

9 Ways to “Do” Ungrading

1. Grade-Free Zones

You don't have to go from 0 to 60 all at once! “Try having the first third of the [semester] be **ungraded**, a sandbox for students to experiment inside before moving on to the more formal activities of a course. Or decide to grade only a few major assignments” (Stommel, 2020, p. 36).

2. Self-Assessment

Build in opportunities for self-assessment, and have students use a rubric to determine their level of mastery of course content. Do this 2-4 times during the semester. “Metacognition is a practical skill that cuts across disciplines. bell hooks advocates for ‘continual self-evaluation’ both of a student by the student and of a teacher by the teacher” (Stommel, 2020, p. 37).

3. Process Letters

As the semester progresses, ask students to periodically write process letters, “describing their learning and how their work evolves over time.” “A process letter can be text, including (or pointing to) representative examples of work students don't otherwise turn in. You might also ask students to take pictures of their work as it evolves, add voice-over to a screencast, or document their learning via film (a sort of behind-the-scenes reel for the class)” (Stommel, 2020, p. 37).

4. Minimal Grading

Reduce the levels or gradations in your grading process. “Scales with too many gradations make it difficult for teachers to determine grades and even more difficult for students to interpret them. [Peter] Elbow recommends scales with fewer gradations: turned in (one gradation), pass/fail (two gradations), strong/satisfactory/weak (three gradations)” (Stommel, 2020, p. 37).

5. Authentic Assessment

Use performative events or public presentations (inside the class, or outside in the campus or community) as a way to encourage them to use the content they are learning in an authentic way. “Increasingly, I don't ask students to turn assignments in to me (aside from their self-reflections). The community of the class becomes their audience. I allow myself space to be one member of that community, a genuine reader of student work” (Stommel, 2020, p. 37-38).

6. Contract Grading

Toward the beginning of the semester, students sign a grading contract for the grade they want to receive. Contract grading consists of “calculating course grades by labor completed and [dispensing] almost completely with judgements of quality. Students work toward the grade they want to achieve, and goalposts don’t unexpectedly shift. [Please note:] “contracts do run the risk of centering grades even more than traditional grading, but at their best, negotiating around the contract becomes a way for students to collectively worry [about] the edges of grading as a system” (Stommel, 2020, p. 38).

7. Portfolios

Use a portfolio as a way for students to collect and display work from across the semester. “I prefer more authentic portfolios that have use value beyond the needs of the individual, course programmatic, or institutional assessment...The key is to use a portfolio not as a mere receptacle for assignments but as a metacognitive space, one with immediate, practical value (as a way for students to share their work with potential collaborators, employers, graduate schools, etc.)” (Stommel, 2020, p. 38).

8. Peer-Assessment

Have students review and provide feedback on each other’s work. “Peer-assessment can be formal (having students evaluate each other’s work) or informal (just having students actively engage with one another’s work)” (Stommel, 2020, p. 39).

9. Student-Made Rubrics

Have students help you create rubrics for one or more of your assignments. “The act of making the rubric becomes an act of learning itself rather than a device (or set of assumptions) created entirely in advance of students arriving to a course” (Stommel, 2020, p. 39).

