

Alternative Grading Strategies

A Quick-Reference Guide for Faculty Learning Communities

[Overview](#) • [Pros & Cons](#) • [Starting Resources for Each Approach](#)

How to use this guide: Each section below summarizes one approach from your reading list, lists key pros and cons, and links to a free video or online resource to watch or explore before or after your PLC meeting. For a comprehensive overview of all approaches, start with *Grading for Growth* by Clark & Talbert (the recommended base text).

Specifications Grading

Pass/fail against clear criteria; course grade based on volume of satisfactory work

Assignments are graded pass/fail (satisfactory/unsatisfactory) against transparently defined specifications. Final course grades are determined by how many assignments or "bundles" students complete satisfactorily. "Pass" is calibrated to at least B-level work, raising the floor for all students.

✓ Pros	✗ Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Reduces subjective "hairsplitting" and grade disputes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Front-loaded design work — writing precise specs is demanding
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Clear expectations give students agency over their final grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none">All-or-nothing grading can frustrate students who "almost" meet specs
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Reduces faculty time spent on partial-credit calculations	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Requires rethinking course architecture, not just grading
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Motivates students to meet a genuine quality threshold	<ul style="list-style-type: none">May not translate easily to creative or exploratory assignments

 **Resource:** [Teaching in Higher Ed Podcast — Linda Nilson on Specs Grading](#)

Ungrading

Removing grades from individual assignments; centering self-assessment and dialogue

Assignments receive rich feedback rather than marks. Students develop self-evaluation skills through reflection, peer review, and instructor conferences. Where institutional requirements mandate a final grade, it emerges from a collaborative end-of-term conversation between student and instructor (Stommel, 2023).

✓ Pros	✗ Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Shifts focus from performance anxiety to genuine learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Can increase student anxiety for those who rely on grade guideposts
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Builds metacognitive skills and student ownership	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Time-intensive feedback and conferencing demands on faculty
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Reduces grade-chasing, cheating, and gaming behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Potential for grade inflation if self-evaluation is uncritical
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Supports diverse learners by removing high-stakes threats	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Institutional GPA pressures (grad school, financial aid) remain real

 **Resource:** [Jesse Stommel — Ungrading and Alternative Assessment \(YouTube, 2022\)](#)

Labor-Based Grading Contracts

Grades reflect quantity and quality of effort/engagement, not judgments of writing quality

Developed by Asao Inoue for writing courses, this approach ties grades to the labor students perform — time on task, engagement, and completion — rather than to quality judgments that can encode dominant discourse standards. Rooted in antiracist pedagogy, it challenges whose language is valued.

✓ Pros	✗ Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explicitly addresses racial and linguistic bias in quality judgments	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Separating effort from quality can be philosophically contentious
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Rewards effort, persistence, and growth rather than prior privilege	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Requires clear labor logs and transparent tracking systems
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reduces power differential between instructor and student	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• May not transfer readily outside writing-intensive courses
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Encourages risk-taking and experimentation in writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some critics argue it undervalues development of disciplinary conventions

 **Resource:** [WAC Clearinghouse — Free PDF of Inoue's Labor-Based Grading Contracts \(2nd ed.\)](#)

Contract Grading

Student-instructor agreement linking specified work to guaranteed grade outcomes

Students and instructors agree in advance: completing a defined set of activities earns a guaranteed baseline grade (typically a B), while higher grades require additional or exemplary work. Contracts can be unilateral (instructor-set) or negotiated collaboratively with students.

✓ Pros	✗ Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Makes grading criteria transparent and mutually agreed upon	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Negotiated contracts require significant facilitation time
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reduces anxiety — students know exactly what earns each grade	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Risk of students doing minimum work to "lock in" a B
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Positions the classroom as a more democratic, agentic space	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Determining what counts as "exemplary" work for higher grades remains subjective
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Can be scaled or adapted without a full course redesign	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• May conflict with departmental or accreditation standards

 **Resource:** [St. Olaf CILA — Sample Grading Contracts Collection](#)

Standards-Based & Mastery Grading

Grades reflect demonstrated mastery of specific learning outcomes; reassessment encouraged

Rather than averaging points across assignments, grades reflect a student's demonstrated mastery of clearly defined learning standards, often using a 4-point or descriptive scale (Beginning, Developing, Proficient, Advanced). Students may reassess to demonstrate growth, and recent evidence of mastery supersedes earlier attempts.

✓ Pros	✗ Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grades communicate exactly what students know and can do 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Significant up-front work to define and align standards
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Multiple reassessment opportunities support a growth mindset 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Managing reassessments can be logistically complex
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Separates academic performance from behaviors like tardiness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Translating mastery levels to transcript letter grades is non-trivial
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strong research base; widely used across K–12 and growing in HE 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can be time-consuming for faculty, especially in large courses

 **Resource:** [Grading for Growth Blog — Standards-Based Grading in Higher Education](#)

Portfolio-Based Assessment

Curated collection of work over time; grade based on the whole, emphasizing growth

Students compile and curate evidence of their learning across the course or program, often with reflective commentary that makes their thinking visible. Final grades are based on the portfolio as a whole, centering process, revision, and student agency rather than any single high-stakes assignment.

✓ Pros	✗ Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Captures growth and process, not just endpoint performance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> End-of-term portfolio grading creates a heavy grading crunch
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourages revision, reflection, and metacognitive development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Students may procrastinate on portfolio curation until too late
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gives students voice and choice in demonstrating competency 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Requires students to have strong self-regulation skills
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Authentic assessment well-suited to writing, arts, and professional programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Digital portfolios add technical overhead for both faculty and students

 **Resource:** [University of Hawaii at Manoa — Guide to Portfolio Assessment](#)

Equitable Grading

Reforming traditional grading to make it accurate, bias-resistant, and motivational

Popularized by Joe Feldman, equitable grading does not replace traditional letter grades but reforms the practices behind them. It targets inaccurate, biased practices (averaging all scores, including homework in grades, using a 0–100 scale, penalizing late work regardless of context) and replaces them with research-backed alternatives organized around three pillars: accuracy, bias-resistance, and motivation.

✓ Pros	✗ Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Works within existing institutional grading structures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Critics argue some reforms (e.g., no late penalties) are difficult to sustain
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Three-pillar framework is practical and actionable for most faculty 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Requires changes to gradebook software and policy norms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research shows it narrows equity gaps for underrepresented students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The 0–4 scale can be unfamiliar to students and parents

- Allows retakes and most-recent evidence to replace penalty-based systems

- Implementation fidelity varies widely; piecemeal adoption may not yield equity gains



Resource: [Harvard EdCast — Joe Feldman on Grading for Equity \(Podcast/Audio\)](#)

Resource compiled from: [Alternative Grading Strategies: A Reading List for Faculty Learning Communities](#)