

A Few Words on Ratings and Grades

The rating of a climb is a subjective indication of the technical difficulty of the route or pitch to which it applies. All rating systems (apart from the British system) use the difficulty of the crux (the most difficult move or series of moves) to determine the rating, at least in principle. Often though, the rating is upped a bit if a climb is sustained (i.e. has a very long series of very difficult moves).

Generally, the climber who makes the first ascent determines, or at least suggests, the rating. Of course, adjustments after a few ascents have been made are not uncommon.

Apart from free climbing ratings, there are a number of other systems in use to qualify climbs:

- The [grade of a climb](#) says something about the seriousness of the ascent.
- An [aid climbing rating scale](#) is used for climbs with etriers and daisy chains.
- An ice rating is what you need when you're wearing an ice axe and crampons. (Page under preparation...)

The following table has a basic comparison chart for (some of) the different free climbing rating systems that are in use around the world.

UIAA	YDS	French	Aussie	UK	Saxon	Czech	Nor	Swe
1	5.2	1	10	easy	I			
2	5.3	2	11	m	II			
3	5.4	3	12	d	III			
4	5.5	4	13	hvd	IV			
5-	5.6	5		ms	V			
5	5.7		14	4a : s	VI		5-	5-
5+		5+	15	4b :vs	VIIa	6	5	5
6-	5.8		16	4c :hvs	VIIb	7	5+	5+
6	5.9	6a	17	5a :	VIIc	7a	6-	6-
6+	5.10a		18	5b : e1	VIIIa	7b	6	6
7-	5.10b	6a+	19	:				
	5.10c	6b	20	5c :	VIIIb	7c	6+	6+
7	5.10d	6b+	21	: e2	VIIIc		7-	
7+	5.11a	6c	22	:				
	5.11b		23	6a : e3	IXa			7-
8-	5.11c	6c+	24	:			7	
8	5.11d	7a	25	: e4	IXb			7
	5.12a			6b :			7+	
8+	5.12b	7a+	26	:	IXc		8-	7+
		7b		:				
9-	5.12c	7b+	27	: e5	Xa		8	8-
				6c :				
9	5.12c	7c	28	:	Xb			
	5.13a			: e6				8
9+	5.13b	7c+	29	:	Xc		8+	
		8a	30	7a :				
10-				:			9-	8+
	5.13c	8a+	31	:	Xc			
10	5.13d	8b	32	: e7				9-
	5.14a		33	7b :			9	
10+		8b+		:				9
				: e8				
	5.14b	8c		:			9+	
11-				:				
	5.14c			: e9				9+
		8c+		:				
11	5.14d	9a		:				

UIAA rating system

The *Union Internationale des Associations d'Alpinisme* (UIAA) rating scale, an ill-fated attempt at international standardization, is used mostly in Western Germany and Austria.

YDS (Yosemite Decimal System - North America)

The Yosemite Decimal System is the North American rating system. The first number in the YDS designates the **class** of the climb (always "5" for free climbs), the second number defines the difficulty.

Although the YDS is the most popular rating system in North America, other systems exist (you may have that old guidebook that still lists them). Some may have the NCCS scale (see below), others may have an old YDS that stops at "5.10" no matter how hard that climb is (my old Carderock guidebook had one of those and the "5.10" in there was corrected to a "5.12" when the new guide came out).

NCCS	F7	F8	F9	F10	F11	F12	F13	F14	F15	F16
YDS	5.7	5.8	5.9	5.10b	5.10d	5.11b	5.11d	5.12b	5.12d	5.13a

The French rating system

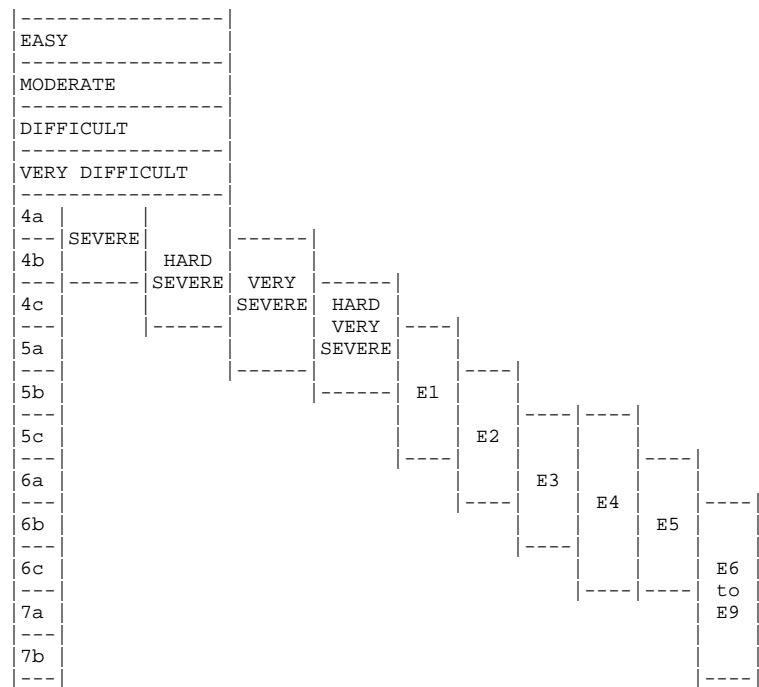
The French rating system is slowly becoming the international standard, at least for comparing really hard climbs. It's used in France (what a surprise), but also in Spain and Italy. Note that "+" but not "-" is used for further subdivisions.

Aussie - The Australian Rating System

Only the Australians - and the South Africans who also use this rating scale - can claim they climb a "10" with one hand tied behind their backs...

The British grading system

The British rating system - had you expected anything else - is a bit more difficult and a little less comprehensible than the rating systems used in the rest of the world. The Brits have two different ratings (they say grades): an adjectival grading and a technical grading. The adjectival grading says something about the overall difficulty of the climb. The technical grading says something about the most difficult move of the climb. So, an easy climb with a difficult move would have a relatively low adjectival grading with a high technical rating (like E4/6c). A sustained climb with long runouts and poor pro - a real British climb - but no real difficult technical moves then has a high adjectival rating with a low technical rating (like E7/6b). If you also know that a "difficult" climb is easy, that there are no technical ratings for climbs less than severe (eqv. UIAA 5) and that the adjective Extreme was split up into E1-E9, you're all set. The table below should clarify it all...



Saxon - The Old East German Rating System

The Saxon Rating System, or the East German (GDR) rating system as it was known before the Wall came down, is used in all of the former East Germany. This includes the formidable climbing area of the *Elbsandsteingebirge* in the state of Saxony.

The Saxon rating system, however, is not complete without the rating scale for **Jumps**. For those of you not

familiar with the *Elbsandsteingebirge* , some routes require horizontal dynos. Most often, that means standing on one sandstone tower and lunging for a hold on an adjacent tower - bridging the void between them. Those jumps are rated using arabic numerals between 1 and 4, where 1 is easy and 4 is a very difficult jump. Personally, I almost wet my pants on a "1". I don't ever want to find out what a "4" is like...

The Czech, Norwegian and Swedish rating systems

All similar to the UIAA rating scale, but with local differences.

The South African Rating System

Someone faxed me a list with an old and a new South African Rating Scale. The new one looked suspiciously similar to the Australian one. The old one, however was quite different. Here it is:

New RSA	13	14	15 16 17	18 19 20	21 22 23	24 25 26	27 28 29	30 31 32 33							

Old RSA	E	F1	F2	F3	G1	G2	G3	H1	H2	H3	I1	I2	I3	J	

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A Few Words on Grades

The grade of a climb is a subjective indication its severity, at least in the US. In the UK, the word grade is also used to indicate the technical difficulty of the climb, what is called [rating](#) in the US. Some grading systems measure the average length of a climb, others consider the general safety of the climb, etc. Below are some of the more popular grading systems. These generally cover both free and aid climbing, but not ice climbing.

The North American Grading System

In North America, grades denote the normal amount of time required to complete a route. This time is based on a team of average climbers using normal techniques.

Class I - Requires 1-2 hours
Class II - Requires half a day
Class III - Requires most of a day
Class IV - Requires a very long day
Class V - Requires an overnight stay on the route
Class VI - Requires a few days
Class VII - Expedition

The Alpine Grading System

Routes in the Western Alps are generally given an overall grade - in addition to a pitch-by-pitch rating. The overall grade says something about the general difficulty of the climb. It takes into account the technical difficulty, the quality of the belays, the nature of the rock, the exposure of the climb, the objective dangers, etc. The grading system uses letters (derived from the french words - in parenthesis) and sometimes uses "+" and "-" to indicate smaller differences.

F - Easy. (Facile)
PD - Moderately difficult. (Peu Difficile)
AD - Fairly difficult. (Assez Difficile)
D - Difficult. (Difficile)
TD - Very difficult. (Très Difficile)
ED - Extremely difficult. (Extrêmement Difficile)
ABO - Horrible. (Abominable)

The German Grading System

The German grading system considers the seriousness or *Ernsthaftigkeitsgrad* of a climb. This grading scale considers all aspects of the climb which have nothing to do with the technical difficulty: average runout distance, quality of the protection placements, objective dangers, quality of the rock, etc. The scale goes from E0 to E5. E0 is a normal route, with solid fixed pro and ample opportunities for placing pro. E5, at the other end of the scale, stands for a largely unprotected and unprotectable route with manky pitons and crummy rock. On an E5 climb, falling is generally a lethal idea. In most topos, routes with an *Ernsthaftigkeitsgrad* above E0 are marked as such.

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A Few Words on Ratings and Grades - Aid Climbing

The good news about aid climbing rating scales is that the whole world uses a single scale that goes from A1 to A5. The bad news is that there are many interpretations of that scale. It will all depend on where and when that first ascent was made.

For most purposes, the following - general - aid rating scale will do:

- **A1**: All placements are rock solid and easy.
- **A2**: Placements are still bomber, but the placements are awkward and a few difficult may be difficult.
- **A3**: Many placements are difficult, but there is the occasional bomber piece.
- **A4**: There are several placements in a row that will hold nothing more than body weight.
- **A5**: 20 meters (60 ft) or more of body placements in a row.

In Europe, where most aid climbs were made long ago, this scale may be adjusted downward. Put simply, **A3** placements are difficult, but will hold a short fall. **A4** will involve some body weight placements, but not necessarily many in a row. And **A5** is just unheard of. In Europe, **A0** is used to indicate that fixed (and solid) pro is in place.

In the USA, modern equipment and the unrelentless drive to climb ever bigger and more difficult Big Walls, has pushed aid climbing to limits that were unimaginable a few decades ago. This has also changed the interpretation of the rating scales. This is how John Long and John Middendorf interpret the modern aid climbing ratings in their 'Big Wall' book:

- **A0**: Hanging from gear, stepping on pitons, pulling up on nuts, etc. Everything that doesn't require aiders and can't be honestly called 'free climbing'. Also known as "french free".
- **A1**: Easy aid. Placements are easy and bomber. Each piece should hold a fall.
- **A2**: Moderate aid. Solid but often awkward and strenuous placements. Maybe a difficult placement or two above good pro. Falls pose no danger.
- **A2+**: Moderate aid, but with more tenuous placements above good pro. There is a potential for serious falls, but these will generally be otherwise uneventful.
- **A3**: Hard aid. Requires many tenuous placements in a row and pieces need to be tested before weighting them. There should be solid placements within the pitch, but they are rather few and far between. During a fall, up to eight pieces of pro may rip out, but there generally is little serious danger. Takes several hours to complete a pitch.
- **A3+**: A3, but with a dangerous fall potential.
- **A4**: Serious aid. Most placements hold little less than body weight and falls are serious affairs. Being 10 to 15 meters (30 to 50 ft) above the last solid piece is not uncommon.
- **A4+**: Very serious aid. Placements are often very marginal and pitches require many hours to complete.
- **A5**: Extreme aid. No piece in the whole pitch can be trusted to hold a fall. No bolts or rivets in A5 pitches.
- **A6**: A5 with poor belays that won't hold a fall. The leader pops and the whole team is airborne. No one sane has ever done this, and no one insane who tried came back to tell us about it.

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