

General Education English, Middle Tennessee State University

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Rethinking Assessment

Classroom writing assessment should support writers in reaching their individual goals, growing as learners and writers, and meeting course objectives. General Education English Assessment should be informative rather than punitive and should help writers improve rather than simply cataloging a lack. Although we are often taught to point out weaknesses in student writing, extensive research demonstrates that such feedback is not helpful to improving student writing. In fact, repeatedly cataloging student error often results in exhausted faculty who have spent hours meticulously copy-editing, and defeated students who do not read faculty feedback. So, what to do? Rethinking our classroom assessments can help foreground learning, engagement and enjoyment for students and faculty.

Assignment and Assessment Heuristic

When designing assignments and assessments for your class, work backward from your course objectives, and consider:

- How can I scaffold writing assignments that build toward the course objectives?
- Which assignments will help students learn to write (focus on delivery)?
- Which assignments will help students write to learn (focus on invention)?
- What assignments will be flexible enough to engage different kinds of students and allow them to demonstrate their strengths (you might consider multimodal opportunities, for instance)?
- What will be engaging for you to read?

When responding to student writing, consider the following:

- What did you enjoy in the students' work?
- What was surprising?
- What questions do you have?
- If students have the opportunity to revise, what will strengthen this particular project?
- For future writing projects, what should they carry over from this project, and what will strengthen future writing projects?

Interested in Ungrading and Alternative Assessments?

Not sure if ungrading is for you? Don't jump into the deep end if you're not ready. Instead, consider entering at a place that feels comfortable. Ungrading displaces much of the responsibility for doing the work of the class onto students, and it changes the classroom dynamic. The following infographic highlights practices and pedagogy at four stages of entrance:

**Interested in
Ungrading?**



**Phase 1: Dip your
toe in the water**



**Phase 2: Put
both feet in**



**Phase 3: Go in up
to your neck**



**Phase 4: Swim
with the sharks**

Dip your toe in the water:



To see if ungrading practices might be right for you, start by turning some of your assignments into completion grades (pass/fail), or letting some of your low-stakes or invention assignments be ungraded.

- Practices:
 - Integrate completion grades for low-stakes or invention work
 - Instead of providing evaluative feedback on low-stakes or invention work, like a discussion board post, simply comment on the content of the post
 - Select some low-stakes or invention work not to grade; just give feedback during class or invite students to present their work to each other for the purposes of invention rather than evaluation
- Read:
 - Elbow, Peter. "Ranking, Evaluating, Liking: Sorting Out Three Forms of Judgment." *College English* 55.2 (1994): 187-206.
 - [CCCC Position Statement on Writing Assessment](#)
- Be prepared: Students may be uncomfortable with ungrading. There will be necessary adjustments for you and for them, many of which you may not foresee. Especially students who are traditionally high-achieving may feel frustrated to not get the As they're used to in the ways they're used to.

Put both feet in:



If you're on board with the ungrading pedagogical apparatus and theories, you might adopt feedback practices that further reflect awareness of the subjectivity of assessment.

- Practices:
 - Adopt a single-point rubric or a community-developed assessment tool
 - Use audio feedback to respond to student writing, focus on strengths and transfer to future writing opportunities
- Read:
 - Gonzalez, Jennifer. "[Meet the Single Point Rubric](#)," *Cult of Pedagogy*, 2015.
 - Hasham, Dana. "[6 Reasons to Try a Single-Point Rubric](#)," *Edutopia*, 2017.
 - Stommel, Jesse. "[How to Ungrade.](#)", <https://www.jessestommel.com>, 2018.
- Be prepared: Grading may start to feel arbitrary when you put both feet in the ungrading waters. Stick with the framework you've set out for students at the beginning of the semester, and actively reflect on changes you might make in future courses.

Up to your neck:



If integrating completion grades and changing your feedback practices felt right, consider adopting ungrading for your entire course.

- Practices:
 - Assign fewer grades overall
 - Adopt grading contracts that specify what activities students need to complete to earn particular grades
 - Adopt the Learning Record, in which students assign themselves grades based on the work they've completed in the course
 - Integrate reflection so that students take charge of deciding whether or not they have met the course objectives
- Read:
 - Blum, Susan D, editor. *UNgrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*. West Virginia University Press, 2020.
 - Kelly-Riley, Diane, and Carl Whithaus. *JWA Special Issue on Contract Grading*, Volume 13:2, 2020.
- Be prepared: Students may not believe you that you're not going to assign A-F grades based on your impression of their work. You'll have to reiterate your approach and be ready to describe it in different ways.
- Classroom Examples;
 - Feedback: [In this 2 minute video](#), Kate models a response to student writing. She emphasizes the work's successes and recommends further ways to strengthen the project. Her recommendations are conversational and imperfect, and they demonstrate appreciation of the students' work.

This video is hosted on youtube for ease of access for faculty. However, we recommend that you upload response videos and caption them within D2L. [This 3 minute video shows how Kate uploads a Video Note](#) within D2L for her students. If you would prefer written instructions, do the following: First go to the "Assessments" tab in your D2L course shell, then select "Grades," then select the assignment you want to respond to by selecting "Enter Grades" in the column associated with the assignment. To upload a Video note, select the pencil to the far right of the screen that corresponds with the student you want to assess. When the window to provide feedback opens, select the "play" button on the left, signified with a sideways triangle, and select "Video Note." Record the Video Note, provide a descriptive title for the recording, then select "English," and check the button to automatically caption the video. Then save your work.

- Contract Grading Model: [In this sample ungrading contract](#). Kate describes how students earn particular grades in class dependent on the work they complete rather than the quality of their writing projects.

This method of grading may be new to students, so you may want to integrate supporting materials to help explain your system. You may consider including an embedded video in D2L that further annotates your grading contracts, and/or you may use a dialogic syllabus that invites students to ask questions of your projects and policies. To further demonstrate the method, enter grades within D2L as quickly as possible and upload feedback on student writing. Although it may seem counterintuitive, offering quick responses in your D2L gradebook will demonstrate to students that your interest is in them completing the work and taking risks, and they will not be penalized for the relative quality of that work. Believe it or not, students usually develop better work and engage more fully with their projects when released from the anxiety of A-F grades on individual assignments. Consider ways to both explain and show your commitment to the grading contract.

Swimming with the sharks:



Moving away from assessment can be dangerous for many faculty. You may not have the autonomy to fully ungrade, and/or you might not find it consistent with your pedagogy, so these phases are not intended as a necessary progression, just a heuristic to gauge your comfort with ungrading and related practices.

- Practices:
 - Grades are only assigned as required by your institution
 - Students self-assign grades based on reflection
 - Assessment is based on project completion
- Read:
 - Lince, Anthony. “Labor-based Grading Contracts and the Opportunity for Failure.” [Crowdsourcing Ungrading](#), 2021.
- Be prepared: You may become an insufferable colleague and may not be able to understand why others aren’t doing the same as you :).

Annotated Bibliography

In each section below, “Overview of Ungrading,” “Theories of Assessment,” “Assessment Practices and Models,” and “Social Justice and Assessment” there is a brief summary of recommended texts in the section, and then individual annotations for each resource. Each annotation also takes into account the length of the source, recognizing that readers may select resources with which to engage based on length and type.

Overview of Ungrading in the Context of Writing Classrooms

Although the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC) doesn’t have specific advice for ungrading, their disciplinary recommendations for responding to student writing are a good place to start when considering making changes to your assessment practices. [The CCCC Position Statement on Writing Assessment](#) offers an overview of best practices for assessing student writing, both at the program level and in the classroom. Their statement on [Electronic Portfolios](#) similarly offers best pedagogical practice for a method often adopted for assessment in the writing classroom. Peter Elbow’s “Ranking, Evaluating, Liking: Sorting Out Three Forms of Judgment” is a must-read for anyone wanting to reflect on their classroom responses to students, particularly in the context of contract grading. Although this article is now more than 25 years old, it offers foundational and accessible theories for alternative assessment. David Buck’s OER project, *Crowdsourcing Ungrading*, and the 2020 special issue on contract grading in the *Journal of Writing Assessment* apply Elbow’s theories to the modern-day university classroom, particularly in light of the pandemic and a commitment to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Within this collection, Michelle Cowan’s overview of ungrading practices across decades and disciplines is a particularly useful article to situate current practice within the broader history of assessment. Finally, Jesse Stommel’s website is a treasure trove of great pedagogical advice, and this blogpost, “How to Ungrade” offers a useful overview of ways to enter into ungrading practices.

Buck, David. [Crowdsourcing Ungrading](#). (Booklength project with short, accessible articles.)

David Buck’s open access project assembles recent scholarship on ungrading, mostly developed during the pandemic. The project is purposefully unedited, so you will find some excellent articles (some of which are cited in this bibliography), but it’s worth keeping in mind that the collection is not peer-reviewed or edited. David Buck is still accepting submissions, so you might consider sharing your own scholarship for the project.

CCCC. [Principles and Practices in Electronic Portfolios](#) Statement. (Accessible position statement with headings to highlight material for instructors and administrators.)

This position statement, revised in 2015, offers recommendations for portfolio design and assessment from the flagship professional organization in Writing Studies, the Conference on College Composition and Communication.

CCCC. [Writing Assessment: A Position Statement](#). (Accessible position statement with headings to highlight material for instructors and administrators.)

This position statement, written in 2014, offers recommendations for best practices in writing assessment from the flagship professional organization in Writing Studies, the Conference on College Composition and Communication. The statement emphasizes the importance of designing assessment for specific, local needs, both in writing programs and in writing classrooms. Classrooms should emphasize a fully-realized writing process and formative assessments in addition to final summative assessments.

Elbow, Peter. "Ranking, Evaluating, Liking: Sorting Out Three Forms of Judgment." *College English* 55.2 (1994): 187-206. (Scholarly article written with accessibility in mind.)

In this frequently cited article, Peter Elbow identifies the different work grading is meant to do for students in the classroom. However, he suggests that we should do less ranking of students and more "liking," since the latter is more effective for improving student writing. Most current ungrading and alternative assessment recommendations in Writing Studies draw on this article. It has mostly aged well.

Kelly-Riley, Diane, and Carl Whithaus. JWA Special Issue on Contract Grading, Volume 13:2, 2020. <http://journalofwritingassessment.org/index.php> (Special issue of a journal composed of two introductions and eight scholarly articles. Introductions are accessible and brief; articles are based on extensive research with multiple citations.)

In the [Journal of Writing Assessment's 2020 Special Issue on Contract Grading](#), Diane Kelly-Riley and Carl Whithaus offer a useful overview of the eight articles included in their Editor's introduction. Asao Inoue also offers an introduction focused on stories that illuminate his own experiences of ungrading. He focuses on Peter Elbow's recommendation to "like" student writing, theorizing its influence on him and his classroom. The other articles address the impact of grading contracts on different populations, antiracist understandings of ungrading, and ways of understanding labor in the context of grading. [Michelle Cowan's overview of ungrading practices across decades and disciplines](#) is a particularly useful article to situate current practice within the broader history of assessment.

Stommel, Jesse. "[What if We Didn't Grade? A Bibliography.](#)" (Blogpost that offers an overview of alternative assessments.)

Long-time "ungrading" advocate and English Studies faculty, Jesse Stommel writes a popular pedagogical blog that addresses assessment and empathetic teaching practice broadly. In this brief post Stommel briefly chronicles his own learning about alternative assessment practices, cites accessible texts to consider if you are interested in a similar route, and makes a basic argument for ungrading.

Theories of Assessment

Laurie Santos, KC Culver, and Susan Blum each offer brief, accessible overviews of the theories that undergird ungrading practices. Each author has extended scholarly treatments of these theories that you might turn to for more in depth treatments, but these short introductions to their work are useful for reflecting on what and why we structure grading systems in the ways that we do.

Blum, Susan . "[Ungrading.](#)" *Inside Higher Ed.*, November 4, 2017. (Brief, informal overview of scholarly research for an interdisciplinary publication)

In this brief *Inside Higher Ed* piece, educational anthropologist and Notre Dame Professor Susan Blum draws on her empirical research with college students to build her case for alternative assessment in the classroom. Ultimately she recommends crafting assessment that moves students toward intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation, arguing that it encourages students to experiment more, create better products, and become an actual life-long learner.

Kulver, KC. "[College Can Still Be Rigorous Without a Lot of Homework.](#)" *The Conversation.* June 28, 2021. (Brief journalistic article about scholarly research.)

KC Culver's brief article sums up her research on understandings of rigor at the university and the relative impact on student learning and thinking abilities. Culver ultimately suggests that concerns with rigor manifest in a lot of work that doesn't necessarily improve student learning and thinking processes, particularly working students.

Santos, Laurie . "[Making the Grade](#)" *Podcast from the Happiness Lab* (Brief interdisciplinary podcast.)

This thirty minute podcast offers a pop-psychology overview of "ungrading" rationale. Drawing on education scholar Alfie Kohn, the host - Yale Professor of Psychology Dr. Laurie Santos, explains how grades impact our motivation and approach to learning. KC Kulver's brief article in *The Conversation* similarly questions what "rigor" means at the university, usefully problematizing some of the arguments faculty provide as a reason for their punitive grading systems.

Assessment Practices and Models

[Dana Hashem](#) and [Jennifer Gonzalez](#) provide discussion of an assessment tool, the Single Point Rubric, and the [University of Texas at Austin details another method, the Learning Record](#). If instead you'd like to read deeply, consider [Asao Inoue's book *Labor-Based Grading Contracts*](#). You can just read the introduction to get a feel of his theories and practices, but there is a whole book to consider if you're interested in a deep dive! Jennifer Consilio and Sheila M. Kennedy offer another version of a grading contract that you might compare with Inoue's. Whereas Inoue's labor-based grading is rooted in antiracist theories, Consilio and Kennedy approach contract grading from the perspective of mindfulness. Both of these articles are interesting to read as responses to Peter Elbow and Jane Danielewicz's hybrid grading contract that they detailed in 2008. The open-access project, *Bad Ideas About Writing*, has a section (8 short, accessible articles) devoted to reconsidering traditional expectations of grading in the writing classroom.

"Bad Ideas About Writing Assessment." In Cheryl E. Ball and Drew E. Loewe and [Bad Ideas About Writing](#), West Virginia University, 2017.

In this section of their open-access text, eight different scholars address bad ideas about writing assessment, including "Grading Has Always Made Writing Better," "Rubrics Save Time and Make Grading Criteria Visible," "Rubrics Oversimplify the Writing Process," "When Responding to Student Writing, More is Better," "Student Writing Must be Graded by the Teacher," and "Plagiarism Detection Services are Money Well-Spent." Each article starts with the bad idea noted in the title, and then presents accessible evidence from Writing Studies that disproves the idea.

Consilio, Jennifer and Sheila M. Kennedy. ["Using Mindfulness as a Heuristic for Writing Evaluation: Transforming Pedagogy and Quality of Experience."](#) *Across the Disciplines: A Journal of Language, Learning and Academic Writing*, 2019. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37514/ATD-J.2019.16.1.04> (Scholarly journal article with practical recommendations for the classroom.)

Jennifer Consilio and Sheila M. Kennedy use theoretical understandings of mindfulness to build grading contracts in their classroom. They offer theoretical underpinnings, classroom applications, and narrative about the impact of the tools they developed.

Elbow, Peter, "A Unilateral Grading Contract to Improve Learning and Teaching [co-written with Jane Danielewicz]" (2008). *College Composition and Communication*. 3. Retrieved from https://scholarworks.umass.edu/eng_faculty_pubs/3

Peter Elbow and Jane Danielewicz offer a hybrid grading contract that encourages students toward a 'B' in their classes. To earn a grade higher than a 'B,' students must demonstrate 'A' quality writing. Asao Inoue uses this model as a jumping off point for labor-based grading and further problematizes evaluations of 'quality' writing in Composition classrooms.

Gonzalez, Jennifer, “Meet the [Single Point Rubric](#),” *Cult of Pedagogy*; Hashem, Dana. “[6 Reasons to Try a Single-Point Rubric](#).”

The Single Point Rubric is a great option for faculty who are interested in alternative assessment practice but are unsure where to start. The rubric is formatted as a simple table with expectations in the center, specific praise on the left, and recommendations for improvement on the right. It’s also easy to add a column for students to self-assess their own work. According to Jennifer Gonzalez, *Cult of Pedagogy* creator, “**Teachers** find them easier and faster to create, because they no longer have to spend precious time thinking up all the different ways students could fail to meet expectations. **Students** find them easier to read when preparing an assignment. With only the target expectations to focus on, they are *more likely to read* those expectations. They allow for **higher-quality feedback**, because teachers must specify key problem areas and notable areas of excellence for that particular student, rather than choosing from a list of generic descriptions.” The Single Point Rubric offers a way to articulate specific feedback for students, and it reminds faculty to provide feedback both on what is successful and what needs improvement in a text. These two brief articles offer different ways to use the rubric in your classes.

Inoue, Asao. [Labor-Based Grading Contracts](#). (Booklength work; the introduction offers a useful overview of the text and an effective entrance to his ideas.)

Asao Inoue’s open-access book *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom* offers extensive discussion of anti-racist assessment practice and pedagogy, rooted in Hannah Arendt’s theory of labor-work-action and Barbara Adam’s concept of “timescapes.” For the busy reader, the introduction is sufficient in providing a useful overview of Inoue’s ideas, and particularly his approach to grading in writing courses. Ultimately Inoue describes his own decision to use labor-based grading contracts that reward students’ labor rather than the “quality” of their writing, an assessment that Inoue describes as ultimately racist, regardless of intention.

[The Learning Record](#) (Website with extensive support and description.)

Developed at the University of Texas at Austin, “The Learning Record provides an architecture and process for documenting student progress and achievement, based on interviews, observations over time, samples of students’ naturally-occurring work, and well-supported interpretations of learning across five dimensions. [...] The Learning Record provides a way of accounting for learning that is richer and more meaningful than standardized testing, yet offers much more consistency and comparability across student populations than conventional portfolio assessment. It can serve as the sole record of students’ achievement, or it can be used to inform and support conventional grading.” It is important to note that this assessment is student-directed. Rather than the faculty

member collecting evidence of student learning, students curate materials, reflect on their learning, and offer their own self-assessment.

Social Justice and Assessment

Ungrading, contract-grading, and labor-based grading are [forms of assessment that give attention to diversity, equity, and inclusion](#) in ways that traditional approaches to assessment do not. The two texts in this section provide a glimpse into how teacher-scholars in writing studies can advance social justice in their pedagogy and assessment practices.

Condon, Frankie, and Vershawn Ashanti Young. *Performing Antiracist Pedagogy in Rhetoric, Writing, and Communication*. The WAC Clearinghouse, 2017.

Chris Anders writes that “The collection of chapters that the authors have assembled vary between explication of significant racial disparities in education/curriculum and providing effective examples to help counteract these issues. The content of each chapter varies in perspective from research-based observation and narrative perspectives. These chapters are divided into well-considered sections. The first section focuses on chapters that not only inform the reader of different aspects of observable institutional racism but also call on the reader to recognize individual responsibility in utilizing anti-racist pedagogy. The second section focuses on the reader’s, likely, internalized racism and deconstructs different forms of privilege. The last section provides examples of anti-racist pedagogy that can be utilized in the classroom and beyond.”

Poe, Mya, et al. *Writing Assessment, Social Justice, and the Advancement of Opportunity*. The WAC Clearinghouse, 2018.

Chris Anders writes that “This collection of chapters is organized into four parts that separate different aspects of composition instruction and assessment as it relates to advancing social justice. The first section provides a historiography of racist and colonial practices through varying critical lenses including Critical Race Theory. This section also provides the positionality of this collection in an introductory fashion and prepares the reader for the following sections. The second section dissects marginalizing aspects of admission practices in higher education and how these practices can be deconstructed through various means as a method of decoloniality. The third section provides detailed analysis and recommendations that help provide the reader with opportunities to advance social justice in their pedagogy and assessment practices. The final section seeks to illuminate areas of pedagogy and assessment that require further research and scholarship. This work’s overall perspective speaks to educators trying to further social justice in higher education.”

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