

Syllabus: Alternatives Grading Approaches

Organized by Christina Moore, Associate Director of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at Oakland University (cmamoore@oakland.edu).

Whether in number or letter form, grades seem like an automatic, inevitable part of education, a deceptively neutral and objective way of assessing student learning. In reality and under greater scrutiny, grades often codify our own biases of what makes a paper a C instead of a B. When we try to increase transparency with details rubrics with attached point values, it may not seem quite right, and students focus so much on the grade that they are no longer interested in the actual learning. Students are frustrated at trying to crack the code, and instructors are frustrated that students only seem to care about the points.

Many faculty have reconsidered grading practices to minimize the dread between themselves and their students and center the learning itself. “Ungrading” has become a popularized term (see Stommel, n.d. and Blum, 2020), while more specific forms of ungrading include labor-based contract grading (see Inoue, n.d. and Davidson, 2011) and specifications grading (Nilson, 2015).

Learning Together

The Grading Conference Online

From [The Grading Conference website](#): “The Grading Conference is a place where faculty join together to learn about grading practices that best support student learning, promote diversity, equity and inclusion in the classroom, and enhance student and faculty classroom experiences. Now in its fourth year, the purpose of the conference is to support instructors as they strive to challenge traditional grading practices that have been shown to be damaging to students and their learning.”

Cost is \$0-50, and support can be provided by the [Senate Teaching and Learning Committee’s Educational Development Grant](#).

PREVIOUS OPPORTUNITIES

CETL Learning Community: Unlearning Grading

[Join the Unlearning Grading Learning Community by enrolling in the group eSpace!](#)
Enrolling yourself will allow you to receive messages and view resources.

The group focuses on developing assignments that encourage students to reflect on their own learning; designing assessment methods that emphasize evaluative, qualitative feedback to aid continued student learning; promoting collaborative learning and peer assessment in the classroom; and developing methods for intrinsic learning motivation.

Informal Discussions

In April 2023 CETL facilitated two sessions on Zoom based on the Questions to Consider below.

- Discussion 1: Monday, April 10, 1-2pm
- Discussion 2: Monday, April 24, 12-1pm

Questions to Consider

1. What falls short in traditional grading systems? How can alternative grading approaches mitigate these issues?
2. How can one implement alternative grading approaches in courses and disciplines that heavily rely on standardized tests (e.g. large courses, STEM courses)?
3. How does one prepare students for alternative grading approaches? Why might students resist such approaches, and how can they be successfully implemented with students?

Symposium Keynote: What Do I Do after the Alternative Grading Keynote?

David Clark, co-author of [Grading for Growth](#), mathematics professor at GVSU

[Watch the keynote recording \(50 minutes\)](#). This keynote took place live on May 5, 2023.

 What do I do after the keynote? - Slides  What do I do after the keynote? - Resources

Learning Materials

[CETL Teaching Tips on alternative grading](#). Includes an [introduction to alternative grading approaches](#) and three faculty experiences with ungrading and labor-based grading.

From [Grading for Growth](#) Blog

While I have found Clark and Talbert's *Grading for Growth* work to be discipline-flexible, both come from a mathematics perspective and their guest posts also tend to come from people in STEM, so I hope these posts show alternative grading approaches within STEM.

1. [An Alternative Grading Glossary](#)
2. [Finding common ground with grading systems](#)
3. [What to do before you do alternative grading](#)
4. [Three steps for getting started with alternative grading](#)
5. [Small Alternative Grading](#)
6. [Planning for grading for growth: Building the structure](#)
7. [What to expect when you're alternatively assessing](#)
8. [Principles: What do you do when you don't know what to do?](#)

9. [When is a number not a number? A statistical case against points-based grading](#)
10. [How to write standards: A brief guide to one of the central components of alternative grading](#)
11. [What is Normed Grading and Why is it Necessary?](#)
12. [Rigor: Seriously, what does that even mean? Anything?](#)
13. [Abundance and Scarcity: Spicy takes from Benjamin Bloom](#)
14. [How specifications grading changed my view of academic dishonesty](#)

Leading Voices

Clark, D., & Talbert, R. (2023). *Grading for Growth: A Guide to Alternative Grading Practices that Promote Authentic Learning and Student Engagement in Higher Education*. Routledge. [Grading for Growth available on the CETL library](#).

Blum, S., Ed. (2020). *Ungrading: Why rating students undermines learning (and what to do instead)*. West Virginia Press. [Access Ungrading book through Kresge Library](#).

Davidson, C. (2011, January 3). [Contract grading + peer review: Here's how it works](#). HASTAC: Changing the Way We Teach + Learn [blog].

Feldman, J. (2018). *Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms*. Corwin. [Grading for Equity available online through Kresge](#) and available in the [CETL Book Library](#).

Gibbs, Laura. 2020. "Let's Talk About Grading." In *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)*, ed. Susan D. Blum, and Alfie Kohn, 91–104. Morgantown: West Virginia University Press.

Inoue, A. (n.d.). [Labor-Based Grading Contract Resources](#). Asao B. Inoue's Infrequent Words [blog].

Kohn, A. (2011). [The case against grades](#). *Educational Leadership*.

Nilson, L. B. (2015). *Specifications grading: Restoring rigor, motivating students, and saving faculty time*. Sterling, VA: Stylus. [Access Specifications grading book through Kresge Library](#).

Schinske, Jeffrey, and Kimberly Tanner. 2014. "[Teaching More By Grading Less \(or Differently\)](#)." *CBE Life Sciences Education* 13 (2): 159–166. <https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.cbe-14-03-0054>

Stommel, J. (n.d.). [Jesse Stommel Blog](#). (includes multiple posts on ungrading). Foundational pieces include [Why I Don't Grade](#) and [How to Ungrade](#).

Other Recommended Reads

Carillo, E. C. (2021). *The hidden inequities in labor-based contract grading*. University Press of Colorado

[Ungrading-themed Issue of Zeal: A Journal for the Liberal Arts 1\(2\)](#)

Research

Brookhart, S. M.; Guskey, T. R.; Bowers, A. J.; McMillan, J. H. (2016). [A century of grading research: Meaning and value in the most common educational measure](#). *Review of Educational Research*, 86(4), 803-848. doi: 10.3102/0034654316672069

Butler, R., & Nisan, M. (1986). [Effects of no feedback, task-related comments, and grades on intrinsic motivation and performance](#). *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 78(3), 210-216. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0663.78.3.210>

Discipline-Specific Perspectives

History

Clossey, Luke & Souman, Esther (2021). [Evaluating Without Grading: Encouraging Students to Master Skills with Specifications Grading](#). *Perspectives on History* 59(7).

Math

Bagley, S. (2020, August 13). [TMWYF: Ungrading as resistance \(Spencer Bagley\)](#). Talk Math with Your Friends [YouTube Channel].

Campbell, Robert, Clark, David, & O'Shaughnessy, Jessica (2020). [Introduction to the Special Issue on Implementing Mastery Grading in the Undergraduate Mathematics Classroom](#). *PRIMUS*, 30(8-10), 837-848. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10511970.2020.1778824>

Owens, Kate (2015). [A Beginner's Guide to Standards-Based Grading](#). AMS Blog on Teaching and Learning Mathematics. <https://blogs.ams.org/matheducation/2015/11/20/a-beginners-guideto-standards-based-grading/>.

Su, F. (2020, April 26). [7 Exam Questions for a Pandemic \(or any other time\)](#). Francis Su blog.

Chemistry

Bowen, R. S., & Cooper, M. M. (2021). [Grading on a curve as a systemic issue of equity in chemistry education](#). *Journal of Chemistry Education*, 99(1), 185-194. <https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.jchemed.1c00369>

Howitz, W. J., McKnelly, K. J., & Link, R. D. (2020). [Developing and implementing a specifications grading system in an organic chemistry laboratory course](https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.jchemed.0c00450). *Journal of Chemical Education*, 98(2), 385-394. <https://doi.org/10.1021/acs.jchemed.0c00450>

Sorensen-Unruh, C. (2019-2020). [Ungrading](#) [blog].

STEM

Talbert, R. (2023). [Ungrading in STEM Courses](#). *Zeal: A Journal for the Liberal Arts*, 1(2).

[Ungrading can work in STEM: A conversation with Clarissa Sorensen-Unruh](#) (vidcast with interview highlights in text form, 24 minutes)