🔥 You Get a *C*, but I Get an *A* 🔥

Challenges of Grading in First-Year Writing Courses at U.S. Colleges

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Contents:

🏁 Introduction

In high school, I took an English class with a friend named Lily. Lily was born and raised in China, which meant that she had learned English as a second language. Her grammar was perfect because she had learned the formulas of subject-verb agreement by heart. Her diction was clear and careful because that was how her teachers had taught her to write and speak. From the most logical iteration of English, Lily was a natural English writer.

I was born and raised in the Philippines, which meant that I also learned English as a second language. However, unlike Lily, I spent more time watching Hollywood movies and reading books from the far-away land of America than paying attention in grammar class. I picked up on more slang, more confusing turns of phrase (try explaining *bussin'* to a foreign speaker), more American lingo—I learned an English that was not my own.

For using someone else's English, I was rewarded. I wrote 'better,' whatever that means. My essays in class would garner bright, red-letter **A's**, and my English teachers would applaud the little effort I put into my written work. To them, I was a natural-born 'writer.'

In contrast, Lily could only get **C's** on her essays. She worked harder than I ever did—she'd spend long nights poring over SAT Reading books to try and understand why her reading and writing skills weren't "up to par". When she'd ask me to explain why a sentence was the way it was, or why her interpretation of a reading was so different from what was 'accepted' by our teachers, my only answer would be: "just 'cuz."

In the end, Lily stopped trying so hard on English essays and all written assignments—what was the point in trying? She felt that her grades would stay the same, regardless of how much effort she put into her writing. Eventually, Lily's grades in other subjects began to suffer—she placed little effort into

writing lab reports for Biology, graph analyses for Economics, and all the other pieces of writing necessary for good grades in other subjects. Lily ended her time in high school with grades that made it difficult for her to garner positions at more prestigious colleges.

I tell story to shine a light on a number of complications that arise when we consider how writing is graded. Why did I get a higher grade than Lily even though I didn't put as much effort into my work? Was the grade meant to measure our amount of labor or the quality of our work? And, if the answer is quality, how does one even go about measuring quality? What was my high school English teacher looking for in our essays? Don't tell me it was "natural writing skills" or a "spark". And if we were both writing English essays, why was my English—which, remember, isn't even mine, as I grew up copying a hodgepodge of different types of American English—considered "better"?

Let's push those questions further. What is a grade meant to do? And if that's a fantastical ideal that cannot be achieved, what do grades *actually* do? Can grades be fair? And if not, is there then something wrong with the way teachers grade? Especially when it comes to grading writing? And if the answer is a sad 'yes', what can we do about it?

🧐 Research Question & Research Methods

This research paper explores the question: ***what are the challenges faced by college instructors grading first-year writing courses in the United States?*** Although I began this paper with an anecdote from my high school days, I chose to center my research on grading within college-level first-year writing courses because these courses are meant to focus *solely* on developing students' writing skills, encouraging them to write and experiment with how they write. First-year writing courses, often a general education requirement at colleges, help students communicate their ideas on paper, a vital skill that college students need both to thrive in a scholarly setting and to excel in a world that rewards those who can convey their opinions fluently and with ease.

However, do these courses always succeed? Can these courses, in fact, discourage students from writing? If so, is the source of discouragement the way these writing courses are graded? And what are the consequences of making a student believe that their writing is "not good enough"? And, perhaps the most important concern of all—how can we do better?

To answer my own research question, I conducted six virtual interviews with professionals who have either worked as instructors in the field of higher education or as researchers of grading in education (or both—one can wear many hats). These professionals each have varied opinions on grading writing—while some argue for the removal or minimization of grades in spaces of higher education, others push for the necessity of upholding the current methods of grading and making improvements within the system. On top of that, I conducted an extensive literature review of books, journals, and peer-reviewed research papers all focused on different aspects of grading writing. Similar to the interviews, these published texts presented contrasting perspectives on the grading of English writing, highlighting both the benefits and drawbacks of the way writing is currently graded.

After sifting through all of that, I present to you (yes, you—mwah~!) the answers to my question:

- Issue #1: No one can agree on how to grade writing.
- Issue #2: Grading writing doesn't promote learning.

We'll walk through these answers together, you and I, and after our in-depth, one-sided conversation on how grading writing is messed up, I will present the alternative grading methods that more and more writing instructors across the country are implementing to make their own writing classes more effective, more welcoming, and most importantly, fairer. 😌

🍎 But First, Some Background

What are "grades"?

Let's get our definitions straight.

To narrow things down, this paper focuses only on *teacher-assigned* grades, which are grades that instructors assign to students' 1) formative assignments and 2) overall performance in the course, which usually comes in the form of summative reports that students receive at the end of the semester (Brookhart, 2022).

The reason it is so important that we agree on the same definition is that there are so many different takes on the act of grading. In fact, instructors themselves—college-level or otherwise—rarely agree on what a grade is supposed to mean and do. We'll get into that later.

How do instructors grade writing?

Although each may add their own personal touch to the job, instructors in both high schools and colleges follow a similar approach to grading students' written work:

> Step 1: Read the written work.
> Step 2: Judge the work based on a set of criteria, created by either the professor themselves or the educational institution they serve (Wright, 2022; Jurich, 2022; Inoue, 2022).
> Step 3: Rate the work based on that judgment, using either "writing rubrics described by proficiency level" (e.g. 'Outstanding,' 'Satisfying,' 'Needs Improvement') or the classic letter-grade system of A to F (Brookhart, 2022).

Note: it *seems* easy, but it's really not. Grading a student's written work—especially when that work's worth is subjective depending on the reader, which is the case with most written work—isn't as simple as following a three-step process (Belanoff, 1991).

Have grades always been like this?

Well, no. When they were first founded, colleges in the United States didn't try grading their students—grading just wasn't the norm (Blum, 2020; Inoue, 2021; Guskey & Bailey, 2001). In the 19th century, instructors would orally present student progress reports to parents, but this proved to be so time-consuming that they were "abandoned in favor of written narrative descriptions of how students were performing" (Guskey & Bailey, 2001). Teachers understood that each of their students progressed at their own unique pace, and so to properly educate them, teachers provided in-depth, personalized feedback (Inoue, 2021).

However, writing narrative reports of a student's progress is hard, time-consuming work, and would have only made sense when there were just a handful of students attending U.S. colleges (most of them "homogenous, young, White, privileged men" who were high enough up the social status ladder to be educated) (Inoue, 2021). But as the country developed and prospered, a rich middle-class bloomed, and more and more people began to see the importance of education and had the means to acquire it (Inoue, 2022).

By the end of the 19th century, there were too many students from too many different backgrounds trying to enter U.S. colleges (Inoue, 2020, 2021, 2022). In order to solve what was really an administrative problem, U.S. colleges learned from European universities and came up with an administrative solution: they started to grade their students (Blum, 2020; Inoue, 2022). By ranking students (Yale was the first, sorting students into four hierarchical classes, and Harvard followed suit with its twenty-point scale grading system), U.S. colleges controlled which students could remain in the world of academia, and which students got the cut (Brookhart, 2022; Blum, 2020). "The logic of

grades and assessment was simple," Inoue writes. "Keep people from that place out of this place" (Inoue, 2020).

In the history of the United States, grading is a relatively new development and educational institutions are constantly reevaluating the way they approach grading (Blum, 2020). However, the fact remains that grading came about in this country not as a helpful measurement of a student's growth, but rather as a barrier to their learning. Because of this, grading as we know it today carries with it several deeply concerning challenges, all of which can harm the learning journey of a student.

So let's talk about those challenges. 💅

💥 Issue #1: No One Can Agree on How to Grade Writing.

Let's start by discussing how difficult it even is to agree on what a grade is supposed to mean and do. Below is a base definition of the word "grades":

> *Grades are the **symbols** assigned to individual pieces of student work or to composite measures of **student performance** created for report cards and other summative documents. Grades can be letters, numbers, figures, or any set of descriptors that designate different levels of performance* (Guskey et al., 2019).

From this definition, we understand that grades, in the form of any symbol (ex: A, 65%, 17/20), are used to measure student performance. Interestingly, this definition deemphasizes the instructor's role in grading—in their most ideal form, grades are meant to solely represent a student's performance and should be devoid of any bias on the instructor's part (Inoue, 2022). That's a lot to ask, especially since the act of grading is basically a teacher passing judgment on a student, but cool. Got it.

Now let's complicate the definition a little further:

> *Grades are a numerical way to evaluate some kind of performance.* ***A certain set of judgments happen****, and then those judgments get translated in some fashion, whether through a rubric, a scoring guide, or* ***a professor's own sort of mechanization in their head*** *to score a letter or some kind of ranking* (Inoue, 2022).

This definition acknowledges the judgment present in grading. Where did these judgments come from? Perhaps the instructor bases their judgment on the objectives that they set for their own course, and this seems fair—if the student's essay didn't meet the course's objectives, then they shouldn't get a good grade, yeah? But what if an instructor's judgment of a student is based not only on the course's objectives, but also on their own internal standard for what type of work (and perhaps, from what type of student) deserves a "good grade." We start to clearly see a little wiggle room in defining grades—a little lack of clarity across the board of instructors on what exactly a grade should represent.

This lack of clarity grows when we start to consider how a grade rarely represents one single thing:

> *Grades may be* ***a multidimensional assessment*** *of both student academic knowledge and a student's ability to negotiate the social processes of schooling, such as behavior, participation, and effort* (Bowers et al., 2011; Bowers, 2022).

> *. . . grades typically represent a mixture of multiple factors that teachers value* (Brookhart et al., 2016).

When an instructor assigns a grade, they aren't grading the student's academic achievement alone; instead, they often consider the student as a whole, from the student's participation in class to their engagement with the course material (Bowers et al., 2011; Bowers, 2022). Although this allows instructors to measure a student's progress more holistically, it eats at the notion of a standard in grading, thus creating more ambiguity in what "factors" go into assigning a grade to a student.

Now, these are all general definitions of grades—do definitions get a little clearer when we consider grades in the context of first-year writing courses in colleges?

Sadly, no. In fact, because the act of appraising writing is so subjective—with each instructor having their own opinion on what constitutes "good" written work—the definitions of grades on written assignments become even more muddled.

In her article on grading writing, *The Myths of Assessment*, Pat Belanoff writes:

> *The assumption here is that [instructors] have some precise notion of what skills students need to master in order to be good or better writers and that [instructors] know in what order these should be learned: word forms before paragraphs, narrative before argument, etc., or vice versa.* ***Unfortunately, the skills which are easiest to measure are the ones least important to the development of good writing****. . . our profession has no agreed upon definition of proficiency and certainly as a consequence, no agreed upon definitions for proficiencies at various levels of schooling* (Belanoff, 1991).

There's a lot to unpack here. Firstly, Belanoff dismantles the myth that instructors are these wise, all-knowing academics who, because they put in the time to get a master's degree and a Ph.D., know exactly when a student is right or wrong about something. No, these are normal human beings who, because of their profession, must pretend to "have some precise notion" of how a student can become a better writer.

Moreover, as Belanoff notes, while it is possible to measure the development of *some* skills necessary for writing, these skills are "the ones least important to the development of good writing." Skills like correct grammar and word forms are easy to teach as they require students to follow a set of universally accepted rules; however, if all writing instructors did was nitpick a student's essay for grammatical errors, then we could easily replace all instructors with Grammarly™. This argument that the skills taught in writing courses aren't necessarily measurable is echoed by progressive educator Alfie Kohn.

"Once we're compelled to focus only on what can be reduced to a number," Kohn writes in *The Case Against Grades*, "such as how many grammatical errors are present in a composition. . . thinking has been severely compromised" (Kohn, 2011). Kohn explains that by relying solely on grades, the consequences are two-fold: instructors are left unsure of whether their students are actually improving or not, and students are left feeling as if their worth as scholars depends solely on the grades they attain (Kohn, 2011).

Finally, Belanoff points out the most important issue of all—inconsistency. Because writing instructors have "no agreed upon definition of proficiency," it is impossible for them to know for sure when a student has mastered writing. Without a standard method of measuring proficiency, instructors are left creating their own approaches to grading their students, either in their individual written assignments or in their holistic reports. "Incommensurability of grades is another long-standing problem," agrees Dr. Susan Blum, an experienced educator and researcher of the decoupling of grading and learning (Blum et al., 2020). "One professor may include homework in the calculation. . . one may include all tests. . . one may ignore attendance" (Blum et al., 2020). With these examples, Blum underscores the many different factors (e.g. homework, tests, attendance, extra credit, etc.) that a grade is meant to represent. With every instructor approaching grading in their own way, it is difficult to determine who's grading more effectively and with the student's best interests in mind.

"And what is writing ability anyway?" Belanoff asks. "What does it mean to write well?" (Belanoff, 1991). When does an instructor know that their student has become a "good" writer? Belanoff ends her argument by highlighting that the idea of "good writing" is merely that—an idea. She calls attention to the fact there is no "Platonic image out there of 'good writing'," and hence there is no "Platonic standard of writing" that instructors must hold their students to (Belanoff, 1991).

💥 Issue #2: Grading Writing Doesn't Promote Learning.

> *If you want to start an argument about some aspect of education,*
> *you need only bring up the way teachers grade.*
>
> - Guskey and Brookhart, 2019.

This is a big question in the education community: do grades work?

There really isn't a right answer. Grades work in the sense that they can be used by instructors as a sort of snapshot assessment of how their students are progressing in class (Guskey et al., 2019). Grades also work as predictors of a student's "overall schooling outcomes"—research has shown that teacher-assigned grades are strongly associated with the probability that a student completes or drops out of high school, is accepted into college or not, and more (Bowers, 2011). However, the jury's still out on whether or not grades can positively impact a student's learning experience. Although there is a long list of challenges related to grading (note the hundreds of books and journals published on the subject), this research paper narrows down the challenges as follows:

Grading does not motivate students to learn.

In his article *The Risks of Rewards*, Alfie Kohn discusses "extrinsic motivators," or rather incentives that motivate an individual to take part in an activity in order to achieve an external goal (Kohn, 1994). In an educational context, grades are extrinsic motivators because they encourage students to participate in an activity—for instance, in class discussions, written assignments, examinations, etc.—with the promise of a reward (e.g. get a gold star, be told that they did a good job, win a new phone from their parents. etc.) (Kohn, 1994). Besides wanting extrinsic rewards, students are also motivated by grades in the sense that they want to avoid punishment—securing an average or higher grade allows students to avoid negative consequences, such as being punished by their parents (Kohn, 1994). Indeed, research into educational assessment has demonstrated that students view their

professors as respected authority figures, and so interpret their grades as indicators of whether their own ideas agree with those of the "respected authority" (Ketter & Hunter, 1997; Cobrin et al., 2022).

Because students are so fixated on getting grades that either bring them closer to a reward or farther away from a punishment, a high level of anxiety often exists within the classroom (Wright, 2022; Cobrin et al., 2022; Blum, 2020). This anxiety, properly termed "evaluation anxiety," causes students to focus less on more insightful narrative feedback that an instructor may provide them, and more on the letter grade they receive (Cobrin et al., 2022). Moreover, evaluation anxiety is intensified in settings like first-year writing classrooms, where first-year students are still unsure of how to succeed academically and so are terrified of "doing the work of intellectual engagement in the 'wrong way'—in a way that will reflect negatively on their graded performance in the class" (Cobrin et al., 2022). Perhaps more alarmingly, evaluation anxiety can have a detrimental impact on a student's "physical and mental health as well as one's educational achievement and occupational career" (Zeidner, 2007; Cobrin et al., 2022). In fact, a number of colleges and universities have implemented programs to reduce the impact grades have on students; particularly in the country's elite medical schools, pass-fail forms of assessment have been put in place in order to preserve student mental health and to decrease the "high rates of suicide" that have long plagued medical school student populations (Blum, 2020).

Grading reduces student interest in learning.

You may be thinking: "Does it matter that grades are just external motivators (whatever those are)? Don't students still learn while they stress out over grades?"

Not necessarily. As Kohn points out, the offer of either rewards or punishments only elicits "temporary compliance" in a student; while the student may obediently do their classwork, this does not mean that they are learning the course material or developing into "lifelong, self-directed learners" (Kohn, 1994). Instead, a student may develop a "preference for the easiest possible task" (Kohn, 2013). From an early age, students have been conditioned to believe that grades have value, that grades make

the world go round (they don't); because of this mindset, students will often choose to complete tasks that have as little risk as possible (Kohn, 2013; Stommel, 2020). Within the context of a writing course, this would mean students who select the easiest essay prompt or craft arguments that do not go against what was already taught or skim through online guides and cheat sheets rather than reading the assigned text. Students want to succeed by avoiding taking "any unnecessary intellectual risks" and relying on "safe tactics"; however, do we ever learn anything from playing it safe (Kohn, 2013; Blum, 2020)?

Grading confines students to an artificial learning environment, leading them to make "unfair decisions" about their approach to learning; consequently, students are forced to ask themselves: "Do I play it safe? Or do I. . . try to take a risk?" (Inoue, 2022). It is a difficult decision to make, often resulting in students trying to get the best grade possible by any means necessary. Students may resort to rote memorization, a studying strategy that sees students committing facts to short-term memory and immediately forgetting all said facts as soon as finals season is over (Kohn, 2013; Cobrin et al., 2022). What's worse, students may feel that they have no other option but to be academically dishonest; assessment researchers have demonstrated that a "grade-oriented environment is associated with increased levels of cheating" (Anderman & Murdock, 2007; Kohn, 2013). Because they may view cheating or even plagiarism as the option that guarantees the highest grade (and is thus the safest choice), students are placed in a position where they make choices that could result in negative life outcomes, such as the termination of their academic career and perhaps greater difficulty in securing employment later on in life.

Grading does not teach students how to improve.

You get your essay back, and a bright letter **C** back with it. What does that **C** mean? You ask the **C** this question. The **C** does not answer.

More often than not, students receive grades with little or no feedback to explain why they received said grades. A letter grade can only tell you what your instructor thought of your work, and how good you were at following your instructor's instructions, but it cannot tell you what was lacking in the work you put in or how you can do better next time (Stommel, 2022). Critics of grading frequently spotlight the oversimplicity of grading, pointing out how grades reduce something so complex as a student's development into something numerical and hierarchical (Stommel, 2020). In short, grades tell us nothing about a student's story. How much have they learned in this class? Have they come far since the start of the course, or have they been coasting by on preexisting knowledge? For grades often disregard the fact that students enter a course with "different beginning baselines" (Blum, 2020). Blum clearly illustrates this inequality in the following example:

> *If someone comes in, say to a language class as a heritage speaker of a language—a popular tactic for boosting a GPA—then doing well on tests may reveal the initial condition of mastery and little growth* (Blum, 2020).

It would not be fair to compare a student well-versed in composition to a student who struggles with writing, but we do it anyway. While the student with "good" writing may pat themselves on the back for doing well in a course that they were already good at, the struggling student may see their lower grades and wonder what they are doing wrong. What's more, grades do not consider how students from "under-resourced backgrounds" are made to compete with students from "hyper-resourced backgrounds" who can afford resources that they use to help themselves get better grades (Cobrin et al., 2015). Grades unknowingly disregard the "skills and knowledge that first-generation and low-income students bring to the classroom"; because of this, more under-resourced students may feel as if they are inferior to their more well-resourced peers, leading them to question their place and contributions in the classroom (Cobrin et al., 2022).

🤩 Closing: How to Do Better

This paper's purpose was to shine a light on the shortcomings of the way instructors grade, specifically instructors of college-level first-year writing courses. Now that we understand the inconsistency and ineffectiveness behind grading, we need to ask ourselves: how can we fix this mess?

Unfortunately, it looks like grades are here to stay. "Grades of some sort," explains educational consultant Dr. Susan M. Brookhart, ". . .are necessary in most school settings for administrative functions that come with doing education at scale" (Brookhart, 2019). Indeed, in order for grading to be unnecessary, "structural changes would need to happen" (Wright, 2022). Melissa Wright, the Interim Executive Director of the Center for Engaged Pedagogy at Barnard College, points out how difficult it would be to abolish large educational systems that have long relied on grades to rank, sort, and educate large populations of students (Wright, 2022). Moreover, even if one institution decided to overhaul its academic structure, the majority of institutions would still rely on grades, making the one institution an outlier (Wright, 2022).

That feels like a lot of doom and gloom. I'm not trying to end this paper on a bad note—I'm just saying it's going to take a lot of hard work to do better.

On a more positive note, an impressive number of institutions in the United States have gone gradeless, or have significantly minimized the impact of grades on students. As Blum lists:

> *Grade-free institutions include Hampshire College, Evergreen State College, Deep Spring College, New College of Florida, Alverno College, Fairhaven College of Interdisciplinary Studies at Western Washington University, Prescott College, Antioch University, and Goddard College. Others, such as Sarah Lawrence College and Reed College, record grades but don't automatically report them to students* (Blum, 2020).

Even elite law schools at Ivy Leagues such as Harvard, Stanford, and Yale have slightly tweaked the way they grade, although they seem to have "basically replaced a letter-grade or numerical system with another system with verbal labels" (Blum, 2020). Regardless, change is slowly but surely happening among these institutions of higher education, as college instructors all across the country begin to question the need for grading (Blum, 2020).

For now, before large-scale structural change can happen, educators can start the grade-free process in their own classrooms. A strong movement of educators has taken to utilizing "ungrading," or rather a "set of practices meant to redirect time and attention" to students learning course material rather than worrying about their grades (Supiano, 2019). Ungrading has grown in popularity among educators over the last few decades, as it "supports critical pedagogy's emphasis on cultivating social justice in the classroom" (Barnard College, 2022). This means that, rather than forcing students of diverse academic and social backgrounds to compete within the same "uniform system," ungrading strategies turn assessment into a "conversation between instructors and students," relying much more on narrative feedback than numerical or letter grades (Cobrin et al., 2022; Barnard College, 2022).

There isn't just one way to ungrade, and to explore all the different strategies would require another research paper. However, some of the more recommended strategies for instructors interested in ungrading students are as follows:

- Have one class assessment that no grades are associated with, or even a semester-long project that the instructor and students work on together (Inoue, 2022).
- Discuss with students the standards they are expected to uphold in their work for the course. These standards can change throughout the semester, as the instructor and students reflect on any needed changes (Inoue, 2022).

- Do not rely entirely on rubrics; although they may not seem as hierarchical as numerical or letter grades, rubrics have been criticized as "overly mechanistic" and can be just as problematic as conventional grading but "with a label" (Stommel, 2020; Kohn, 2013).
- Have students write self-evaluations "two to three times throughout the term;" these evaluations allow them to reflect not just on the course, but also on "their learning and. . . how learning happens" (Stommel, 2020).
- Ask students to create portfolios of their work, which allows them to visually track their progress throughout the course (Barnard College, 2022).

These are not easy, simple strategies, and often they require more work on the part of both the instructor and the student (Kohn, 2013; Stommel, 2020; Blum, 2020). At times, it is easier for instructors to fall back on the way they have always graded and hope for the best. Sometimes, we are left asking: why should we care about grading writing? Grading, after all, only truly exists within the world of education—in the "real world," we don't go around giving people **A's** or **B's** or **C's** for their hard work, and we certainly don't remember all the grades we got in high school or college.

Perhaps the best answer to this question comes in the form of an allegory, taken from a firsthand interview with Professor Asao Inoue of Arizona State University:

> *[Imagine grading as] a house. It's the house we live in, yes—but it's leaky, and not everyone is invited, and not everyone can fit in there. It doesn't have very good accommodations for people—it's uncomfortable, ill-fitting, and the doors are too short. We need to fix the house to make it more universally accessible for everyone. And to do that, it means we have to tear down a part of the roof, pull out some pipes, tear down a wall, etc. But it's raining outside, so some of us are going to get wet while we do the work. It's going to be messy, living in the house while we try to rebuild it—but ultimately, we have to start fixing the house, even if it's slowgoing and messy.*

Although this research project cannot provide clear-cut solutions to the complex challenges or "leaks" surrounding grading, (and won't even try to—that's really hard!), it demonstrates the challenges in a grading system that we often take for granted and rarely critically evaluate. By pointing out the leaks in the "house" that is the conventional approach to grading writing, this research project hopes to spotlight how these leaks can be fixed and thus encourage readers to get down and dirty and start the messy fixing process.

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