

Course Grading Practices

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Grade-Free Learning Environment

This course will be a grade-free learning environment. The intention here is to focus our attention on curiosity, discovery, creative growth, and ensemble accountability and away from traditional educational hierarchies that reward simple compliance. As an instructor, I will provide feedback on your work, and we may rely on peer response as well, but *all* feedback will come in the form of questions, comments, and opportunities to refine a creative process, rather than points, letters, or other such tokens. The decision to go grade-free is based on the following factors:

- **Grades take student focus away from more useful feedback.** Students can improve their performance when they receive and integrate detailed feedback, but when that feedback is accompanied by a grade, the more useful information is almost always overshadowed. It is very hard for anyone to focus on growth when they are being graded.
- **A dependency on grades discourages healthy risk-taking, experimentation, and constructive failure.** Unfortunately, these same things are absolutely necessary for new learning and creative growth. They are also fundamental skills of good acting.
- **Grading creates a transactional system.** A very normal response to this kind of economy is to pursue the highest value product (i.e. grade) for the minimum required investment (i.e. effort). Learning, however, does not operate as a commodity. High levels of growth always require a high investment of effort.
- **Grades reinforce hierarchies over relationships and ensemble.** Additionally, in our current educational system, these hierarchies often favor those with privileged social identities.

Frequently Asked Questions

Q: How Does It Work?

A: As you have probably guessed, the university does require me to submit a final grade for your transcript. At the beginning of the term, I will ask you to review the learning outcomes in the syllabus and compare them to your own learning goals in order to **set some intentions** for your own work and growth over the course of the semester. We will also discuss, edit, and adopt a set of [grading benchmarks](#) as a community. These benchmarks will include labor expectations for each letter grade, as well as community accountability expectations for partner and ensemble work. At the midpoint and end of the semester, I will ask you once again to reflect on your growth and the extent to which you have met your goals and the community labor standards. The community grading benchmarks, viewed through the lens of your own goals, circumstances, and experience, as well as the feedback of your colleagues who have relied on your presence and collaboration, will help you **set your own final grade** in an end-of-term conference, video, or written reflection. If you choose a transcript grade that differs from the community benchmarks, I will ask you to provide a basic rationale, but I will honor your choice in all cases. Your rationale for choosing a grade outside the benchmark guidelines might include information about how you plan to adjust your future work to better meet professional expectations or about how the community benchmarks could be adjusted to better meet student capacity.

Q: What if someone "cheats"?

A: I assume you mean, "What if someone doesn't do the labor required to learn, but chooses a 'passing grade' anyway?" In this case, they have squandered an educational opportunity. **It is my job to provide learning opportunities and encourage student engagement, not to police whether students avail themselves of those opportunities.**

Q: Isn't that unfair to the students who do all the work?

A: Not in the long run. Literally no one in the professional world will ever care about your grade in a college theatre class. **No one is casting actors based on GPA.** They are far more likely to care about the skills and knowledge you acquired (or didn't) through your training. The course is an opportunity, and all students are free to seize it. I do feel a responsibility to make the material as interesting, relevant, and accessible as possible, but in the end it's not my job to force growth or interest on students who aren't receptive or ready. Finally, while I believe in the importance of artistic technique (and the important societal role of the arts), I don't need a theatre student to know their craft the way I need my pharmacist to know drug interactions...a lack of content mastery here isn't going to kill anyone. Put more simply: Some folks may do less work than you. Some may do more. None of that is your business. Set and pursue your own goals. Aim high. Engage in the learning community. Tend to your growth and be a supportive colleague.

Q: Aren't you required to assess students?

A: I consider the *evaluation of student work* and *constructive feedback* parts of my job. **Assessment and grading are not the same thing.** Eliminating grades from the conversation actually empowers me to assess student work more frankly, honestly, and collaboratively.

Q: So does this mean there are no deadlines or expectations?

A: I never said that! **There are indeed deadlines and expectations.** The core expectation is that you complete the course fully and on time. I expect you to show up to class every day—for you and for your colleagues—read assignment instructions, do all assigned tasks, and ask me questions if things are unclear or if you need additional support.

Q: Don't you care about my work?

A: Deeply. I'm inviting you to care about it too, and for a personally meaningful reason.

Q: I don't like this system because I will always prioritize other classes that reward me with grades.

A: I invite you to be curious about that, and reflect on what it might mean for you as a creative person. If you need help organizing and prioritizing so that you can effectively balance your commitments, please let me know. **If you honestly feel you need me to grade you in order for you to remain accountable, at the beginning of the semester you may request that I assign you a grade based on the community benchmarks and my limited knowledge of your circumstances.**

Q: It feels uncomfortable to give myself a grade.

A: This process is not intended to create an uncomfortable power dynamic, to feel like a test, or to be a negotiation. It is an invitation to have a frank conversation about your progress and process without the stakes of having your transcript grade on the line. While there is nothing inherently meaningful about a grade, your process of self-assessment *can* reflect respect for the work, yourself, and your community and offer you another avenue for learning and growth. If this process truly takes you beyond discomfort into distress, let me know; at your request, I can assign a grade based on our community benchmarks and my limited knowledge of your circumstances.

Q: What if the assignments aren't supporting my learning?

A: My intention is for this to be a **busy-work-free zone**. That means if the purpose of an assignment is unclear or you don't feel you are learning anything from it, we should have a conversation about how to **revise the instructions** to suit your learning strengths or **devise an alternate assignment** together. Please don't be shy about letting me know when things aren't clicking; it helps me become a better teacher. Additionally, your alternate learning activity may be a good option I can adopt for the whole class.

Community Benchmarks

(Adapted from Ashleigh Reade, Boston University)

We will discuss the following provisional definitions as a class. Remember, these are *one facet* of your grading decision. Your transcript grade and your benchmark may mean different things to you.

Benchmark	Unreviewed Absences	Completed All Major Assignments	Completed All Preparatory & Reflective Work	Outside Practice	Could Assist a Peer
E	>4	✗	✗	✗	✗
D	4	✗	✗	✗	✗
C	3	✓~⚠	⚠	✓~⚠	✗
B	2	✓	✓~⚠	✓~⚠	⚠
A	None	✓	✓	✓	✓

Benchmark "E": This Just Wasn't the Semester ("Fail/Retake")

You may have **missed multiple major assignments** or undermined the ensemble through absence or inattention. You would **need to retake the course** in order to learn the material and/or succeed in more advanced work. You may have **more than four un-reviewed absences**.

Benchmark "D": Struggle Bus ("Marginal")

You may have **missed a major assignment** or **neglected considerable preparatory and reflective work**. You failed to engage with class activities/discussion but did not unduly undermine the ensemble learning environment. You devoted little time outside of class to mastering the content. You may have **up to four un-reviewed absences**.

Benchmark "C": Working Knowledge ("Fair")

You **attempted all major assignments** and engaged with **much of the preparatory and reflective work**. You participated somewhat in class activities/discussion and did not undermine the ensemble learning environment through absence or inattention. You devoted some time outside of class to mastering the content and feel somewhat confident with most of the course learning outcomes. You have **up to three un-reviewed absences**. You understand and can embody much of the material, but you are not confident teaching it to someone else.

Benchmark "B": Comprehension ("Good")

You **completed all major assignments** and engaged with **most of the preparatory and reflective work**. You participated fully in class activities/discussion and supported the ensemble learning environment as a good partner and colleague. You devoted some time outside of class to mastering the content and feel mostly confident with all course learning outcomes. You have **no more than two**

un-reviewed absences. You understand and can embody the material well, but feel less confident teaching it to someone else.

Benchmark "A": Fluency ("Exceptional")

You **completed all major assignments** and engaged with **all of the preparatory and reflective work**. You participated fully in class activities/discussion and supported the ensemble learning environment as an exemplary partner and colleague. You devoted considerable time outside of class to mastering the content and feel very confident with all course learning outcomes. For **every class** you may have missed, you reviewed the recording, practiced the material, and submitted a reflection on the content or scheduled time to debrief in student hours. You understand and can embody the material fluently enough to assist someone else in learning or practicing it. You **completed the course as devised**.

Diverging from the Community Benchmarks

If you choose a grade that diverges from the community standard (benchmark), please provide a rationale so I know you are engaging critically with your own work. For example:

- *"I experienced challenges meeting the community standard due to a problem with the course or my collaborators."*
 - If it's within your boundaries, please elaborate so that I can try to mitigate this issue for future students.
- *"I experienced challenges meeting the community standard due to unforeseen circumstances."*
 - I don't necessarily need to know the personal specifics of your situation, but will these challenges continue? Do you have a specific plan moving forward? Do you need additional support? If applicable, please let me know what you've learned that will enable you to handle this in future semesters.
- *"I experienced challenges meeting the community standard that I could have overcome with more effort spent on time management, organization, or communication. I acknowledge that my work reflects the community standard benchmark grade ____, but I am choosing to inflate that grade for transcript purposes."*
 - I won't ask you to elaborate, and I appreciate your honest self-assessment. Please let me know: What is your specific plan for meeting community work standards in the future? Let's strategize!

These grading policies are an evolving practice of collaborative learning and student empowerment. They are informed by ongoing discussion with theatre educators from across North America, including on conference panels of the Association of Theatre in Higher Education in 2020, 2021 and 2024, and the Voice & Speech Trainers Association in 2022. This is a living document and I am open to conversations about how these practices work (or don't) for you.

For additional information about my rationale for ungrading in an actor-training context, please see [this blog post](#).

These grading practices were originally inspired by and adapted from:

Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom

by Asao B. Inoue, Arizona State University (2019)

["Why I Don't Grade"](#)

by Jesse Stommel, University of Mary Washington (2017)