# [A Case against Grades](https://www.teachingprofessor.com/topics/grading-feedback/a-case-against-grades/)

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Iused to fret quite a lot over my grade distribution. If I gave too many As, did that mean my courses lacked rigor? If too many students failed, was I a bad teacher? My thinking has shifted to a greater concern over student learning and I don’t put much thought into the grades I assign. I wish for my students to do the same.

**Grades, in of themselves, are meaningless**

I was recently contacted by one of my students who had incorrectly completed a quiz question and was curious to understand her mistake. She sent me a long email outlining her logic, identifying what she thought was her error, and asking for clarifications. By the time this student and I were finished exchanging notes, I was confident that she understood the material as well as, if not better than, her peers who had answered the question correctly on the first try. At this point, this student’s grade did not reflect her current knowledge, and so I gave back the points she missed.

We all know that feeling at the end of the semester when final grades have been calculated and we’re agonizing over those students whose numerical grades do not reflect their learning in the class, because ultimately, learning is often not linear. I have spent hours wondering whether I should bump a student up to a grade that I feel they deserve even when the numbers don’t quite work out in their favor. After much reflection on this topic, I have decided that since we submit grades whether or not student learning has happened, the grade itself to some extent lacks meaning.

**Intrinsically motivated students thrive without grades**

My aversion to grades is personal. Growing up, I attended a Waldorf school based on the Rudolf Steiner philosophy of anthroposophy, a pedagogy that postulates that students must independently experience the world to develop holistically. At Waldorf schools, elementary students do not receive any homework, and teachers do not assign grades. This practice sometimes continues even into the high school level, where in lieu of grades, teachers give students written evaluations. The Waldorf rationale is simple: students need to be intrinsically motivated. As a result, students suffer few consequences for underperforming in a Waldorf setting. I vividly remember working hard as a child to produce beautiful work because I understood that it was a direct reflection of my abilities. I studied seriously for exams because I wanted my teacher to see what I had learned, and I practiced skills like handwriting and violin because I genuinely wanted to be good at them. I did all of this without the incentive of earning a certain grade.

Consider the role of grades in graduate school. In PhD programs, students conduct research as a result of intrinsic motivation, not grades. A young science scholar does not arrive on campus at 2 a.m. to feed hungry cells or give up Saturdays to collect data for fear of scoring less than 50 percent. No, that student’s desire to glean and create new knowledge motivates their research progress. Doctoral candidates progress through their studies with little oversight or graded feedback. In the absence of grades, graduate students continue to publish papers, write theses, and eventually graduate, all presumably because of a genuine desire to learn without immediate reward. As for undergraduate education, grades did not emerge as a common practice for undergraduates until the late 1800s (Durm, 1993). Academia is, at its core, historically gradeless.

**Grades are not helpful and sometimes hurtful**

I know this might sound outrageous, but Waldorf teachers across the globe will tell you that the model works. Carol Triggiano, a Waldorf educator for almost 30 years, and my teacher for eight of them, assures that students work hard when they trust and respect their teachers. From her perspective, grades do little more than train students to regurgitate facts. In my own experience, I can tell you that I remained a motivated and engaged learner throughout my childhood without the stress of earning grades. After the eighth grade, I transitioned from Waldorf into a traditional educational setting, and I couldn’t believe how quickly the desire to “earn points” captured my energy and focus. Even as someone determined not obsess over my GPA, once I was “measured,” it was difficult not let grades determine where I focused my attention. As a student, I often found that grades did not influence my desire to learn and at times even dampened my passion.

**Research that backs what I experienced**

Reward-based systems have diminishing returns according to researchers in motivational psychology, which is consistent with how Waldorf School teachers describe their experiences. Even though incentivizing is the root of many approaches to parenting, teaching, and business; behaviorists suggest that incentives only momentarily change behavior and lack a lasting impact (Kohn, 1993). Humans are actually less likely to complete the same tasks when a previously available reward is suddenly absent. In short, if a student earns points or a grade in exchange for learning, their long-term motivation and intrinsic desire to learn can actually decrease (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

**Ungrading as an alternative**

Ungradingat the college level offers a new perspective on assigning grades that mirrors the Waldorf pedagogy and yet remains one of higher education’s best-kept secrets. Aside from some brave (and usually tenured) pioneers, professors often approach the idea of not assigning grades with trepidation. Others try it quietly, fearing backlash from colleagues or administrators. But the absence of grades clearly benefits college students too. Evidence shows that when instructors provide feedback without a letter or numerical score, students read, review, and internalize that feedback more than they would if a grade accompanied the feedback. Jesse Stommel, a strong proponent of ungrading*,* describes a variety of approaches that include metacognitive exercises, peer assessment, portfolio development, and student-developed rubrics to achieve a mutually agreed upon final grade (Stommel, 2018).

With ungrading, students do not receive a numerical or letter score for their work during the course, and their final grade is usually determined through collaboration between the student and the professor. Even though our impulse as educators might be to imagine a high level of student anxiety when they can’t calculate an exact grade, proponents of the practice describe satisfied students who have agency over their learning. An ongoing and frank dialogue about whether a student is meeting expectations is essential in the absence of grades.

**How to implement ungrading in your classroom**

Teachers interested in ungrading can start by temporarily withholding grades from students. I have found particular success in the method whereby I collect exams, scan them, and return the unmarked copies to the students. As a class, we review the exam, discuss the correct answers, and consider what types of mistakes are significant and which ones are trivial. Students then assess their own performance and assign themselves a score. I incentivize them to take this task seriously by telling them that if their scores are within five points of my own, I will grant them the higher value. While this method ultimately results in an assigned grade, I have found that it encourages students to review their work and consider their mistakes and ask new questions about old course topics. While ungrading has been more commonly implemented in humanities and the arts, STEM professors may also find that their students better master the material with ungrading—at least, that has been my experience.

**Cultivating a love of learning**

I believe that what we want most for our students is learning that continues after the course ends. The objective of building a lifelong love for learning is a highly sought after but difficult to measure goal. I believe that continuing to put performance metrics front and center in the learning process diminishes student motivation and ultimately reduces intrinsic interest in knowledge. Emphasizing grades has the insidious effect of taking the genuine desire to learn away from most of our students. By putting performance measures first, we put student learning last.

**References**

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