



You get a C, but I get an A

issues of grading writing in U.S. colleges

Introduction

- Grading writing isn't easy. It often requires the instructor to judge a student's written assignment by its worth, resulting in bias and subjectivity seeping into the grade the instructor provides. ¹
- But how does an instructor know if a student's essay is "good"? Is a grade meant to solely measure an essay's "good-ness," and if so, isn't that a little problematic? What harm is done by grading a student's written work? Do grades even turn students into better writers?

Objective

This research project explores the issues that come with grading writing, specifically in college-level writing courses in the United States that are meant to develop a student's writing skills. The project dives into several issues that educators and researchers across the country have identified in the way students are graded based on their written work.

Research Method

- Carried out six (6) interviews with professionals who've either worked as instructors in the field of higher education or as researchers of grading in education, each with their own opinion on grading.
- Conducted an extensive literature review of books, journals, and peer-reviewed research papers all focused on different aspects of grading writing.

Why talk about grading?

- Across the country, colleges—including Ivy Leagues such as Harvard and Yale—are starting to realize that the "real world" does not rely on grades. They are modifying their grading systems to move away from reductive letter or numerical grades (Blum, 2020).
- It is a difficult and slow process to change the way we grade writing. However, it is a necessary change, as our classrooms must reflect the "real world," where we don't go around giving people A's or B's or C's (Inoue, 2022; Blum, 2020).
- By talking about grading, we acknowledge the issues that come with a system we have so rarely questioned. By asking important questions, we can find solutions and create a grading system that prioritizes the student (Inoue, 2022).

Research Question

What are the issues that come with the way college instructors grade first-year writing courses in the United States?

Identified Issues

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

Issue #1: No one can agree on how to grade writing.

- At their most basic level, grades are symbols that instructors assign students based on their classwork (Guskey et al., 2019).
- However, the act of grading requires judgment. These judgments are often based on class rubrics & expectations, but they also involve a level of bias—the instructor must judge what constitutes "good" writing (Inoue, 2022).
- Because of this bias, the act of grading writing is different in every classroom—there is no agreed-upon definition of proficiency, making it difficult to determine if students are truly developing skills necessary for writing (Belanoff, 1991).

Issue #2: Grading writing doesn't promote learning.

- Grades can be seen as "extrinsic motivators," a.k.a. incentives that motivate students to do better academically (Kohn, 1994). Your parents might have promised you a reward, like a trip to Disney World, if you achieved straight As. Or you might want to avoid the punishment that comes with getting lower grades. Regardless, you—the student—spend more time worrying about grades than actually learning (Kohn, 1994; Cobrin et al., 2022).
- Because the student is motivated to achieve the highest grade possible, they develop a preference for the easiest possible task (Kohn, 2013). Instead of taking risks and experimenting, students choose options that can guarantee that they achieve their desired grade—but such options can also be academically dishonest ones, such as cheating and plagiarizing (Anderman & Murdock, 2007). Students may feel like they have no choice but to cheat, resulting in negative consequences like the termination of their academic career or difficulty in securing employment later on in life.