Collaborative Grading for Student Success: Using Feedback and Reflection to Engage Students in Writing and Learning

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Abstract: As a writing teacher, I want to encourage students to see themselves as writers and to share their ideas and opinions in their own voice, which can be increasingly challenging in the era of artificial intelligence. Traditional grading structures can interfere with those goals and can discourage students from taking risks; alternative grading strategies can provide space for students to challenge themselves. Here, I share the details of the collaborative-grading approach I took in a first-year writing course: students helped to develop the criteria by which their work would be evaluated and then proposed their own final grade. Throughout the semester, I encouraged students to revise and resubmit their work and to reflect on their process along the way. This approach was successful for me and for students. Their submissions showed evidence that they were carefully reading and considering my feedback, and they reported increased engagement and learning. In what follows, I outline the development of our collective-grading contract and share some of my reflections on its successes and limitations; as well, I share students' responses to this approach.

Keywords: Ungrading, Collaborative Grading, Student Engagement, Student Voice

Introduction

By early 2023, I knew something had to change. In the semesters since our post-pandemic return to in-person learning, students' attendance and engagement had dropped. Students' anxiety seemed amplified. More students than ever before seemed to be missing due dates and giving up. As I was trying to plan for creative new strategies to help students succeed, I kept hearing creeping concerns about Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI). With the advent of GenAI tools like ChatGPT, I worried that already disengaged and overburdened students would be tempted to turn to GenAI to circumvent their learning entirely. The risks seemed especially great for writing courses like mine. I needed to find ways to implement GenAI productively, but I first needed to help students see that they would be safe to take risks in our class. I needed something drastically different from what I'd tried so far.

In May of 2023, I listened to a panel of students from Humber College. The students were presenting at a conference I was attending—organized and hosted by the College Association for Language and Literacy (CALL), which brings together college writing teachers from across Ontario—and they were sharing their experiences of the communications credit they had just completed. Audience members were full of questions for the students; again and again, the students' answers redirected us to the ungrading approach that several different professors had taken to the course. The students were eager for us to hear their central point: knowing they were not being judged at each step of the learning process removed the intimidation they had expected to feel and allowed them to find both their voice and their confidence. At one point, one of the student participants said to the audience, "Write this down: Jesse Stommel."

Jesse Stommel, a faculty member in the Writing Program at the University of Denver, has been writing publicly about ungrading since 2017. Others have been writing about the potential unintended complications of grading systems for decades (see Peter Elbow and Alfie Kohn, for example), but the skepticism towards traditional systems of grading and the search for something different has grown in recent years (Moosvi et al., 2022). The Humber students' enthusiasm prompted me to attend a panel hosted later that same day by three of the Humber Communications department faculty members who had taught those same students and inspired such passion for ungrading. The three faculty members—Jessica Freitag, Erin Harvey, and Chandra Hodgson—had each adopted a slightly different approach to ungrading, but all three moved away from traditional grades on student work, prioritizing instead a culture of learning and a "pedagogy of care" (see Maha Bali, 2021). Each of these three Humber professors shared her process in generous detail. Their courses did not assign number or letter labels to individual assessments but instead identified which of three categories the student's work had

achieved: each used a variation of not yet, meets, and masters to help students see whether they had achieved the learning outcomes. All three allowed for flexible deadlines and resubmissions, and all three finished the term by requiring students to propose their own grade. Leaving the CALL conference, I felt hopeful and enthusiastic. I was inspired to try an ungraded approach, through which I hoped I would find a path to engage students, to encourage them to take risks, and to share their authentic voices.

Although grading often feels inevitable—synonymous with the work of teaching and learning—research is increasingly demonstrating the risks that traditional grading can pose to student learning and well being. There are many important concerns about traditional grading structures, but three problems resonate most for me: first, grades can prioritize extrinsic reward and compromise a student's intrinsic motivation, leading to "a misplaced focus on accumulating points rather than on learning" (Blum, 2020b, p. 3); second, they can undermine relationships and community building, amplifying competition and "undermin[ing] the climate for teaching and learning" (Elbow, 1997, p. 127); and third, they often lack the accuracy and reliability that led to their centrality in so many classrooms in the first place. Even when summative assessments are weighted more heavily than formative ones, the grade allocations in most courses penalize students for getting it wrong early on. Final grades are not straightforward indicators of students' learning.

Many scholars (Blum, 2020b; Schinske & Tanner, 2014; Stommel, 2023; and more) have outlined the history of the grading systems adopted in education (Note 1). As any student who has studied on more than one continent could confirm, grades' meanings shift between cultures and contexts. I remember being told (informally and in hushed tones) during my first year in graduate school that the grades I received during my time in that program would range from 78-90 and that a 78 should be read as a D. During that same semester, I worked as a Teaching Assistant (TA) in an undergraduate class, and the professor held a grade-norming session with his TAs, reviewing our comments and then adjusting our grades as necessary to match the institutionally required distribution. When I moved on to my next TA role at a new university, that institution's policy mandated that final grades end only in 0, 2, 5, or 8. All these rules felt arbitrary to me, and none of these policies was communicated openly with students.

Imprecise and context specific as the numbers can be, grades have a very real effect on students' lives (Elbow, 1994, p. 3). Despite all their complications and too-often arbitrary nature, grades are often used to determine eligibility and worthiness for scholarships and co-op positions, and final grades are required by most (but not all!) post-secondary institutions in North America: some teachers advocate for systemic change that would move institutions away from recording and relying on final grades (see Kohn, 2011, for example) and there are institutions that have adopted a pass/ fail system (Note 2). However, most Ontario teachers must submit final grades instead of narrative descriptions of students'

performance. Grades serve as a shorthand to communication between institutions (Schinske & Tanner, 2014): in our current system, final grades still play a role in student pathways and transfer opportunities. Although I believe qualitative information would provide a richer understanding of students' true learning and therefore communicate more usefully, I can understand the need for quantitative data; however, I wanted to make room for more transparency and student agency in the process of arriving at those final numbers. Because I wanted to create a different kind of classroom—one where students saw their peers as allies instead of competitors, one where they saw me as a coach instead of a judge, one where they felt free to take the risk of using their own voice—I needed to move away from traditional grades.

The term "ungrading" is an umbrella term (Blum, n.d.) used as shorthand to refer to many different versions of alternative assessment: different approaches to ungrading all work to question the assumptions we make around grading. The "ungrading" label gestures to the ongoing nature of the work. As Jesse Stommel (2023), the term's founder, argues,

> The word 'ungrading' means raising an eyebrow at grades as a systemic practice, distinct from simply 'not grading.' The word is a present participle, an ongoing process, not a static set of practices. Ungrading is a systemic critique, a series of conversations we have about grades, ideally drawing students into those conversations with the goal of engaging them as full agents in their own education. (p. 6)

An ungraded classroom is a purposefully participatory, student-driven, learning-focused space.

With the conventional pressures of grades removed and the chance to learn without penalty from mistakes, students are, ideally, freed to pursue learning for its own sake. Ungrading, for me, meant three key things: i) that students would not be receiving number or letter grades on their assignments throughout the term; ii) that they would have opportunities to revise and resubmit their work after receiving my feedback; iii) that we would decide their final grade in conversation. At its core, ungrading means reversing or undoing the harm that grading can have on learning.

Many teachers today are sharing their ideas and approaches to ungrading, and as David Clark (2024a), one of the co-authors on the *Grading for Growth* blog, maintains, "There are as many helpful and effective ways to implement alternative grading as there are people using it" (para. 30). Following the lead of my ungrading colleagues at Humber College, I decided to use contract grading in my pilot project. This grading approach feels to me like a helpful compromise: contract grading "still uses a traditional [grading] scale but puts some of the control in students' hands" (Blum, 2020a, p. 60) while simultaneously providing "a meaningful, documentable, and responsible credentialed form of credit for learning attainments" (Katopodis & Davidson, 2020, p. 106).With a contract-grading approach, the expectations are clear. The course contract maps out various

categories of final grade and explains both the quality and quantity of work that each category requires. One of the main goals of contract grading is increased transparency, which has been found to alleviate student stress (Gibbs, 2020). Because grades function as currency and hold material importance for students' wellbeing, uncertainty around grades can lead to demonstrable anxiety for students. Contract grading would allow me to step away from the pressures and limitations of traditional grades while still providing students with a clear framework for success.

Emily Donahoe (2024) argues that traditional grades "can create unproductive frictions like fear of failure or lack of self-efficacy," which "leads some students to avoid the more productive frictions of taking intellectual risks or persisting through challenging tasks" (para. 7). If the anxiety around grades is reduced or eliminated, there is room for discomfort and "productive uncertainty" (Jesse Stommel in conversation, October 2023) in other areas—students are free to take risks in their writing and in their learning. Instead of writing what they believe the teacher wants to hear, they can write what they truly want to say. Another advantage of the contract-grading approach is that it makes room for greater student agency. Students set their own goals, and not all will be aiming for A grades. The grading contract provides students with respect and agency as they allocate the work of their course loads, employment, family commitments, and lives.

Some argue that contract grading does not go far enough. It is often positioned as a first step in the journey towards true ungrading. That line of thinking is evident in Alfie Kohn's introduction to a 2020 collection on ungrading: Kohn writes that teachers who begin with a contract-grading approach will eventually "see the need to move on to step two—eliminating any sort of grading—if we're truly committed to creating a focus on learning" (p. xv). Kohn advocates for "wiping out grades once and for all" (p. xvi). Others suggest that the metaphors of progress within the ungrading movement are limiting in their linearity (see Clark, 2024a). Ungrading exists along a spectrum and not a hierarchy, and different approaches will work best for different learners in different contexts. For me, a contract-grading approach—which I chose to call "collaborative grading"—seemed to offer the transparency and equity I was looking for.

Inspired by my colleagues at Humber and by the growing research, in the Fall 2023 term, I took a collaborative-grading approach to one section of our first semester writing course, Communications 1013: Critical Thinking and Writing. My goal was to balance clarity and collaboration: I wanted to provide full disclosure about how this section would be different (in case anyone wanted to switch to a different section before the add/drop deadline), but I also wanted to generate our operating principles together, and so I did not want to present an already fully developed model. From the first day of term, the students and I worked together to establish the goals and criteria for the semester. I tried to be as transparent as possible, telling them that the approach we would take together would be an experiment for me, founded on my long-held feeling that grades in a writing class interfere

with learning. I told them that my goal was to provide lots of feedback and lots of room to revise and resubmit (if they chose to do so) for genuine learning and (I hope!) enjoyment, but that I did not plan to assign numbers along the way. I told them that (because the college still requires me to record final grades), we would decide together on the criteria for final grades during our next class.

Together, we drafted our class contract, deciding what each different grade option would look like so everyone would be able to set clear goals, consider their work over the course of the term, and eventually select an appropriate end-of-term number grade. Our conversation acknowledged the fact that for some people, this alternative approach might be a bit anxiety-inducing. Because grades are traditionally such important currency in students' lives, they can become entangled with questions of identity and can serve as a (dangerous) shorthand for questions of intelligence and aptitude. Some students do well in the existing system and might not like the idea of change. Those conversations really seemed to resonate—one student shared that she feels she suffers from "gold-star syndrome," which for her meant that grades below a certain self-imposed standard would lead to anxiety. She worried that she might miss the approval that comes from other people telling her that her work is strong. Others agreed. We talked about how helpful it will be to reflect on your own work and give yourself the gold star, which is more meaningful in the long run. This student's sharing was a strong starting point for our conversation.

Our discussions about the importance of intrinsic motivation and pursuing learning for its own sake led to further conversation about the benefits of being able to clearly evaluate your own performance and communicate your strengths and needs to others. I was able to frame those skills as very practical for the workplace (and for life!). Other ungraders have taken a similar approach, highlighting the strategic benefits of this alternative take on assessment, reminding students that "You should know exactly (or close to it) what your boss is going to tell you when you walk into your yearly performance review. And you should have a say in the review itself—otherwise it would be considered unfair. Why are grades any different?" (Sorensen-Unruh, 2020, p.148). I tried to emphasize this same idea, that it's important to develop the ability to reflect honestly on your work and accurately describe what you've done well and your goals for growth, and then to be able to advocate for yourself and for your learning needs. That idea seemed to resonate with students.

From that broad starting point, we moved to small-group discussion. I asked students to talk together and write down their ideas together about answers to two primary questions: 1) What should it take to record an A for yourself at the end of term? and 2) What support do you need from me for this to work? The student groups shared many suggestions. I had already suggested the basic principles of our approach—feedback instead of numbers, room for revision and resubmission, a collaboratively decided final grade—and they developed many of the practical details they wanted

to see implemented. Students were vocal and on topic throughout this conversation. Students said that success meant attending class and participating in class conversations, submitting assignments on schedule, and reading my feedback and revising their work. They wanted to see effort rewarded in some way. They suggested a two-week window for resubmitting work. In answer to the second question (which asked them to describe the supports they would need from me), they asked that I deliver real criticism and not just praise. They wanted honesty. They also requested that I reserve the right to veto a suggested grade. I was surprised to see that request, but I suspect it may be a sign of their apprehension in moving away from the traditional systems they've known. There were many pieces of this conversation that we could (and perhaps should) have continued, but I felt we were racing the clock at this point: the add/drop deadline was looming, so we carried on. I left with their generous notes, and we planned to review together during our next class session.

Using students' content, I generated a draft contract describing the practices and achievements required to earn a final grade in each grade range. I posted the document to our Learning Management System (LMS) with a social-annotation feature enabled and asked students to add notes in the margins. We began our next class by reviewing the contract and comments together. Students seemed comfortable with the plan. (See Appendix A for our co-developed course contract.) At the close of the semester, students would reflect on both the quantity and quality of their work and degree of engagement with the course and propose their own final grade within the range that corresponds to their achievements and practices; our contract included reminders that if I disagree with a student's proposed final grade, we will meet to discuss, and (as mentioned) that I will reserve the right to adjust (Note 3).

We moved through the semester with our agreement in place. Most students participated regularly in class discussions and activities. I provided prompt and thorough feedback on assignments. Especially because students were limited in the time available for revisions, I felt it was important to provide them the opportunity to revise and resubmit as quickly as possible. I tried to use my feedback to celebrate students as writers and to help them identify potential clarifications and improvements. With support from my college's Teaching and Learning Centre, I modified our LMS gradebook to bypass number and letter grades until the very end of term. Instead of numbers, students saw colour-coded labels in the gradebook (missing, needs improvement, meets expectations, or exceeds expectations) on individual assignments throughout the term.

Throughout the term, I reminded students often that they were welcome and encouraged to revise and resubmit (Note 4). For each resubmission, I asked students to share their self-reflections with me. These instructions appeared with each dropbox: "When submitting a revised version of your work, please include your answers to the following questions: which pieces of the work did you feel could be stronger? Did my

feedback match your thinking? What work did you do to revise? How do you feel about the piece now?" I'd imagined that these self-reflections would help me to learn which pieces of feedback were most valuable for students; I also hoped the regular reflection process would help students prepare for the final reflection at the end of term. I believe that regular reflection supports true learning and, as Jesse Stommel (2023) argues, that the main goal of most education should be to help students think more clearly about their own thinking (p.71). Fostering that kind of metacognitive practice is one of the central goals of this course.

  The revisions and resubmissions I received from students were, for me, one of the highlights of this ungraded approach. Not all students chose to revise their work, but many made revision a regular part of their process. Many students submitted multiple drafts of the same piece (sometimes as many four or five). One of the most encouraging trends from my perspective was that many students regularly chose to revise and resubmit even after their work had reached the "exceeds expectations" level. Some students chose to correct only surface details, but others' revisions were often very thoughtful and thorough reconsiderations. The accompanying reflections shared that they appreciated my feedback. Many were beginning to anticipate my notes and were beginning to share that they had addressed those elements in advance. I was genuinely happy to see new revisions arrive in the LMS dropboxes: it was a quick and rewarding process for me to compare the document versions and celebrate the changes that had been made.

  I was impressed with the numbers of resubmissions, but I was even happier with the true engagement I was seeing with the feedback I had provided. Ungrading "is built around the idea of engaging with feedback loops" (Clark, 2024a, para.15), and students were engaging. They read my notes. They reread their work. They noticed patterns. They made connections across assignments. They identified their strengths as writers. They noted struggles that stayed with them from one piece to the next, and they asked for advice on how to improve. They regularly thanked me for my suggestions. This was the type of engagement I had dreamt of. I noticed an interesting and unexpected carryover here: I knew their individual voices well—much better than I'd known the voices of students in previous sections. In full class discussions, I could point to their various strengths on the spot and celebrate their accomplishments with examples. I think that familiarity, combined with my readerly notes on their work, helped them to see themselves as writers.

  During one of our final sessions together, the students and I talked together about their transition back to graded classrooms for future classes. Knowing that most of their teachers would continue to assign grades to their work, I wanted to strategize with them about how they could take what they'd learned from our class and use that knowledge to their benefit. We talked about the importance of regular feedback and reflection. I encouraged them to look for clarity and transparency in assignments and rubrics, and if

they didn't see what they were looking for, to advocate (respectfully) for change.

We also strategized together about how they would select a final grade for our course. We reviewed the course contract we had created together, and I asked them to begin to reflect on the category that they felt best represented their work throughout the term. The grade ranges are broad—10% for each—and so we also talked about how to discern a fair grade within that range. I encouraged them to be generous with themselves if they felt undecided. In traditionally graded classes, when I've been on the fence between two grades, I make it my practice to default to generosity. I wanted them to have permission to do the same. One student asked what would happen if everyone awarded themselves an A—what would I do then? My response was that if everyone advocated for a grade of A, and if that grade was a fair representation of their work, I would record final grades of A and we would celebrate. They laughed, but they were clearly also surprised. They assumed I was not allowed to turn in high grades across the board. Their educational experiences to date had taught them that in order for some students to succeed, others had to fail—that even in courses that weren't graded on a curve, some sort of ranking and range would still be institutionally enforced (Note 5). In future years, I will ensure that conversation is shared earlier in the term. It's important for students to know that there is room for all to succeed.

The students' final reflections were interesting and thought-provoking. I asked them to frame their reflection as a letter to me in which they considered their work throughout the term and proposed a final grade. I found many students proposed final grades that corresponded to the range I had expected for them. In those cases, I responded to the ideas within the reflection letters and followed up with an email confirmation to the student, which thanked them for their hard work and clarified that I supported and would record the final grade they had proposed for themselves. I was intentional in my language: I said that I "support"—and not that I agree with—their final assessment, which feels like an important difference. I didn't want them to feel like I had a number in mind that they needed to accurately guess. I wanted to affirm the importance of their self-advocacy.

I resisted the impulse to do too much adjusting at the end of term. I found myself tempted to move students up or down just a bit—I felt haunted by the idea of ranking. Peter Elbow (1994) writes that ranking feels like one of the most insidious pieces of the grading system: "Ranking leads students to get so hung up on these oversimple quantitative verdicts that they care more about scores than about learning" (p.3), and it's clearly possible for teachers to become distracted by ranking, too. In the end, I decided that if students had selected a fitting category for themselves, I was satisfied. Together, we'd had conversations about the illusory nature of accurate grades, and I'd suggested that they choose generously once they had identified the grade category that fit their work: with the process transparent, I needed to abandon the illusion of accurate ranks. I did not

want to undermine the self-assessment process. Additionally, if my message was that grades are too often arbitrary, I could not then quibble over minute differences. However, when a student placed themselves outside of the category of our contract that aligned with their work, I felt I needed to intervene.

Several students proposed grades that were higher than I would have expected, and those students did not seem aware of the divergence from our grading contract. In each of those cases, I requested to meet with the student one-on-one. (I had intentionally kept the final week of term open to allow space for such conversations.) I began those conversations by celebrating the student's achievements with as much concrete detail as I could. I then turned to the grading contract and asked how they had arrived at their decision. In each case, the student acknowledged that they had chosen a grade too high before I needed to say anything, and we easily settled on a compromise. Next time, I will consider providing students in this situation with two options: (1) they could choose a grade that better reflects their already-completed work, or (2) if, after reviewing our grading contract, they feel they can improve their work enough to match the grade they selected, they can revise and resubmit (Note 6). I like that providing this choice would again empower students to decide their own grade.

In other cases, students had proposed a grade that I felt was too low (Note 7). That was the case with five students, and in each case, I again asked to meet individually. I followed the same process—highlighting the student's strengths and then turning to the grading contract—but in each of these cases, I needed to clarify that I felt the student had undervalued her performance. Most of those conversations ended in tears and thanks. It was interesting to see that all five of these students were female. Others have noted a similar pattern, finding "a distinct gender imbalance" that leaves female students much more likely to undervalue their contributions (Stommel, 2023, p. 74). These moments felt like important interventions: I could remind these students to value their work. I was grateful that the contract had afforded me the chance to meet with students if our grade estimates varied widely, and I want to ensure a continued balance between respecting students' self-assessments and intervening when internalized bias seems to be skewing a student's perception of self-worth. To do so without placing too much emphasis on the final grade will continue to be a challenge.

My goals are 1) to help all students see the importance of learning to write well and 2) to create a space where they are motivated to learn. Several different pieces can interfere with those goals: students are sometimes pre-conditioned to believe they're not strong writers; they focus on accuracy at the expense of expression; and increasingly, they are tempted to turn to online tools that mechanize large pieces (or the entirety) of the writing process. Underscoring each of these frustrations is the pressure of the traditional grading system, which regularly erodes students' confidence and teaches them to avoid risk and even individuality. I had hoped that the

collaborative-grading approach would alleviate students' stress, and by extension, create space for them to use their authentic voice, engage fully in class activities, revise their work for true learning, and recognize the value of learning to write well. Students told me that the approach worked.

I heard that the class structure gave them room to recognize their strengths, and the ungrading approach gave them room to grow. I believe the structure also made room for a larger number of students to excel. The iterative nature of the course meant that students who devoted time to revision were not penalized by early mistakes. Collaborative-grading is a concrete path to equity, inclusion, belonging and Universal Design for Learning, as well as student engagement, retention, empowerment, and success.

The collaborative grading approach also helped me to be more authentically present. Erica Dolson (2022) shares her experience of turning to ungrading out of frustration with the time and attention that grades seemed to steal from the work of writing. Dolson found that "ungrading brought humanity—both my students' and my own—to the center of the course" (para. 8). I feel the same. I was more myself in my ungraded classroom. I looked forward to class conversations, and I genuinely looked forward to reading students' work. The students read my feedback, they rewrote, they remembered, they improved, they engaged. I can't imagine dropping the option to revise and resubmit.

As Jesse Stommel (2023) notes, ungrading isn't a panacea: no method of grading (or ungrading) will fix a pedagogical approach that is not student focused and equity minded. Collaborative grading provided me with a practical means to highlight and activate an already existing student-centred pedagogy. This was a practical change—one that students could not miss—that prompted worthwhile conversations about the opportunity for and responsibility of learning.

I would like to give students the final word. I share the following excerpts from our end-of-term reflections with the writers' permission:

- "The opportunity to resubmit my work allowed me to see the mistakes and lack of clarity in my writing. With each resubmission I felt as though I improved and learned."
- "The style of writing and revising gave me the opportunity to get better. Instead of one chance one grade approach. … It's like I don't want to be done writing so I hope that I get the opportunity to do so given the work load."
- "I look forward to your feedback every assignment I submit. It has helped me realize and fix my mistakes, hopefully in the future I make less mistakes in my writing. I have resubmitted at least once of every assignment if not more, I have enjoyed resubmitting and making my work better. … I have enjoyed this class more than I expected too, as writing is not my strong suit. Throughout the semester I feel like I have grown with my writing skills as well as participating in class conversations and workshops. … I appreciate

all your feedback and I thank you for doing this experiment in this class. I have enjoyed it a lot."

- "I first want to start this letter off by saying thank you. Thank you for allowing this class to make mistakes without being judged so harshly on them. Thanks for giving us the chance to fix those mistakes and talk about how we can learn from them and what to do next time. Allowing us to take risks in class and write about what we are passionate about or even just relate to is a breath of fresh air."

- "Everything was respectful in the class. I felt very comfortable to participate in the class discussion, so I did, more than I normally would in any other class. I knew that even if I wasn't quite on the right track, I would be met with alternatives in a way that would allow me to feel confident in being able to try again."

- "This term was challenging; however, it was rewarding. Reflecting on what I achieved and how far I've come from the beginning of the term as a writer is uplifting… Your feedback helped me learned strategies of how to improve the effectiveness of my writing. It guided my revisions. I used your suggestions, comments, and explanations throughout the revision of my work. I felt better and happy in every revision made. I am proud of myself because I felt I'd gained and developed skills in writing."

Note 1: See especially Schinske and Tanner (2017) for a full account of the "relatively young and constantly changing nature of current systems of grading" (p. 159).

Note 2: Some postsecondary institutions use narrative-style feedback instead of final grades even on final transcripts: see, for example, University of California Santa Cruz (Stommel, 2023, p. 20). Others (Brown University, for instance) omit failing grades from students' transcripts: see Schinske and Tanner (2014) for details.

Note 3: Some students did not complete the course and did not respond to my attempts to communicate. To address those circumstances, I will add the following line to future learning agreements: "If you do not propose a grade and do not respond to my meeting requests, I will submit a final grade on your behalf, but that grade will not exceed 50%. If you did not complete the course because of an emergency, contact me when you are able, and we will meet to discuss the work that would be required for a grade change."

Note 4: Early in the term, one of the readings I presented as a response option was about perfectionism, and ideas of perfectionism surfaced often in our conversations, both one-on-one and collectively. I intentionally spoke often about the writing process, reminding students that writing is never finished (and certainly never perfect), and that revision leads to increased clarity. Next term, I would like to also have class conversations about how to know when a piece is complete—I will try to remind students that, sometimes, external pressures (like deadlines and

other obligations) decide for us. I want to help students fight against (or at least be aware of) perfectionist tendencies. I suspect it's in part the standard grading process that students have been working within that has encouraged perfectionism. I will remind students that they can hold themselves to a high standard without demanding perfection, and that "perfection is really the opposite of a high standard, because it makes *every* error, no matter how minor or irrelevant, into a critical one" that causes the perception of failure (Clark, 2024b, para. 26).

Note 5: As Jesse Stommel (2023) notes, "having and encouraging high expectations and giving mostly good grades are not incompatible" (p. 29).

Note 6: In that case, however, we would need to meet again to review the finished work, and we may be limited by time. Some of the aspirations of this system are sometimes limited by the practical realities and timelines of our semester: the number of resubmissions may be similarly limited.

Appendix A: Collaborative-Grading Agreement (Fall 2023)

Throughout our semester together, I will provide regular feedback on your work. You will have the opportunity to read that feedback, ask questions, make changes to your work, and resubmit. Our focus will be on the process of writing and not just the final product. I hope you will take risks in your writing. Try to share your true thoughts, write in your own voice, and have fun.

Each of our assignments is meant to build on what's come before, and the goal of my feedback will be to help you improve. I will provide comments on each piece you submit, and instead of a number grade, I will provide you with one of three responses: Needs Improvement (NI), Meets Expectations (ME), or Exceeds Expectations (EE). (If an assignment is missing from the dropbox after its due date has passed, you'll see an I for Incomplete.) If you choose, you may revise your assignment and resubmit your work. If you choose to resubmit, you will add a brief reflection to your piece to tell me about the work you did to revise. (Please see the Resubmission section below for details.) Each dropbox (except our final reflection dropbox) will remain open for two weeks after I've provided feedback on round one.

At the end of the semester, you'll consider your efforts throughout the term and propose a final grade. If I have questions about the grade you've proposed, we will meet to discuss. I will reserve the right to adjust your grade if I feel it does not abide by our contract, but I will do so only after listening to your ideas. If you do not propose a final grade, I will record a grade of incomplete until hear from you.

Reflecting on your own performance is an important skill. Being able to accurately assess your own work, identify what needs to be improved, and communicate those details to your supervisor is extremely helpful in the workplace; I hope this class experience will help prepare you for those conversations.

Here are our expectations for each other:

Participation: Please plan to be present and engaged in class (whether online or in person). While illnesses and special circumstances may sometimes keep you away, we would like you to attend regularly. You are an important part of our classroom community. We will treat each other with respect by listening carefully when others are speaking and sharing our perspective thoughtfully.

Effort: Please choose topics that interest you. Do your best to hear the feedback you receive (from me and from your peers), and if you don't understand or if you disagree, plan to ask questions. Write with passion. Use your own voice. If you choose to bring in sentences or ideas from an AI-writing tool, include a note about that borrowing in your document. Please keep your use of those tools to a minimum: it's your voice I want to hear. If you have ideas about how those tools could help you, let's meet to discuss.

Resubmission: If you've submitted your assignment on or before the due date, you can choose to resubmit up to two weeks after you've received my feedback. Two weeks after the initial due date, the dropbox will close for new submissions. At the top of your revised document, please answer the following questions: Which pieces of the work did you feel could be stronger? Did my feedback match your thinking? What work did you do to revise? How do you feel about the piece now?

Here's what you can expect from me:

- detailed feedback about your work, pointing out strengths, weaknesses, patterns, and possibilities;
- clarification of assignment directions and expectations any time you need it;
- help (through additional meetings and check-ins) when you share a need;
- assistance in finding a topic that you care about;
- understanding when life events happen that bring you away from the class; and
- my full effort to make this class an enjoyable, useful, rewarding experience for each of you!

Criteria for Final Grades

If you've met the following criteria, select a grade in the 90-100% range:
☑ I submitted all assignments on schedule (and/or contacted Erica in advance if I needed more time)   ☑ I participated thoughtfully in class conversations and peer review   ☑ All or most of my submissions reached the "Exceeds Expectations" level   ☑ I considered Erica's feedback and revised for improvement where possible   ☑ I challenged myself to improve my writing this term

☑ My self-reflection shows that I have thought about my writing process and goals
If you've met the following criteria, select a grade in the 80-90% range: ☑ I submitted most assignments (at least 7 of 8, including the final essay) on schedule (and/or contacted Erica in advance if I needed more time) ☑ I participated thoughtfully in class conversations and peer review ☑ At least six of my assignments reached the "Exceeds Expectations" level ☑ I considered Erica's feedback and revised for improvement where possible ☑ I challenged myself to improve my writing this term
If you've met the following criteria, select a grade in the 70-80% range: ☑ I submitted most assignments (at least 5 of 8, including the final essay) on schedule (and/or contacted Erica in advance if I needed more time) ☑ I participated thoughtfully in class conversations and peer review ☑ At least four of my assignments reached the "Exceeds Expectations" level ☑ I considered Erica's feedback and revised for improvement where possible ☑ I challenged myself to improve my writing this term
If you've met the following criteria, select a grade in the 60-70% range: ☑ I submitted most assignments (at least 5 of 8, including the final essay) on schedule (and/or contacted Erica in advance if I needed more time) ☑ I participated in class conversations and peer review ☑ All of my assignments reached at least the "Meets Expectations" level ☑ I considered Erica's feedback and revised for improvement where possible ☑ I challenged myself to improve my writing this term
If you've met the following criteria, select a grade in the 50-60% range: ☑ I submitted at least six assignments, including the final essay, and I submitted most on schedule (and/or contacted Erica in advance if I needed more time) ☑ I participated in some class conversations and peer review ☑ At least five of my assignments reached at least the "Meets Expectations" level ☑ I considered Erica's feedback and sometimes revised for improvement ☑ I challenged myself to improve my writing this term
If you are missing more than two assignments, or if you did not complete Essay #2, you may need to select an F grade and repeat the course. If you are considering this option, please speak with me.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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