








# The Discriminating Designer's Guide to Identifying Quality Gemstone Beads






Competition in the jewelry design business is keen so give your clientele every reason to buy from you. Your design is only as good as the material you choose to create it. High quality gemstone beads are worth every penny but don't waste your time or money, learn to judge the difference between premium beads vs. inferior quality beads.








First understand the quality of gemstone material used for making beads is not usually as high as that, which is reserved for mounting in fine jewelry and thus should not be equally compared. The beads most commonly found for sale in the retail market have qualities that range from a low-grade budget or economy material to an ideal or premium "gemmy" material.

Although the FTC has regulations governing honest disclosure in selling gemstones, which includes gemstone beads, there is no set system in place for grading gemstone beads. The quality grades issued by dealers are highly subject to personal opinion, experience in handling and level of professionalism. Letter grades are sometimes issued as a selling tool and are usually listed as "C, B or A to AAAA". Dealers will sometimes carelessly use word grades such as "flawless", "perfect", "rare", "museum quality", and "gem quality" in an attempt to convince prospective buyers. Because some dealers, either unknowingly or deceptively, quality grade their product with no regard to truth or logic, I recommend not relying solely on the written description or letter grade but rather use your intellect, training skills and your eyes.




For this you will need to develop a discerning eye and learn to quickly and systematically separate the different qualities. The following examples are taken from a random selection. They are not intended to cite the *crème de la crème* vs. the utter dreadful but rather reflect what's commonly available. Caution, by the end of this tutorial, you will never see gemstone beads in the same way. You may even feel as if you have new found super vision giving you the power to transcend into a discriminating gemstone bead critic, a savvy buyer and an elite designer!






Develop a Discerning Eye & Master the Fine Art of Grading							
<p><i>1. Inspect the following examples &amp; review the content several times. 2. Apply these steps when grading most any type of bead. 4. Visit any website/ catalog business selling gemstone beads &amp; test your skills. 4. Repeat this process until you can logically, honestly, tactfully &amp; accurately critique like a pro. [When you are ready to purchase: Buy in person when you can. Refer to a written record of average per-carat prices &amp; compare when you shop. If buying online, look at all the available photos of your chosen sample to make sure what you see is not a photographic anomaly. Try looking at the colors of the beads via different computer monitors to make sure your monitor is fairly true or order from a paper catalog, as the colors may be more accurate in print. Pay attention to written descriptions and disclosure. Ask questions if disclosure or photos are insufficient.]</i></p>							
<b>COLOR</b>	Color is the most important consideration in grading gemstone beads. Look for: 1. Pure color (primary, secondary & tertiary hues). 2. Rich saturation/tint (vivid/full-bodied without being paled from white). 3. Tonality/shade (vivid/ full-bodied without suppression from black). 4. Evenness (not suffering from distracting or blotchy zones). 5. Unadulterated (natural un-enhanced/ note that trade accepted enhancements are acceptable).						
<b>YES</b>		Left: The ideal ruby bead is translucent to semi-translucent. Its core color is as close to red as possible. It's richly saturated without inky tones & natural looking.			Left: The ideal emerald bead is translucent to semi-translucent. Its core color is very slightly blueish-green. It's richly saturated without inky tones.		
<b>NO</b>	 Inferior ruby pale, dull & opaque.	 Suspiciously un-natural neon color & possibly adulterated.	 Opaque, dull, pale & streaky color zones.	 Inferior emerald suppressed by dark inky tonality.			
<b>THINK</b>	 <p>How would you describe the color of this emerald? The seller's description quote: "They're really saturated with color and very sparkly!"</p>						

<b>EFFECT</b>	Some gemstones have special or phenomenal attributes that pop, dance, roil or play. Basically, the ideal quality is noted as strength, sharpness & evenness in formation & effect. Examples are <b>asterism</b> (stars; e.g. star sapphire), <b>chatoyancy</b> (cat's eyes), <b>adularescence</b> (billowy floating glow; e.g. moonstone), <b>dispersion</b> (sparkle; e.g. diamond), <b>pleochroism</b> (different colors comprising one color), <b>multi-colored</b> (different overall colors in one; e.g. bi-colored quartz), <b>iridescence</b> ; (e.g. fire agate), <b>labradorescence</b> (layered interference; e.g. Labradorite), <b>color change</b> ; (e.g. Alexandrite), <b>schiller</b> ; (e.g. Oregon Sun Stone), <b>tenebrescence</b> ; (aka color shift, chameleon or reversible photochromism), <b>fluorescence</b> , (glow under UV) <b>phosphorescence</b> (stay glowing after UV), <b>aventurescence</b> (glittery effect; e.g. aventurine quartz), <b>play</b> ; (e.g. opal), <b>orient</b> (soap bubble look; e.g. pearl), <b>Tyndall scattering</b> (positional billowy blue effect; e.g. scarce type of rose quartz), rainbow (blended colors; e.g. rainbow garnet) & <b>fire</b> (roiling effect; e.g. fire opal/ fire agate)			
YES		Left: The ideal Labradorite is richly saturated in core color with an obvious pop of directional layered reflected light.		Left: The ideal bi-colored quartz is richly saturated in core color with an obvious fade of one color into the next.
NO		Inferior Labradorite with dull core color, inky tonality & weak labradorescence.		Inferior bi-colored quartz weak core color, weak saturation, inky tonality & weak definition between the fade.
THINK		How do you rate these Labradorite beads?		

<b>CLARITY</b>	Degree of clarity & diaphaneity is an important factor in qualifying a material as “gemmy”. It is expected that some gemstones inherently have inclusions & other visual attributes, which ultimately give them character and make them unique. However, their clarity, diaphaneity & other inherent attributes should not interfere or distract from the beauty of the gemstone. See chart below for a few examples of category types & expect your beads to fall within the appropriate ranges.			
YES		Left/right: The ideal “gemmy” rhodochrosite is watermelon in core color, the diaphaneity has a degree of translucency & it may have some (bacon fat) effect of richer deeper hues to whitish marbling.		
NO		Left/right: Inferior rhodochrosite brownish, opaque, weak, blotchy, muddy, dark veins, lackluster & much facet wear.		
THINK		How do you rate the clarity & diaphaneity of these rhodochrosite beads?		

Type I Usually eye clean	Type II Usually slightly included	Type III Almost always included	Special Types expect some natural formations & irregularities especially in opaque material
Aquamarine Chrysoberyl, yellow and green Beryl except emerald Quartz, smoky Spodumene, all Tanzanite Blue Topaz Tourmaline, green Zircon, blue & colorless	Andalusite few Apatite Sapphire Garnet, all Iolite Peridot Quartz most varieties Topaz, except blue Spinel, all Tourmaline, no green, Zircon, most	Emerald Tourmaline, red and watermelon Ruby is usually placed in category II-III Kyanite Prehnite Chalcedony some Quartz some Rhodochrosite some Tourmaline watermelon Andalusite most	Rhodochrosite most Opal Chiaistolite Trapiche Emerald Labradorite Ammolite Agate, Jasper, Chalcedony Amber Jade Phenomenal Many Other <i>Note: clarity refers to internal cleanness vs. inclusions while diaphaneity refers to how vitreous or transpicuous a material is; i.e. ranges of transparency, translucency &amp;/or opaque qualities.</i>









<b>MAKE</b>	Make refers to the overall quality of workmanship & choice in material. Check for symmetry along the strand; proportion in cut & shape; accuracy in faceting, drilling holes & seating; plus matching in core color, tonality, & saturation. Check the vertical (long) view as well as the horizontal (face-up) view.	
YES		Left: The ideal peridot bead is transparent & olive-like in color. It matches from bead to bead along a strand in core color, saturation, tonality, symmetry, proportion, cut & seating (how each bead is seated evenly with the next). Proper seating is the result of accurately & smoothly drilled holes from one end completely through to the next. Make in beads is more important than most people realize. It makes for elegant draping in a finished piece. The opposite is detrimental as demonstrated below.
NO		Left: Inferior peridot weak, blotchy, color zoned & included. Notice the obvious lack of symmetry, proportion & matching. There are no two alike in the strand, the facets are not accurately joined nor symmetrically diamond-shaped. The beads range in proportion from pointy, flat, bulbous, diamond-like, square & oval. They are not well seated & appear to be drilled from one side to the other. This lack of attention to detail results in ugly designs, un-even seating, difficulty in stringing, heavy wear to a bead's inside edges, premature wear to the stringing material & possible breakage of the finished piece.
THINK		Left: What's wrong with these, so called, peridot beads? Look closely at the make. Now let's look at the odd color. Is it possible the seller enhanced the color via a photo manipulation process? The background color looks suspiciously too similar to the beads. This is a "red flag" whenever you can't inspect the beads in person.

<b>FINISH</b>	Finish refers to luster; which is caused when transmitted light hits a highly polished mirrored-like surface & results in light reflecting back to the viewer. "Lack-luster" is the term applied to inferior finishes that ultimately fail in delivering shine.	
YES		Left/right: Luster can be difficult to capture in a still photograph but the evidence of better quality finishing is clear (even though the photograph could not capture the moment of light reflecting off every facet, the photos are taken at some distance, the image is small & the bead on the left is opaque). Notice the distinct & sharp outlines of some facets as well as the many reflections on the surface of the background in the transparent beads on the right. 
NO		Left/right: Examples of lackluster. Notice the reflection is interrupted & the finish is grainy. The facet edges look worn & dull edged & they are soft-edged as opposed to sharp-edged. There is an extreme lack of attention to detail around the drill hole especially to the bead on the right. This obviously is the fault of the finish rather than perhaps a bad photo. 
THINK	 <p style="text-align: right;">How do you rate these beads?</p>	









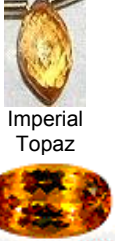

## Grading Terms & Defining Relationships







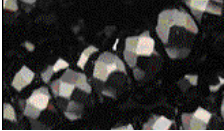


Study the information in this table for course of thought. There is a congruent correlation within the relationships, between high & low-grades of a gemstone material, which should be logical in succession & fairly predictable. This will help you to write sound descriptions for your finished pieces as well as spot possible misleading information when shopping for materials. Also, do use the preferred grading terminology & note terms like “gem grade”, “gem quality” “top grade”, “perfect”, “flawless” and, the single most misused term, “museum quality” are not accurately descriptive, credible nor professional when referring to beads. In addition, refrain from using terms like “rare”, “rarest of” or scarce to define a property unless you are absolutely sure of its obscurity. (“Rare” refers to almost absent in quantity & “scarce” refers to restricted quantities.) It is also advisable when writing a description to be cautious not to perpetuate possible misinformation; e.g. using information off another seller’s description or a possibly unreliable website on the Internet. Strive to spot misused language & don’t allow yourself to fall prey to it. Similarly, strive to keep your descriptions as true & concise as possible.

<b>Preferred Grading Terminology</b>	<b>Applicable Letter Grade</b>	<b>Defined</b>	<b>Most often used or sold by</b>	<b>Loose Material Market Availability</b>
Premium Grade	AAAA	-Remarkable -Exceptional -Noteworthy -World Class -Noble -Opulent -Superior -Top dollar	-Connoisseurs -Top designers -Top jewelry firms -Custom cutters -Wholesale firms & manufacturers catering to top jewelry firms -Elite few	Seldom to infrequently encountered in the retail marketplace
Ideal Grade	AAA	-Optimal -Preferred -Choice -Elegant -Rich -Select -Expensive	-Professional designers & jewelers -Wholesale firms -manufacturers & catering to jewelers -Some auction venues -Niche supply houses	Infrequently to occasionally encountered in the retail marketplace
Commercial Grade	AA+	-Above average -Fair	-Non-professional designers -Discount sales -Beading enthusiast -Hobby stores & Crafters -High volume producers -Discount venues -Most auction venues -Volume bead suppliers -Catalog sales -Flea market jobbers	Regularly encountered in the retail marketplace
	AA	-Average -Decent -Ordinary -Moderately priced		
	AA-	-Below average -Adequate/ -Mediocre		
Economy Grade	A	-Economical -Commonplace -Inferior -Tolerable -Entry Level -Second-rate -Very affordable	-Hobby bead makers -Arts crafts & hobby stores -Crafters -Discount venues -Volume bead suppliers -Catalog sales -Flea market jobbers -Obscure foreign markets	Frequently encountered in the retail marketplace
Bargain Grade	B-C	-Substandard -Fairly inadequate -Base -Ignoble -Inexpensive	-Occasional crafter/beader -Discount venues -Discount hobby stores -Many auction venues -Flea market jobbers -Obscure foreign markets	Generally encountered in the retail marketplace

OTHER	<p>Written disclosure should match what you see. This is not an issue of quality as it is a matter of <u>fair pricing, honest disclosure &amp; accurately describing the attributes of a material itself</u>. Take a moment to use trusted third party resources &amp; cross reference the gem material in question before you buy. There is a plethora of uneducated sellers in this field &amp; they are all too willing to pass on misinformation. Compare the written description with the nature of the material &amp; take into account especially the purchase price. Often times you get what you pay for. If you find a discrepancy, question the purchase &amp; diplomatically point out to the seller (they could have made an honest mistake). There are several sources available for beads so do not ever settle for less than what you expect and never pay more than what it's worth. Refer to the chart above (pg. 4) for acceptable grading terms &amp; information.</p>		
YES		<p>*Sky blue topaz *40cm strand/6-8mm *Faceted rectangle *AAA *Enhanced by irradiation *\$126.00</p>	 <p>Micro-facets. Notice the size &amp; reflected light.</p>
NO		<p>Left: Description as quoted by seller: <i>"I think you can see from the pics, (left) that these are top grade sky blue topaz rondelles. This is natural blue topaz, completely untreated, but the colour is still a definite blue. Beautifully cut as well."</i> [Graded AAA/ priced @ 36.00 per 13" strand of 4mm]</p> <p>In reality these are commercial grade &amp; considered below average for the material. Note the color is fairly good but lack saturation. The make is well below average, the finish is slightly below average &amp; they are not micro-cut as claimed (compare above right). Worse yet, topaz of this type is not natural as claimed but commonly irradiated as a standard form of enhancement to achieve this color. The triple A grade &amp; description is far from accurate. Notice the price more closely reflects the lower quality than does the description.</p>	
YES		<p>*Apatite *One 20cm strand/3-5mm *Micro cut *AAA *Enhancements/Treatments: None *\$76.50</p>	
NO		<p>Left: Description as quoted by seller: <i>"I am loving the quality of this strand of apatite rondelles. I am giving them an AAA rating as every stone is so amazingly clear and glowing."</i> [Graded AAA/ priced @ \$28.50 per 14" strand of 3.5mm of micro cut.]</p> <p>These are not micro-faceted, they have dull color, weak saturation, muddy tonality, poor matching, poor make &amp; poor finish. I grade them closer to B-C grade.</p>	
YES		<p>*Amethyst *One 20cm strand/3-4mm *Faceted *AAA *Enhancements/Treatments: None *\$39.00</p>	
NO		<p>Left: <i>"You will receive six amethyst briolettes for \$3.00. They are not top quality but a great color."</i></p> <p>Gemstones that are carelessly stored become "shop worn" (abraded/ damaged) especially to the facet edges. Better quality gemstone beads are separated &amp; stored carefully.</p>	
THINK		<p>Left: <i>"This listing is for 6 stunning eye-clean Sky Blue Topaz pear briolettes. I bought the highest quality strand I could find. These stones are absolutely amazing!"</i> [Graded as "flawless" priced at \$28.95 for six 9mm beads.]</p> <p>Topaz is a type I clarity, gemstone so the claim of being "eye-clean" should not be boasted nor a reason to elevate the price. We expect topaz to be eye clean. We also expect this type of topaz to be priced reasonably as it is a common adulterated gemstone. I grade it closer to AA. Also, professional graders &amp; the FTC consider the term "flawless" <u>very strong</u> &amp; the claim is reserved for use by skilled professional graders &amp; held exclusively for natural diamonds &amp; gemstones possessing the most exceptional, premium &amp; superior qualities--far surpassing anything you've see here.</p>	

Now it is time to practice. Examine the following pictures & the corresponding descriptions in quotes. Using a separate sheet of paper, rewrite the descriptions to honestly, logically, tactfully & concisely express the true nature of the product represented.

IDEAL EXAMPLE	GRADE THE BEADS IN THIS COLUMN	THINK
		<p><i>"Gem Quality Watermelon Tourmaline Beadstrand Very Fine top of the line watermelon tourmaline faceted gem beads."</i></p>
<p>Hint: if these were truly "gem quality" then the material would be faceted into gemstones for jewelry, not sub-standard beads. Or at the least, these beads would have been made with much higher precision &amp; truly be a top of the line, AAAA grade.</p>		
		<p><i>"These briolettes are simply gorgeous with superb inner sparkle. Top grade AAA quality fire opal with Amazing clarity and colour."</i></p>
<p>Hint: Notice the overuse of acronyms alluding to high quality. Pay close attention to saturation and make.</p>		
		<p><i>"Fantastic, sunny Lemon Quartz Briolettes...A Trio of AAA Gem Grade sparkling rich Lemon Quartz"</i></p>
<p>Hint: Notice the overuse of acronyms alluding to high quality. Pay close attention to saturation.</p>		
 <p>Padparadscha Sapphire</p>		<p><i>"OMG Gem quality super rare pappadasha sapphire!!!! This is the rarest of all sapphires &amp; is truly amazing color worth every penny at \$10.00 ct.! AAA grade world class beads!!!!!!!"</i></p>
<p>Hint: Notice the overuse of acronyms alluding to high quality as well as the over use of exclamation points. Pay close attention to saturation and make. What is in a name? Names &amp; terms that carry weight can be another reason prices may be elevated without logic. Should name alone be a qualifying reason for desirability, salability or elevated price? Note the lack of proper spelling and grammar. Does this denote a lack of professionalism &amp;/or lack of actual knowledge of gemstone properties?</p>		
 <p>Imperial Topaz</p>		<p><i>"Imperial topaz, with its distinct hues is perhaps the rarest topaz variety. Eye Clean with natural hues and inclusions." [Priced @ \$1.92 ct]</i></p>
<p>Hint: Pay particular attention to the weight of the name, claim to "rarity", price per ct., clarity type &amp; contradicting claim of being "eye clean" when clearly one can visibly see several inclusions.</p>		

 <p>Tanzanite</p> 		<p><i>"Rarest of rare Tanzanite beads are the best beads money can buy! They are only found in one part of the world and are getting rarer every day." Hurry up and buy these ultra rare beads while you still can!</i></p>
<p>Hint: This seller used the term "rare" Tanzanite in their description &amp; overly stressed it with no regard to make or any other qualifying reason for desirability, salability or elevated price. Should rarity or scarcity be the key selling factor? Is Tanzanite truly rare? Overuse of the term "rare" is careless, problematic &amp; misleading in many cases. Also be cautious of descriptions that attempt to imply a sense of urgency without merit.</p>		
		<p><i>"MUSEUM QUALITY STONES NOW REDUCED!!!! You will receive 1/2 strand of the very finest super gem quality Rare Swiss Blue Topaz faceted Pear Briolettes with perfect cut, clarity and faceting...AAAA Briolettes average 10x7mm with a total weight of 86 carats per 1/2 strand.. \$110.99 **Perfect For your high end projects***"</i></p>
<p>Hint: "A rat with a gold tooth is but a rat and chocolate-covered cheese is still cheese." Think realistically, would the Smithsonian Institution, or any other museum actually show this set of common adulterated topaz beads? To grade beads as "museum quality" is an extremely serious claim, highly misleading &amp; very frowned upon by informed gemologist &amp; jewelry professionals. Notice the price for the specimens above are about \$1.29 per carat. Whereas the world-class gemstone on the left is priced at about \$850.00 per carat, and yet, is not considered museum grade.</p>		
		<p><i>"100% Natural Earthy Gorgeous Onyx Beads of Highest Quality. Symbol of Elegance, Richness and Beauty."</i></p>
<p>Hint: The public seems to have a heightened interest in all things natural lately. The term "natural" is one of the top most frequently misused terms by uninformed dealers. It implies: <i>100% made by geological occurrences in the earth whereby possessing inherent mineral properties &amp; is 100% unadulterated by man but may be fashioned, that is, cut, faceted and polished by man.</i> Material typically enhanced with resin, epoxy, acid, bleach, dye or irradiation is pearls, coral, quartz, chalcedony, jade, turquoise, topaz, tourmaline, black onyx &amp; more. (<i>Black onyx is the trade name used to describe commonly dyed chalcedony. Actual onyx is a light-colored marbled-looking stone.</i>) It is important to note that treatments &amp; enhancements don't always have a negative effect on gemstones. There are many trade-accepted treatments, which have positive effects so why hide the truth? The important fact in this scenario is to offer <u>honest disclosure &amp; accuracy in describing the attributes of a material itself</u> so consumers know exactly what they are getting, therefore, are afforded options.</p>		
		<p><i>"Natural Ruby Quartz gemstone beads. They were sold to me as natural ruby quartz gemstones. Irregardless they are beautiful."</i></p>
<p>Hint: Are they ruby-colored quartz? Are they natural African ruby quartz? Are they ruby (corundum) in quartz? It is difficult to know exactly what they are. Whether you are selling bead strands or selling your designs to the public, be cautious not to perpetuate any misleading information you may get from your supplier. If you are selling to the public, you must take the responsibility of knowing the laws &amp; regulations that protect consumers. Ignorance is considered negligent. If you or your clients insist on strictly natural material then get savvy on the subject! Visit <a href="http://www.AGTA.org">www.AGTA.org</a> for a very useful enhancement &amp; care chart or visit <a href="http://www.ftc.gov">www.ftc.gov</a> for more detailed information regarding regulations in wording your product and complying with the Law.</p>		
<p><b>"It is pride in craftsmanship that translates into prestige in possession!"</b>  For content support, permission to reprint or distribute write to <a href="mailto:gemscope@gmail.com">gemscope@gmail.com</a>  Copyright 2009 S. N. Nellis, PG RG Gemologist Consultant</p>		