen when displayed and liable to the most wear or defacement. The areas of most common wear are around the staples/spine area and at the corners. Check for any cracks or chipping along the right-hand edge (more applicable to American comics than British). Hold the comic up to the light and check the depth of color, the amount of cover gloss (more American comics) and any indentations.

Check dark blue and black areas for any signs of color-touch (more applicable to American comics than British).

5. Finally,

assess the overall appearance of the comic, checking for tightness and squareness of trim. Many comics were mis-cut or had off-center staples as part of the initial production process. American comics in particular can suffer from cover wraparound where some of the back cover is visible from the front, sometimes called white line or 'white spine'. On British comics look out for 'foxing'. These are orange/red spots that appear mostly on covers, sometimes quite light, other times quite heavy and very noticeable. These spots are spores in the paper, usually caused by storage in damp conditions. It can really spoil the 'eye-appeal' of a comic. Something else to watch out for - both US and UK comics can have 'dust shadows' across their covers. This is where a pile of comics has been exposed to some sunlight or accumulated a layer of dust. A line is left where one comic was lying across another one.

Notes On the Overall Grading Process

It would make sense, again for grading consistency, for page quality to limit overall grade. Brittle pages should allow a comic to grade no better than a GOOD, no matter how great it looks. Brown pages should allow a comic to grade no better than a VG. Tan pages no better than a FN/VFN. I believe that Very Fine is a very sharp grade and tan pages have no place in that realm.

Pages constitute the major part of the comic. A comic with White Pages is clearly superior to a comic with Cream or Light Tan pages. I believe that a more accurate hierarchy of grading can be achieved with the 100Point™ system which is crucial when dealing with higher grade key and super-key issues. The difference between a Very Fine Amazing Fantasy #15 with white pages and one with Light Tan (LT) to Cream (CR) pages is, in my opinion, immense.

Once the Structural Integrity of the comic has been arrived at, ignoring the page quality, the comic can be more accurately graded. Considering the front and back covers, the eye-appeal, the spine and (very importantly) the color of the inside front and back cover and how the pages are attached to the covers should give you the grade in the conventional 10 Point System. Considering the overall quality and color of the pages gives you that further refinement.

15 Point Grading System

This system works backwards i.e. {[15: Page damage] there is none. Put a 9} A good rule of thumb is, there are no 10's. This is using the train of thought that there are no perfect 10s.

A damaged page can, of course, be coupons cut out, coffee droplets....

1	stress marks	
2	chips on the cover	
3	slight surface wear	
4	Original Glossiness	
5	Cover flatness	
6	Staple discoloration	
7	Spine stress lines ~ ¼"	
8	Cover Tightness	
9	Cover soiling	
10	Cover defects – 1/8" – ¼"	
11	Pages missing	
12	Page coloration	
13	Page brittleness	
14	Loose Pages	
15	Page damage	
Total Score		

Divided by 15 **Comic Book Grade**

Modified New Kadia grading chart

		Free of tears at staple?	Inside pages	Flat	Cover free of tears	Cover Corners sharply cut	Cover colors reflect	Cover clean
		---- A R E / I S ----						
Mint	9.8	Yes	White	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
NEAR MINT/MINT	9.4	Yes	White	Yes	Yes	Barely visible blunting	Yes	Yes
Very Fine	8.0	No, but staples very firm	Off-white, yellow or tan	Slight bend OK	Yes, tiny indentations	1/4" max crease	High to medium	Yes
FINE/VERY FINE	7.0	Staples firm	Tan to Cream	Relatively	Minor interior tears at the margin	May be blunted or abraded.	High to medium	No obvious soiling
Fine	6.0	Staples firm	Yellow or tan	Bend OK	Yes, minor creases OK	Minor crease	Medium (fading)	Minor wear
Very Good	5.0	1 staple loose OK	Brown & minor tears OK	slight roll OK	Tiny tears, long crease or color chipping	Medium crease or 1/2" missing	Low or no	Medium wear; some ink / H2O
VERY GOOD	4.0	Minor to moderate	Brown but not brittle	Slight roll OK	Minor to moderate tears	may be blunted or abraded.	Moderate to extreme	Significant moderate wear
GOOD/VERY GOOD	3.0	Minor to moderate From 1" to 1-1/2"	Brown but not brittle. Minor to moderate	Moderate spine roll	Minor to moderate tears	Blunted or even rounded	Very low	fading and even minor to moderate soiling
Good	2.0	1 staple detached	Brown & moderate tears OK	No	Minor tear or major crease	Major creases OK	No	No, dirty
Fair	1.0	2/3 spine split or missing	Brittle & coupons missing	No	Major tears up to 1/12th missing OK	Corners missing OK	No	No, very dirty
Poor	0.5	Cover detached	Brittle OK or pages missing	No	1/3 + cover missing or severe rips	Corners+ missing OK	No	Severe stains / mildew

Reference:

- Comic Book Grading: <https://www.comicpriceguide.co.uk/features.php?id=10>
- Grading wiki: <https://www.wikihow.com/Grade-Comic-Books>
- UK Price Guide: <https://www.comicpriceguide.co.uk/features.php?id=20>
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