

Your Grading – What to expect on the day

Introduction

When you enter the Dojo to begin your grading, you should have prepared yourself both physically and mentally so that you are totally focused on demonstrating to the Grading Panel you are worthy of being awarded the grade you are being tested for.

This article is all about helping you achieve a positive, mental approach to the whole grading process. If you know what to expect; if you understand what the Grading Panel are looking for in your performance, and you know from your physical preparation that you *really* can do all of what is about to be asked of you on the day then the actual grading becomes a pleasurable event to look forward to ... rather than one to dread and even avoid.

So we will begin by summarising the different sessions that makes up a grading:

Kihon	Basic Techniques
Kihon Ido	Moving basics
Kata	Gekisai Di Ichi, Di ni, Saifa etc
Bunkai	Kata applications
Ippon Kumite	One step (prearranged) sparring
Yakasoku Kumite	Pre-arranged sparring
Rensoku Bunkai	Reverse kata
Kakie	Hand-to-hand attack and defend
Sandan Gi	Three level sparring
Iri Kumi	Sparring
Hojo Undo	Supplementary training.
Spirit, condition and stamina	Under continuous assessment

We shall now take you through each session explaining what the Panel will be looking for. Please be aware the order of sessions may change.

1. Kihon

The instructor will take you through a series of basic blocking, punching and kicking techniques in a stationery position. The panel will be looking for precision, focused, powerful and quickly delivered techniques, with clear distinctions between Jodan, Chudan and Gedan. Remember the covering blocks, and make sure you keep checking you really have pulled your opposing fist and elbow right back on each technique!

At this early stage, it is worth digressing to considering the immutable Second Law of Newtonian physics, namely that $Force = Mass \times Acceleration$.

As you cannot change your body *mass* on a whim, the only way you can create a powerful block, punch, or kick (the applied Force) is to make sure that at the deemed point of contact, that part of your body that is going to deliver the technique is moving forward at the highest *acceleration* you can muster.

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Although it is unlikely that the past Okinawan masters were mindful of applied physics, they were acutely aware that if you first arrange the mechanical placement of your bones and tissue (posture), you manage your breathing (tanden), you use the rotational power of the hips and upper body combined with the drawing back of the other fist ... and throughout all this you remain relaxed and only tense at the very last moment at the point of delivery ... you will maximise the acceleration of the limb you are aiming to use to deliver the technique and consequently also maximise the power.

So it is vital that after each round of techniques, you check your body posture, manage your breathing, and try and keep as relaxed as you can. Tensing up always slows body movements down. Carrying out this self diagnostic check becomes even more important as you start to grow tired as you progress through the grading.

2. Kihon Ido

The introduction of Tai Sabaki (evasive movements) from side to side, just adds an extra level of complication to the initial moving basics. The points to watch out for here is that you maintain the correct upright body posture and make a real effort to show distinct transitions from Heiko Dachi (parallel stance) to Zenkutsu Dachi (forward leg stance), Hans Zenkutsu Dachi (half forward leg stance), or Neko Ashi Dachi (cats foot stance).

3. Kata

After the explosive intensity of the two Kihon sessions, it is far too easy to switch off and just coast through the first two Gekisai katas. All we can say is don't – the Grading Panel are not going to be very impressed if you give a lack-lustre performance or go wrong at this early stage.

You really do need to concentrate and deliver powerful and crisp performances from beginning to end. If you are not tired by the time you finish your final kata, the chances are you have not worked hard enough.

You will have probably gone through each kata hundreds of times without a problem before the grading day, but if you do happen to go wrong, it is not the end of the world. The grading panel will either consider the error unimportant in the greater scheme of things, or they may call you out to repeat the kata again. If that happens, keep your nerve and just go out there thinking this is your golden opportunity to show how the kata should be done ... and nail it the second time around!

One important element of performing kata as a group is to keep in time with the other people around you. You will stick out like a sore thumb if you get out of sync, and it is just as bad to be too fast and rush ahead, as it is to be too slow and fall behind.

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The senior instructors will have indicated the pace they like to see each kata performed at in the pre-grading training session. Take note, and follow their example, even if it is at odds with the way you normally feel comfortable performing the kata.

4. Bunkai

This is one area in the grading where having a clear and rehearsed approach to running through your required Bunkai for your grade can pay dividends. We have seen pairs taking turns to demonstrate one application at a time, working through a kata at a time, or working all the way through to the end of all their katas before switching. Unless instructed otherwise, do what works best for you.

The first demonstration of the attack and defence should be very slow, highlighting to the Grading Panel that you both know the technical intricacies of the application involved. The second should be at full speed and power to demonstrate you can apply the application in a more realistic combat situation.

Whichever way you do it, it is essential that you work with your partner to get the best result. Hopefully you will be lucky enough to get paired up with a familiar training partner of equal ability who will compliment your own skills. Sometimes you are paired up with a lower grade or simply a less-gifted partner. If that is the case, you just have to work twice as hard to get you both through this part of the grading. If you partner gets stuck, don't let him or her flounder. Just help them through the applications, because the quicker you both finish, the longer you will have to rest before the next session.

Our final comment is one that applies equally to the next few sessions, and is often overlooked by many students. Just remember the Grading Panel will not only be assessing the quality of the defence - they will also be looking at the attack as well.

5. Ippon Kumite

Do not be fooled by the apparent simplicity of this part of the grading. You must concentrate so you keep the proper distances, your attacks and blocks are precise and powerful, and you follow up the block with just one counter.

As in the Bunkai, each technique should first be carried out slowly with over-emphasised accuracy and technique. Then you should follow up with one at full power and speed.

The most common faults observed in this part of the grading are students not pulling their fists right back, failing to judge their distances correctly so their attacks and counters could never reach their intended targets, and the defender failing to step back out of attack range after delivering their counter.

These little points really matter in Ippon Kumite because they are so obvious when they are performed incorrectly. So practice to make sure you get them right.

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6. Yakasoku Kumite

This is an opportunity for you to demonstrate to the Grading Panel your preferred way of dealing with four basic attacks: a Jodan punch; a Chudan punch; a Mae Geri, and a Mawashi Geri.

The defender will be expected to demonstrate a lighter block more typical of sparring, followed by at least two quick and effective counters ending in either a choke, lock or take down technique.

You can expect the instructor to demonstrate a possible defence for each of the attacks, which you are welcome to follow. There is no reason, however, why you should not follow a defence sequence of your own.

As before, the first technique should be carried out slow, and then followed by one at full power and speed.

7. Rensoku Bunkai

Reverse kata is a stumbling block for many a student, simply because they have not practiced it enough before the grading.

The instructors tend to set a fast pace for Rensoku Bunkai to test your ability to still deliver distinct attacks, blocks and counters whilst maintaining your balance and correct stance.

In the run up to the grading you should take every spare moment to run through the sequence, even if it is only in your mind.

8. Kakie

Most students have a very good grasp of what is required here, and can successfully sail through this part of the grading without a problem.

Students should be mindful that when an instructor stands at the front, it is very easy to differentiate between pairs who are taking pride and working hard at performing Kakie, and those that are not.

From the moment you position yourself in front of your partner preparing to engage hand to hand, to the moment you complete the technique you should take care to demonstrate Muchimi (strong and sticky) whilst maintaining perfect balance and co-ordination of movement.

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9. Sandan Gi

You will normally run through the first two Sandan Gi variations, the only difference being the introduction of a Mae Geri in the third Gedan attack and defence.

You really should be able to run through these two routines in your sleep, which is why making a mistake at a grading can be very costly indeed.

So make sure you keep your stances in balance and draw back your fists. Really concentrate on delivering powerful attacks and defences, and differentiate between Jodan, Chudan and Gedan.

By this stage of the grading you should be getting very tired, and this element is as much about your resolve to keep going as well as attending to technical perfection.

10. Iri Kumi

This really should be the fun part of a grading, but so many students begin this session in complete trepidation because they don't understand what the instructors are looking for.

Let's start by stating Iri Kumi should be about *continuous* and *light* sparring where both sides of the pair can demonstrate their ability to continuously attack, defend and then attack again.

So the Grading Panel will be looking for you to keep up the pace and attack as well as defend from the moment you hear 'hajime' to the closing 'yame'.

If you are unlucky enough to be paired up with a really skilful partner who is running circles around you, be determined to stand your ground, keep your guard up and wait for the opportunity to get the odd counter in when you can. Your spirit will be noted.

If you are the more highly skilled of the pair, you won't impress the Grading Panel as much as you could, if all you do is chase your opponent around the Dojo for the entire bout. Unless you ease off from your attack, your opponent will not be able to attack you, which means you won't be able to demonstrate to the instructors you can defend as well as you can obviously attack.

And finally, there is no excuse for becoming too heavy and aggressive.

Iri Kumi is all about *fast* and *light* sparring. So if your opponent is careless enough to land a heavy attack or block, then be big enough to accept it. If they repeat the error then fair enough, give one back. But don't let matters get out of hand!

You will receive a warning about inappropriate aggressiveness from one of the many additional instructors that come on to the floor at this stage to keep control. If you continue to be too aggressive you may face the possibility of being dismissed from the hall and failing the grading.

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11. Hojo Undo

Students come in all sizes, ages and different states of physical fitness. You must all demonstrate you are fit enough to get through the Sanchin and Chi-ishi sessions if applicable, followed up by the more exhausting pad work, push-ups, sit-ups and squats.

There is no substitute for the hard physical training you will need to put in before the day in order to raise your general fitness level, but here are a few simple tips to help you get through this strenuous part of the grading:

1. Make sure you keep hydrated throughout the grading.
2. If you are lucky enough to have access to a sports therapist or nutritionist take advice from them about what you should eat and drink before and during the grading to maximise your physical performance.
3. If you are right-handed, start the pad work with your left.
4. Begin your push-ups on your fists close to your chest and waist. When you get tired, switch to your palms and gradually move outwards and forwards. By taking this approach you are switching from your arms' biceps to your chest muscles as you move outwards and forwards.

12. The results

It would be fair to say that the worse part of any grading session is waiting to hear the results being announced.

If your name is called out, simply stand, bow to the Grading Panel and mentally pat your self on the back for a job well done.

If your name has not been called out, you will not have been successful on this occasion. Although we can understand what a disappointment this may be, you must take heart. You would not have been allowed to grade in the first place if your standard of Karate was way off the mark. Take up the invitation you will receive to talk to the Grading Panel to find out where you went wrong and what you need to do to correct it. It is very likely your overall performance met the standards required but you just went wrong in one or two areas that can easily be corrected for the next time.

13. The Written Examination

You should have no problem passing the written examination if you have read the history of Goju-Ryu published on the EGKA and IOGKF websites, and you have a fairly good working knowledge of Japanese Goju-Ryu terminology.

The examination consists of 20 to 25 multiple-choice questions and takes about 10 to 15 minutes to complete. On most occasions the test is run during the lunch break just before the grading session starts.