



Forging a Path Towards More Equitable and Inclusive Assessment

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Path for today

- ◆ The meaning of grades
- ◆ Traditional grading
- ◆ Principles and approaches of ungrading
- ◆ Implications



Grading and being graded

- ◆ Please go to the link in the chat.
- ◆ [Pollev.com/jessicafreit486](https://pollev.com/jessicafreit486)

Unpacking the meaning of grades

“There is nothing ideologically neutral about grades”

(Stommel, 2021)



History of grading

- ♦ Grades have not always been a part of education systems (Schneider & Hutt, 2014)
- ♦ 1785: Yale ranked seniors as “**Optimi, second Optimi, Inferiores, or Perjores**”
- ♦ 1817: College of William and Mary’s student rankings:
 - ♦ *The first in their respective classes.*
 - ♦ *Orderly, correct, and attentive.*
 - ♦ *They have made little improvement.*
 - ♦ *They have learned little or nothing.*
- ♦ 1837: **100-point** scale (Harvard)
- ♦ 1897: **A – F** scale (Mount Holyoke)
- ♦ 1967-1981: Yale moved through 4 grading systems.



Problematizing traditional grading

- ♦ **Reliability** is questionable – especially using a 100-point scale
- ♦ Variables include:
 - ♦ instructor subjectivity, bias (Johnson, 2012; Quinn, 2020)
 - ♦ course and assessment design
 - ♦ students' individual circumstances
(time, responsibilities, health, preparation, etc.)
 - ♦ grade interpretation

Are we grading privileged performance or are we grading progress?

So... *what to do???*

There is nothing ideologically neutral about grades, and there is nothing ideologically neutral about the idea that we can neatly and tidily do away with grades.

We can't simply remove them without re-examining all our pedagogical approaches – and this work looks different for each teacher, in each context and with each group of students. (Stommel, 2021)

What is *ungrading*? Or *going gradeless*?



- ♦ “[Ungrading](#) is the practice of **minimizing or eliminating** grades in order to focus on meaningful feedback and student learning.”
- ♦ “[Ungrading](#) is an umbrella term for any assessment that **decenters** the action of an instructor assigning a summary grade to student work.”
- ♦ Ungrading shifts focus **from** numbers and products **to**
 - ♦ **process, progress**
 - ♦ **formative feedback**
 - ♦ **metacognition, reflection, learner agency**

Uncoupling grades from feedback

Why not give grades AND feedback together?

- ♦ “Despite the time harried faculty put into writing comments, the sad and enduring fact has been that students rarely read them.” (Kohn, as cited in Blum, 2020, p. 13)
- ♦ Butler’s (1988) study - 3 conditions:
 - ♦ Grade only
 - ♦ Grade + comments
 - ♦ Comments only
- ♦ Results:
 - ♦ Student interest and performance were **highest after comments only**.
 - ♦ **Grades and grades plus comments** had similar and generally **undermining effects** on both interest and performance.

Principles of Ungrading

- ◆ Voice and choice
- ◆ Metacognition
- ◆ Process/progress
- ◆ Trust



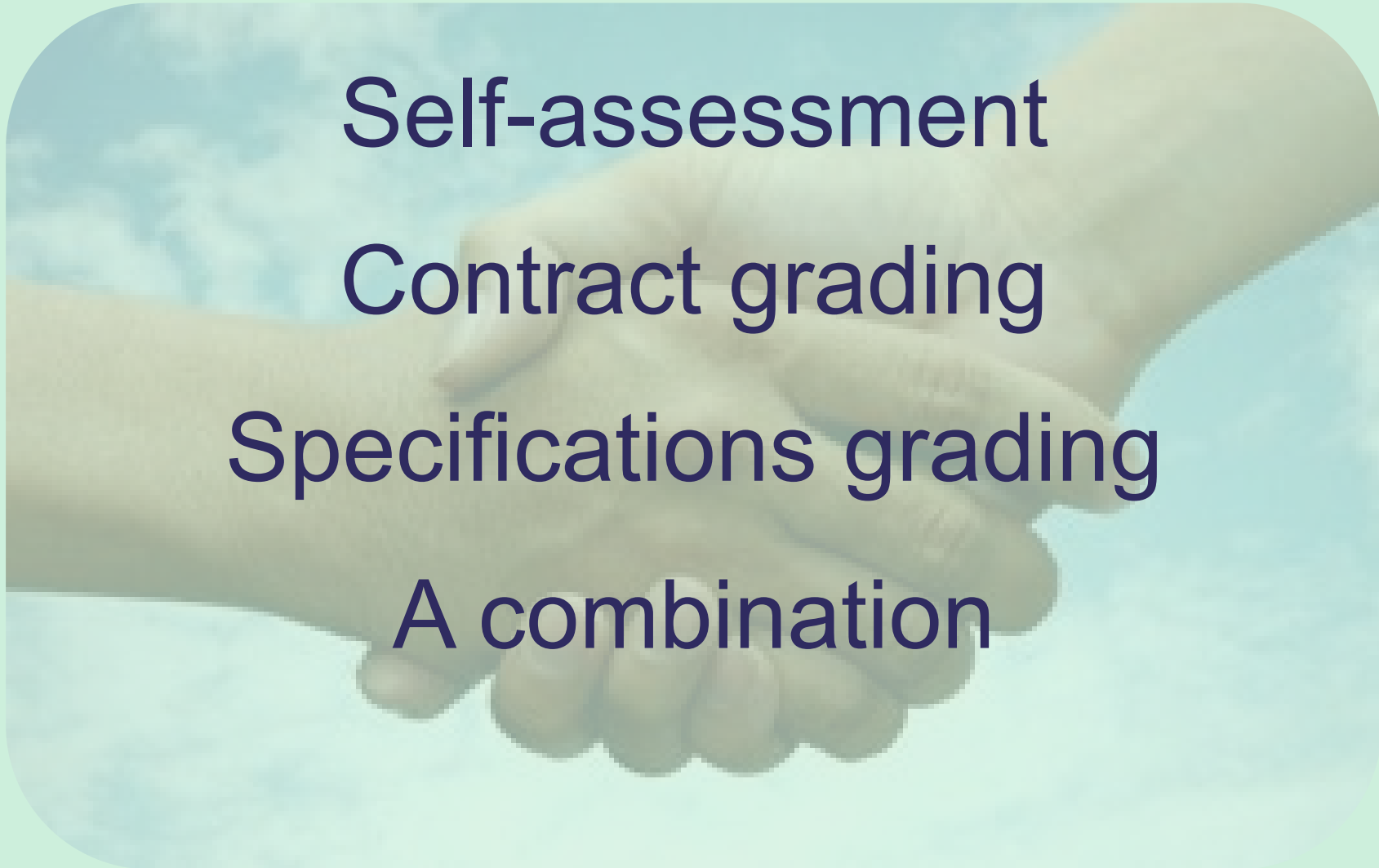
Approaches to Ungrading

Self-assessment

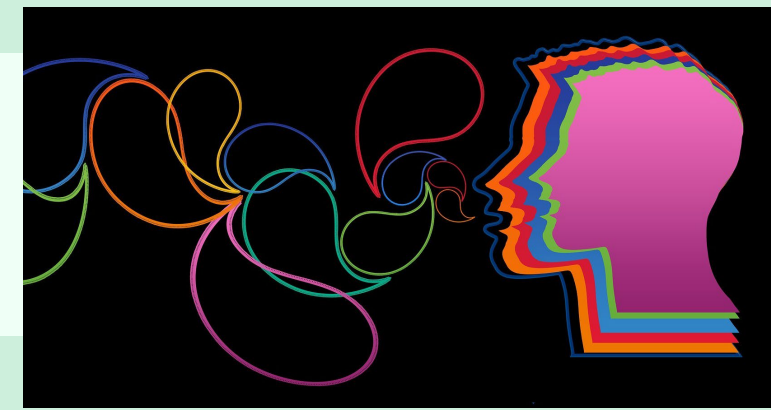
Contract grading

Specifications grading

A combination



Self-assessment: Including student voice and choice



[Jesse Stommel](#), a top pioneer of ungrading, is a faculty member in the Writing Program at University of Denver and teaches about pedagogy, film, digital studies, and composition.

His theory is illustrated in [The following excerpts from Stommel](#):

John Holt writes in *Instead of Education*, "[Competitive schooling, grades, credentials] seem to me the most authoritarian and dangerous of all the social inventions." **Agency, dialogue, self-actualization, and social justice** are not possible in a hierarchical system that pits teachers against students and encourages competition by ranking students against one another.

and

Amy Fast writes, "the saddest and most ironic practice in schools is how hard we try to measure how students are doing and how rarely we ever **ask them.**"

Self-assessment approach

- ◆ No grades on assignments
- ◆ Feedback only
- ◆ Prompts for student reflection and self-assessment
- ◆ Midterm / final grade proposal

Contract grading: Embracing diversity



Asao B. Inoue, writing professor and associate dean for Academic Affairs, Equity, and Inclusion at Arizona State University, has been widely influential in the area of [labour-based contract grading](#)

His theory:

- ♦ Teachers need to appreciate diverse ways of using English, and this includes not penalizing students for using dialects or aspects of dialects outside “Standard” English.
- ♦ When we are inclusive linguistically, we practice antiracist teaching. When we are not, we perpetuate **White Language Supremacy**. (Inoue, as cited in Corrigan, 2019)

Contract grading approach

- ♦ No grades on assignments (feedback only)
- ♦ Syllabus indicates what must be completed to achieve each course grade (e.g., A, B, C, D, F).
- ♦ The contract may involve:
 - ♦ Assignments (number, type, length, etc.)
 - ♦ Attendance (number of classes / days)
 - ♦ Labour logged (hours, mins / etc.)
- ♦ Ss choose which grade to contract for (sign/revisit)

Specifications grading: Valuing Learner Potential



Linda B. Nilson wrote the book, *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty time*.

Her theory:

In the current grading system, our students can bank on partial credit for just making a weak attempt. No wonder the quality of the work they submit varies radically. In fact, we spend hours judging how much partial credit to give and writing explanations of each student's errors and omissions to justify our subtracting points.

Specifications grading approach

- ◆ All assignments pass/fail
- ◆ Single-point rubric
- ◆ Bundling:
 - ◆ A: complete 10/10 assignments
 - ◆ B: complete 8/10 assignments
 - ◆ C: complete 6/10 assignments
 - ◆ D: complete 5/10 easiest assignments
- ◆ Revision attempts determined by instructor

My approach: specifications + self-assessment

Specifications grading

- ♦ 3 essential assignments (summary, critical analysis drafts 1 and 2)
 - ♦ Complete **or** redo (single-point rubric)
- ♦ Several smaller assignments (blogs, social annotations, peer reviews)
 - ♦ Meets criteria **or** exceeds criteria (**or** redo)

+

Evidence-based self-assessment

- ♦ Two grade proposal forms (midterm, final)
- ♦ Ss interpret where their work aligns with set grading criteria
 - ♦ 50, 65, 75, 85, 90, or other
- ♦ I respond

Grading criteria for my WRIT 100 class

Grade	Criteria
85% (A)	<p>>>> <i>This grade signifies that your course work satisfies all four bullet items below:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Achieves “Complete” for ESA 1, 2, and 3. (ESA = Essential Skills Assignment)• Achieves “Complete” for 9 or more of 13 total assignments (including ESA 1, 2, 3).• Exceeds criteria for 4 or more assignments.• Demonstrates critical reflection on work and feedback.
75% (B)	<p>>>> <i>This grade signifies that your course work satisfies all four bullet items below:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Achieves “Complete” for ESA 1, 2, and 3.• Achieves “Complete” for 8 or more of 13 total assignments.• Exceeds criteria for 2 or more assignments.• Demonstrates critical reflection on work and feedback.
65% (C)	<p>>>> <i>This grade signifies that your course work satisfies both bullet items below:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Achieves “Complete” for ESA 1, 2, and 3.• Achieves “Complete” for 6 or more of 13 total assignments.
50% (D)	<p>>>> <i>This grade signifies that your course work satisfies both bullet items below:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Achieves “Complete” for ESA 1, 2, and 3.• Achieves “Complete” for 4 or more of 13 total assignments (including ESA 1, 2, 3).
0% – 45% (F)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Does NOT achieve “Complete” for ESA 1, 2, and 3 AND at least one more assignment.

My approach to due dates



- ♦ The **Best-by Date (BBD)** = the “Assessment Due Date” in LMS.
- ♦ The **Grace Period (GP)**, is the period that follows the BBD (typically a week), in which you can submit your assignment without grade deduction or need to notify me.
- ♦ Work submitted after the grace period must be accompanied by a completed [Late Assignment Submission Form](#). This work may or may not be assessed.

My students' reactions 1



On the first day of this course, I was skeptical about the grading system but throughout the course, I noticed that the grading system really helped me to focus on my progress and potential rather than just focusing on performance and avoiding risks that can lead to growth

I like this system as it allows for the student to focus on the quality and depth of the work subconsciously as the student might not have to deal with the anxiety of a certain grade while doing an assignment.

I think that grading system is smart because you can't hand in any type of work it was to meet a certain criteria in order to get a complete

I Like it because it forces me to hold myself accountable and empathize with the position of the instructor.

My students' reactions 2



The grading system used in this course is ok i have no problem with it, you get chance to redo assessment

I liked the system used, and the meets vs exceeds criteria categories, however, I found it confusing to remember the assignments in which I exceed/meeted on.

It is better to base the exceed criteria not on the amount of work done, but on the skill and delivery of the task's content. I like the "meet" grading as it shows the person has followed and understood instructions. Additionally, "meet" is a good way of recognizing the student's effort without providing a sense of discouragement. Overall the system is fair and easy to understand.

Implications



Ungrading is not for everyone.

Starting small is recommended. Examine your pedagogy.

Crucial to effective ungrading:

- Willingness to trust students, give up some control
- Feedback practices that are manageable and meaningful
- Structure that has students reflecting on their learning and feedback
- Frequent communication about assessment design and its rationale
- Significant prep up front

Final Thoughts

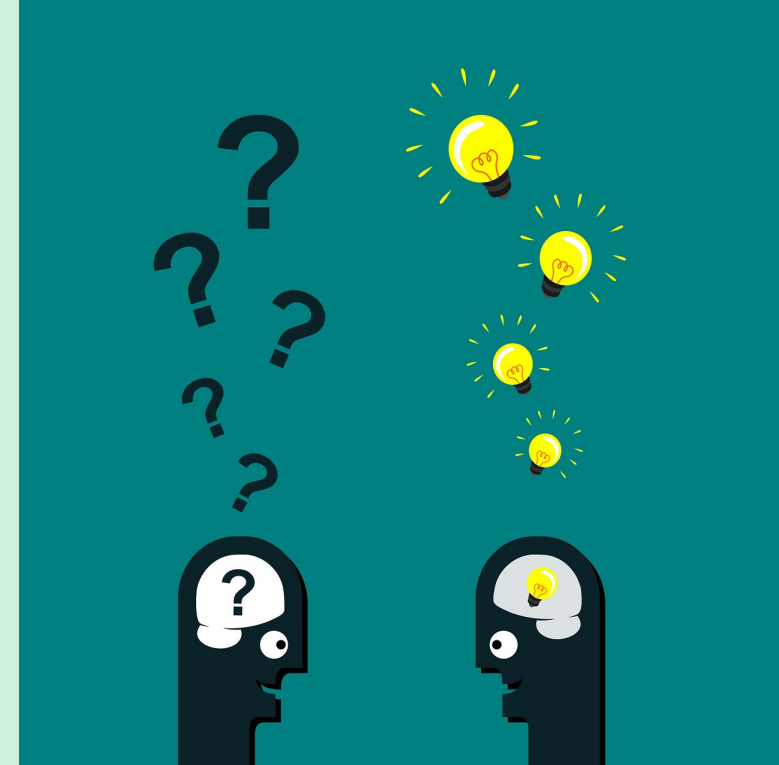
I will continue to use ungrading for these benefits:

- Decentres grades and authoritarianism
- Includes students as agents of their own learning
- Acknowledges individuality in learners
- Assesses what students do **during** the course, not what privileges they arrive with or without
- Promotes instructor freedom
 - from justifying grades in a range of arbitrary numbers
 - to focus on feedback – **time better spent!**



Closing Questions

1. What do you already do in your teaching practice that is grounded in any **principle(s) of ungrading?** (*trust, metacognition, voice and choice, process/progress*)
2. What is one thing you could do to enhance **learner agency** in your course assessments?



Thank You!

I'm happy to chat about **#ungrading** further if you're interested.

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