

The development of rating systems for climbing began in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in Britain and Germany. Ratings used internationally today include no less than seven systems for rock, four for alpine climbing, four for ice, and two for aid climbing. A rating system is a tool that helps a climber choose a climb that is challenging and within his or her ability. Rating climbs is a subjective task, which makes consistency between climbing areas elusive. Of course, evaluation of a rating system is no more precise than the rating system itself.

The most relevant systems for climbs in North America are the Yosemite Decimal System (YDS) and the National Climbing Classification System (NCCS). In a nutshell, the YDS “categorizes terrain according to the techniques and physical difficulties encountered when rock climbing.” The NCCS describes the overall nature of a climb in terms of time and technical difficulty taking the following into account: length of climb, number of hard pitches, difficulty of hardest pitch, average difficulty, commitment, route finding problems, and overall ascent time. It is often called the “commitment grade.” It is notable that the approach and remoteness of a climb might not affect the grade. This is especially relevant to the North Cascades which are known for their challenging and rigorous approaches so much so that local guidebook authors have devised their own “approach ratings.

Source: *Mountaineering: The Freedom of the Hills* by the Mountaineers

Grade I: Normally requires several hours; can be of any difficulty.

Grade II: Requires half a day; any technical difficulty

Grade III: Requires a day to do the technical portion; any technical difficulty

Requires a full day for the technical portion; the hardest pitch is usually

Grade IV: no less than 5.7 (in the YDS rating)

Grade V: Requires a day and a half; the hardest pitch is usually 5.8 or harder

Grade VI: A multiday excursion with difficult free climbing and/or aid climbing

Class 1: Hiking

Class 2: Simple scrambling, with the possible occasional use of the hands

Class 3: Scrambling; a rope might be carried

Class 4: Simple climbing, often with exposure. A rope is often used. A fall on Class 4 rock could be fatal. Typically, natural protection can be easily found

Class 5: Where rock climbing begins in earnest. Climbing involves the use of a rope, belaying, and protection (natural or artificial) to protect the leader from a long fall. Fifth class is further defined by a decimal and letter system – in increasing and difficulty. The ratings from 5.10-5.15 are subdivided in a, b, c and d levels to more precisely define the difficulty (for example: 5.10a or 5.11d)

5.0-5.7: Easy for experienced climbers; where most novices begin.

5.8-5.9: Where most weekend climbers become comfortable; employs the specific skills of rock climbing, such as jamming, liebacks, and mantels.

5.10: A dedicated weekend climber might attain this level.

5.11-5.15: The realm of true experts; demands much training and natural ability and, often, repeated working of a route.

The French system, widely used outside the United States, does a better job with the complicated factors of the alpine environment. Its increasingly widespread use suggests it may become the international language of the future guidebook rating system. The main distinction between the North American and French rating system is that the French includes a seriousness rating, as well as a description of overall technical difficulty. The seriousness rating, expressed as a roman numeral, denotes such things as remoteness, possibility of retreat, difficulty of the approach or descent, and objective hazards.

I Short, relatively safe route; little belaying needed; not remote; with an easy descent.

II About 4-6 hours of climbing; usually some belayed pitches; skill in route-finding and hazard recognition required; descent maybe involve rappels or technical climbing; few objective hazards.

III A longer route, requiring most of a day; extensive belaying; possibly remote or difficult to retreat from; tricky descent.

IV A long day with much technical terrain; requires very good skills, experience, and fitness; complex descent; some objective hazards.

V A long, committing route, sustained and often remote; retreat difficult; potential for significant objective hazards.

VI A very long and difficult route that can be completed in 1 day by only the best climbers; difficult technical climbing with tricky or minimal protection; retreat entails danger; serious objective hazards.

VII Harder still. Like grade VI above, but longer. The best climbers take several days on these routes.

F **Facile - Easy:** Easy climbing, little or no belaying, well protected. May involve crevassed but straightforward glaciers.

PD **Peu Difficile - A little difficult:** Moderate climbing, usually requires some belaying, possible rappel on descent. Exposed scrambling, crevassed glaciers.

AD **Assez Difficile - Fairly difficult:** Belayed climbing, in addition to large amounts of exposed but easier terrain. A wide range of protective systems are needed.

D **Difficile - Difficult:** Climbing at a fairly high standard. D routes either involve many hundreds of meters of moderate climbing or a harder but shorter route.

TD **Tres Difficile - Very difficult:** TD routes usually have very long sections of hard climbing. Climbing need to move very fast and be very efficient to keep guidebook time.

ED **Extremement Difficile - Extremely difficult:** ED routes are further broken down into ED 1 to 4. The 1938 route on the North Face of the Eiger is considered ED 2.