

13 Grading on Merit and Achievement: Where Quality Meets Quantity

Stephen Adkison and Stephen Tchudi
University of Nevada, Reno

Stephen Adkison is a graduate student in rhetoric and composition at the University of Nevada, Reno. He is associate editor of Halcyon, a journal of the humanities, and a co-director of the Truckee River Project, an interdisciplinary summer institute for teachers held annually at the University of Nevada, Reno. He is particularly interested in writing instruction, interdisciplinary and environmental literature, and the implications of brain research for language-learning theory.

Stephen Tchudi (introduced on the Editor page) chaired the NCTE Committee on Alternatives to Grading Student Writing.

"Kneel before the judge," orders the bailiff, a rough-looking dude who reminds us of a football player from an English 101 class.

"All others please rise," he continues, and we become aware from the shuffling that there's a large crowd in the hall behind us.

Through a window to the left, we are shocked to catch a glimpse of a guillotine, sunlight glinting off its razor-sharp blade. To our right, we see, is a jury, and we gradually realize that it seems to be made up of former students of ours. We smile at them, happy to see familiar faces. They do not smile back. Our gray prison garments stick to our sweaty bodies.

"The charge, your worship," says some lawyer-type guy decked out in a sharkskin suit, "is that of grading inequity."

He smooths his slick black hair with his palms, and the jury nods at him. He paces toward the jury box and continues: "The question is one of fairness and equity."

Somebody in the jury says, "Amen, brother!"

The lawyer raises his fist in a rhetorical flourish: "A question of specificity and honesty."

Somebody else shouts, "Right on!"

The lawyer crosses back over to us and glares: "A question of just how it is one gets an A in this course."

"So how *do* you get an A?" sneers the lawyer, "or a B for that matter, or a C plus, or even . . ." (and here he pinches his nose while speaking) "add Evv?"

We finally understand what's happening and speak up.

"Well," one of us says, "we're modern writing teachers, so we give A's for things like *ideas* and *structure* and *personal voice*."

"Yeah," the other adds, "like, we don't grade for grammar or mechanics or things like that. We want to encourage our students to write."

"Encourage?!" sneers the lawyer, while the jury giggles. "So tell me Mr. Wiseguys, just what's an 'A' *idea*, as opposed to a 'B'? What's a 'C' in *voice*?"

"Well, that's a little hard to say," we begin.

"Hard to say?" asks the lawyer, imitating our intonation. "Don't you grade for *clarity*? For *specificity*? For *details*? Please be *clear*, *specific*, and *detailed*. Tell us the difference between an A paper and a B+, or B- versus a C+."

"Well, clarity is, you know, clear," one of us says, and the jury listens, waiting for more. Somebody snorts.

"And voice," we say, "we can easily recognize it in student writing."

"Just give us a writing sample."

"And a rubric."

"We can show you."

"You see!" screams the lawyer, whom we now recognize as that prelaw kid to whom we gave a C- a few years ago, "They don't know! They really can't tell us what those grading criteria are. 'Guess what I like,'" he mimics, "'and I'll give you your A.'"

"I've heard enough," screams the judge, "Off with their heads!"

Thus ends our living nightmare of putting letter grades on student writing.

There are many good reasons *not* to grade student writing, ranging from the psychological to the pedagogical. In this essay, we'll concentrate on just one of these: the rhetorical difficulty of articulating grading standards—in advance, with clarity and detail—that tell students exactly what one believes to be "good" writing; what kind of writing the teacher will reward with an A; why a paper, after going through the proper stages of the writing process, might still wind up as a C. We will offer our rationale for what we call "achievement grading," an approach that allows us *not* to put grades on individual papers, and we'll illustrate and discuss problems with this system through anecdotal evidence from our university classes. By articulating our approach to grading, we hope to end our nightmares, or at least, to face the jury with a clean pedagogical conscience.

Writing quality, we have come to realize, is virtually inseparable from the context of writer, audience, occasion, and content. From the beginning of rhetorical history, scholars from Aristotle to Quintilian and beyond have tried to describe the abstract or general traits of writ-

ing. They have spoken of organizational structures and patterns, the characteristics of good style, and matters of language purity and propriety. Yet much of the writing advice that one finds in current-traditional handbooks—our inheritance from the classical and neoclassical traditions—seems to us empty and unhelpful. What is a good topic sentence as opposed to a bad one? A solid reason or piece of evidence as opposed to a shaky one? Clear, concise, and coherent prose as opposed to the unclear, inconcise, or incoherent? Although the rhetorical generalizations are interesting, none of these descriptions seems to us precise enough that a well-meaning writing teacher can explain to students, in advance, just what an A paper will be. The rhetoricians would have as difficult a time in court as we would.

We believe that until a writer begins drafting—trying to hammer out a poem or essay or story about elephants or mermaids or his or her life—the criteria, rhetorical or evaluative, remain vague. Once the process is under way, the teacher/rhetorician may be able to offer advice—“You seem to need more evidence about elephant memories”—or even grading hints—“This seems to be shaping up as an A paper.” But before the fact and before the judge, one is limited to vague generalities, to waving rhetoric books and rubrics at one’s students.

The solution we have explored in our own teaching is what we call “achievement grading.” (We hasten to add that we see this only as a partial solution to the grading dilemma.) In simplest terms, the approach awards higher grades to the students who complete a wider range of work or who go into ideas and topics in greater depth than their peers. Achievement grading has its roots in so-called “contract grading” and “point” systems, where students receive credit for completing tasks successfully and do not receive grades on papers per se (see Kirschenbaum, Napier, and Simon; Knowles; and O’Hagan, this volume). Actually, we have to say that our first choice in teaching would be not to grade at all, but to have the schools—or, at least, English/language arts classes—run on a pass/fail or credit/no credit system. Achievement grading attempts to implement what amounts to pass/fail within the confines of the grading system:

- All work is “graded” credit/no credit (or pass/fail or successful/unsuccessful).
- The requirements for credit are stated in terms of *tasks* or *assignments* to be completed. The criteria for credit usually specify both the amount of work to be done (quantity) and the kind of thoroughness and polish required for acceptance

(quality). The teacher may be the sole determiner of tasks and criteria, but usually students are involved in the negotiation of both.

- Students get points, grades, or other rewards on the basis of how much creditable work they do.

One sees a kind of achievement grading at work in Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer*. In Tom's Sunday school, the children are given colored ribbons for reading Biblical verses. Ten ribbons of one color can be turned in for one ribbon of the next hierarchical color; ten of those can be converted to a ribbon of a third color; and ten of those can be exchanged for the big prize, one's own Bible. Tom shocks the Sunday school superintendent by turning in the necessary ribbons to earn the Bible, even though he acquired them through bartering, not reading. (Achievement grading, like the Bible ribbon program, needs to include various checks and measures to keep students on track and within the rules.)

In fact, Tom's experience with reading ribbons in Sunday school parallels the more recent summer reading programs for young readers found in public libraries nationwide. Though varying in specific details, these programs typically recognize readers as they reach reading goals based on how much they've read throughout the summer, rather than on whether they've digested what this librarian or that considers "essential" to their young minds. One scale we're familiar with openly encourages young readers to undertake voyages of discovery by designating four successive levels: "vagabond," "adventurer," "explorer," and finally, "discoverer." The youngsters must read ten books to gain "vagabond" status and then ten more books for each successive level afterward. Achievement is recognized at each level with a certificate indicating that the recipient has met the requirements for that level and is acknowledged to be an "adventurer" or "explorer" and so forth. The youngsters are encouraged to read and then to read more; each book encountered and completed adds to their progress up the scale of the reading program. Certainly, by summer's end, different readers will end up at various points along this scale (as do students engaged in achievement grading at the end of the term). Freed from grade tyranny (but having their good work praised), many children read more than they otherwise would have, and many read a prodigious amount. Better yet, most of these programs are set up so that the young readers are not only rewarded for reading, but are encouraged to choose what they will read, discovering their own motivation to read.

Then there's scouting—both boy and girl—which plays a major role in the lives of huge numbers of young people, an *educational* role, we might add. In the scouts, a hierarchy of tasks is arranged. The more of these one completes, the higher up the ranks one goes. The tasks are clear and explicit: "Cook a meal on an open fire." "Do a safety inspection of your house." There's no puzzlement over A's and B's or the fine gradations of a C+. A mentor adult or older scout monitors the process to make certain the job is well and thoroughly done. In scouting, learning is self-paced, incremental, and interdisciplinary; the rewards are clear and unambiguous. Without idealizing the program (there *are* problems in the merit badge approach to learning and rewards), it has occurred to us that the schools could do worse than to convert the curriculum to something like the scouting awards program:

You want a diploma? You want a Bible? You want to be a "vagabond"? You want to go to college? You want to prepare for a job? Here's a list of things you can do to qualify.

This list of tasks required to qualify for a specific grade forms the backbone of our approach to achievement grading. The tasks spell out, in concrete terms, what is expected of students in the classroom. Rather than struggling to master vague and context-dependent concepts—"structure," "voice," "clarity," "specificity," and the like—students are shown a number of assignments that must be completed during the course of the semester. All tasks are pass/fail or credit/no credit, with the possibility that unacceptable work can be redone until it is creditable. (We'll tackle the obvious problem of defining "creditable" before we complete this paper.)

We have found that, given a set of tasks that must be acceptably accomplished, students spend less time trying to determine what we, the teachers, prefer and more time working on the tasks before them. In short, students encounter less ambiguity surrounding teacher expectations and course requirements, and they find focusing on the course easier.

For example, here is how Steve Adkison structures the achievement grading in his freshman composition class, English 101, a required course in the University of Nevada's core curriculum. Conceptually, the aim of English 101 is to encourage student development in various levels of the intellectual process through writing and other whole language activities, a sequence of writing that moves from *observation*, *interpretation*, and *analysis* to *integration* and *synthesis*. Since most of the students entering freshman composition classes are new to

the university community, many come to the 101 class anxious about both the course itself and college in general. They are worried about “making their grades” for a premed or other grade-conscious concentration, and some are simply concerned about passing the course and staying in school. Grade consciousness often outweighs any interests they might have in developing their writing and thinking skills through an active exploration of the writing process.

In an attempt to break the ambush these anxieties often spring in writing courses, Adkison establishes a performance-based evaluation system in his 101 classes. The system is based on specific requirements for both B grades and A grades; though some students do end up receiving C grades (mostly for failure just to do the work or to come to class), this emphasis on B’s and A’s helps focus students on higher rather than “acceptable” goals. In fact, any students who normally pursue, at best, C grades often find themselves actively working for higher grades than they would have in a traditionally evaluated classroom. To earn a B, students must:

- attend the class regularly, coming prepared to participate actively in class discussions, readings, and small-group work; more than three absences will lower the final grade one full letter;
- maintain an informal writing journal, responding to all assigned readings as well as both in-class discussions and out-of-class field trips. Journal entries are made both in class and assigned as homework;
- complete several (from five to seven, depending on the specific syllabus) out-of-class field trips which form the basis of several in-class activities. (As an example, one of the field trips requires the students to find and observe someone that interests them in some way and to write a description of that person and what he or she is doing. The descriptions are read and discussed in class as a way of looking at significant details and how they function in specific writing contexts);
- complete five formal essays assigned during the course of the semester. Though these essays are generally structured to move students through the overall course aims, the specifics of each assignment are open-ended and broad enough to allow students a wide range of approaches and possibilities; and
- develop a final portfolio consisting of further revisions and polishing of two of the five formal essays. The students choose which of the two essays they will revise, and include

all draft materials, the essay as it was originally accepted, and the final polished revision.

Moving beyond the basic requirements for a B in English 101, the requirements for an A encompass all of the B requirements and also encourage students to push themselves beyond the work done in the classroom. The A grade requires students to develop a project that they pursue independently over the latter half of the course. Suitable projects might range from a sixth formal essay to reading projects that are designed to immerse students deeply in a particular interest they wish to explore. The particulars of these projects must be negotiated individually with the instructor and completed according to agreed-upon criteria. This A approach reinforces the idea that A grades are reserved for work that goes beyond the baseline effort required to complete the course.

None of the requirements—for a B or an A—is graded, *per se*, but rather all work is evaluated as either “credit” or “no credit.” Since the 101 students are not pressured to write “A” papers—papers the instructor will “like”—most spend much less time struggling with what they think the instructor wants and more time creating their own approaches and developing their essays. As a result, the vast majority of work turned in by these 101 students is creditable the first time around. And creditable work is by no means merely marginal work but must be complete and thorough.

A wonderful example of this work occurred during a segment of the course in which the class focused their discussions and writing on western land and water issues. One of the students, a former C student in his high school English courses, committed himself to an A project—arguing that control of federal lands in Nevada should be turned over to the state—a view decidedly at odds with most of the rest of the class, including the instructor. Because his initial drafts were emotionally loaded patchworks of evidence cookie-cuttered from various media sources and merely pasted together, he at first failed at moving his classmates to take his argument seriously in group discussions and peer workshops. Rather than retreating to a position which he knew to be safer and more acceptable with both his classmates and the instructor, he instead decided to work harder at being heard and understood; he scrapped his original approach and went on to develop an appealing argument supported by carefully considered evidence drawn from both his original media sources and personal anecdote. The essay he turned in for “credit” had evolved far beyond his original cut-and-paste report approach and was, in fact, a model of

original synthesis. In the end, though he did not sway the whole class, his voice was not only heard and understood, but also respected by his colleagues. This experience motivated him throughout the rest of the course as well and was reflected in the high quality of all the work he did. His A project in achievement grading turned him into an A student.

Overall, this approach to evaluation presents course requirements in specific, concrete terms focused on work to be accomplished, which helps allay from the beginning the anxiety and dissonance many students experience in the course of trying to “figure a class out.” Moreover, lack of ambiguity in expectations is only the beginning of several other benefits we have found with achievement grading. One student wrote on a 101 course-evaluation sheet that the achievement grading system allowed him “to worry less about what the teacher expects and concentrate more on doing my work. Since I am free to try different things for different assignments, I care more about what I am doing. I *want* to get all my work done. I *want* to do a good job.” Another wrote that she “was able to focus a lot more on the ‘quality’ of my work, rather than simply making sure I did it.” Yet another was sure that “I’ve written some of my best essays in this class because of not having the burden of a grade resting over my head. This helps bring out the true writer in you because you’re not writing to please the teacher.” All three of these freshman writers echo much the same thought—given the prospect of a set of tasks to accomplish rather than a teacher to satisfy, students often discover motivation within themselves to work that does not exist when they perceive themselves as pursuing a grade rather than getting work done.

We have found that, without grade-driven pressures, students are more likely to take risks in their writing. Sometimes the risks the students take are successful and sometimes not, but whether the risks work, the students are actively learning about “voice” and “details” and “clarity” in rich, context-sensitive ways that are much harder to attain in grade-driven classrooms. This ability to foster personal contexts created by the students themselves is at the heart of achievement grading. Though we argue against ambiguity of expectations, a healthy ambiguity drives the creation of these personal contexts. Since students are presented with a set of tasks to accomplish rather than rigid requirements for completing course assignments, they must decide for themselves how they will accomplish these tasks, what they want to achieve, and how to go about getting the work done. The ambiguities they must resolve are not between themselves and a

teacher's vague expectations, but between themselves and a task they must achieve. Thus is born commitment to the task at hand rather than to the hoped-for grade-at-end.

"But hold on," says a classroom lawyer. "All this talk about 'credible' and 'noncredible' or 'criteria' for projects sounds the same as conventional grading. What's the difference?"

Thanking the lawyer (and noticing that he has straw coming out of his shirt sleeves, as do most straw men), we quickly acknowledge that, yes, there are elements of subjectivity in our criteria. Furthermore, we can't always state in advance how the criteria of acceptability will work out for particular papers in particular contexts. The critical point is that we have shifted grading away from sliding scales (from F to A) and that we describe criteria in terms of completion of the job rather than abstract rhetorical traits. In addition, the system shifts the development of criteria away from the professor toward the students. The question is not so much "What does the prof want?"—although some of that inevitably enters in—as "What do the prof and I think has to be done to make this a credible paper?"

Of course, our expectations as teachers do play an essential role in this process; we decide what is and is not "credible." However, since we negotiate these expectations with students individually, our expectations are refined and attuned to the particular contexts each student has created instead of being thrown, blanket-like, over the entire course. Not only is this easier for our students to grasp, but we also find ourselves struggling less to define what is and is not acceptable for a given grade in our classrooms:

Want an A in this class? Here is a list of tasks to complete for the grade. Now decide how to approach each task and we'll talk about whether your approach is credible for each task in turn.

Most important, perhaps, is to observe that in the vast majority of cases, the work that is submitted *is* "credible." We find that freed from the vise of traditional grading, students feel free to do their best. We talk candidly with our students about traditional grade pressures, and we tell them that we respect their maturity and refuse to use a carrot-and-stick approach. We tell them that we want their best efforts, regardless of grades, and we feel that our students respond well to that opportunity and invitation to operate under their own sense of values. We occasionally receive work that shows evidence of being done the night before or just before class or having simply been poorly executed or conceived, and we send it back. But for the most part work

comes in well executed, so we can praise it, credit it, and move on to the next task.

Furthermore, achievement grading breaks down an important barrier by placing the teacher on the same side of the evaluation fence as the student. That is, relieved of the responsibility of being a judge, the teacher can face a much more interesting task: that of helping students do the right thing, to be the best that they can be. With achievement grading, the criteria for what makes something "creditable" or "noncreditable" diminish in the face of more important questions: "How's your paper coming, Samantha?" "Are you reworking the paper the way your discussion group suggested, Paul?"

Thus we move closer to being able to face the jury when the time comes to assign grades for the course. Because we've left room for the students to participate in deciding what they learn, we've also given ourselves the flexibility to enunciate our expectations relative to real contexts, not vague, unspecific cover-it-alls.

Designing this structure or, more accurately, flexibility of structures presents some of the greatest challenges in setting up a course based on achievement grading. Keeping in mind the essential principle that in achievement grading, more (quality) work is better, we have explored a variety of ways of issuing rewards, of moving from a collection of student work toward the grade that must appear on a transcript:

- In an intermediate writing course, "C" is the baseline grade for completing four papers (plus basic attendance, readings, participation, etc.); the B is awarded for maintaining a writer's notebook throughout the term; the A is tied to the development of an independent project.
- In a freshman seminar where the C, again, covers core course requirements, students can nudge their grade up through the pluses and minuses by completing self-designed mini-projects. One project moves you to C+, two to B-, six to an A. (We see this system as directly related to the scouts' merit badge plan, except that the students design the requirements for the badges.)
- In another intermediate writing course, we've used a straight contracting system in which (while completing the core requirements) each student designs and argues for a B project and/or an A project, or a single project that will carry the weight of an A, after the class has discussed the general criteria. Students write a proposal for their projects early in the course, including a discussion of their goals, their planned procedures, their timetable, and a set of criteria that they and

the instructor can use to determine whether the project has been completed successfully.

- In a British literature/writing course, we created the “clock-watching option,” where students, beyond the C, spend up to thirty hours in reading and in writing about their reading to move up to the B, and thirty more for an A. The students began searching the library vigorously to find books related to the course topic and read and reported on those books, logging in hours as they proceeded. The students were particularly appreciative of this system because, as they noted in evaluations, “some people read slower than others, and this system doesn’t penalize you for that.”
- In an undergraduate “capstone” seminar on children and children’s language, the B and the A could be earned for reading varying numbers of young adult books, coupled with volunteer tutoring in the schools.
- In another freshman composition course, we used a point system: points awarded for attendance, for completing core projects, and for completing advanced projects. Points varied for a range of projects—writer’s notebook entries, journal or diary entries, short “experimental” writings, work done on a family history, or extra work done on papers being submitted for other courses.

With these kinds of grading frameworks, we’ve been able to open up our writing classes to a wide range of activities and writing adventures. Among the projects we’ve been able to credit are

- writing one’s own obituary in advance;
- creating a learning center on a Native American reservation;
- analyzing the power structure in an institution, including the university, one’s family, or a job;
- mastering a new skill (cross-country skiing, elementary German) and writing a how-to book;
- interviewing people on a key topic;
- writing a string of letters to newspapers, public officials, university administrators on getting things done;
- examining the rhetoric of people who write letters to editors and public officials;
- creating media projects of all sorts: composing through film, video, photography, sundry magazines, or even the World Wide Web.

Recalling that our purpose as teachers is to assess and evaluate, not just to grade, we have discovered that achievement grading sup-

ports and even encourages us to extend the range of assessment devices and systems. Where conventional grading essentially requires that all students be processed with the same assessment tools, be they portfolios or standardized tests, a grading system based on accomplishment can use many different forms of assessment. In fact, part of determining what is "creditable" involves having the students design appropriate tests and measures. "What are your goals in this project?" we will ask frequently, "and how will we know whether you've met them?" Some students have problems with this process at first. We've had them say, "Well, I don't know, but I guess we'll know in the end" or even "Well, if you [the teacher] are satisfied, I'll be satisfied."

Those aren't good enough, and we push our students to think of other criteria, other measures. They may, at the conclusion of a project, want to survey their readers or audience and ask for response. They may establish publication (say, of a letter to the editor) as a measure of success. We encourage them to submit journals and notebooks and scrapbooks as evidence, to turn in drafts and revisions as proof of change; we've had them propose to keep project logs or diaries as part of the assessment process. In some classes, we even employ more-or-less conventional tests, if there is specific content that we think all students should know. (Tests are "graded" pass/fail or credit/no credit and can be reworked if students have not demonstrated mastery.)

Like any system, achievement grading has its problems. (Please recall our original assertion that if we could, we'd work exclusively under a pass/fail or credit/no credit system.) What follows are some hard and skeptical questions raised about achievement grading. As phrased, they may sound as if they were raised by negative critics, but in fact, these are critical questions we've raised ourselves over the years, as we've prepared ourselves to face the jury of our nightmares. Here then, are some foil questions, followed by some of the answers we've worked out for ourselves:

How can you justify completion of a "wider" range of work as leading to a higher grade? Would a composer of one piece of brilliant music be more brilliant if he or she composed twelve very different major pieces? We believe that breadth of experience is as important as depth in a limited area, in that students are exposed to a greater range of voices, perspectives, and techniques. This wider exposure, we argue, is instrumental in students' learning to situate their own perspectives in the broader worlds of academe and community. Indeed, this wide range of work has often resulted in greater overall depth of experience for our students than

would have been possible in more narrowly focused situations. No, composers might not be considered “more” brilliant merely on the basis of the number of pieces they have composed. While some composers might be considered brilliant on the basis of a single composition, we feel brilliance is most normally recognized in those composers, and students, whose accomplishments span a range of areas and situate their work within a broader context. Thus, rewarding students for a wide range of work in fact rewards them for striving toward brilliance.

Similarly, how can “greater depth” be measured in such a way as to avoid vagueness? Vagueness regarding “depth” cannot be avoided if we attempt to measure it before the fact. We can, however, within the context of an individual paper on a given topic, measure relative depth. Generally, and vaguely, speaking, a given paper exhibits greater depth if the student has integrated a range of perspectives sufficient to synthesize her own position in such a way that it accounts for or explains the most possible variables surrounding an issue. The broader the range of experience a student integrates and synthesizes into his own context, the greater the depth of experience that will result.

*What about the student who chooses to work for a C or a B? Can one justify a system where students opt for anything less than the top grade? Of course, we’d like to see all students get A’s. (We don’t worry about the alleged evils of “grade inflation” in a system we did not create.) But we have to be realistic—we teach mostly *required* courses that students might not have selected otherwise. We know that students have varying interests in signing up for a writing course. At the beginning of the semester, we urge students to consider going for top grades; we make it clear that even students who’ve never gotten an A before can do so under achievement grading. We then accept the students’ decisions about the grade they wish to seek.*

*Doesn’t this system overly reward the drones and worker bees? Possibly. We *have* had achievement-oriented students march through our courses cranking out required and optional projects at a great rate, sometimes almost mindlessly. Although drone-like work will sometimes be “unacceptable” because it lacks vigor or depth, we’d have to acknowledge that some worker bees effectively bypass course involvement. We also have to boast that we’ve had worker-bee types who set out to do the minimum, efficiently, and who got hooked on enthusiastic work, precisely because the system encourages students to think,*

act, and assess for themselves, something that the worker bees have previously failed to learn.

Clearly, not all work done in your courses is of the same absolute quality or quantity. Doesn't the system reward different amounts and qualities of work equally and thus inequitably? We worry about the student who does an exquisite project and gets the same final grade as a student who did an adequate job. We justify this to ourselves, though, in that we are seeking each individual's best work. Although there are clearly differences in the absolute quality of student work (which would be quickly marked up and down in conventional grading systems), what we're seeking is individual growth, not standardized or Procrustean growth or quality measured with a Platonic evaluation scale using vague criteria. Our final grades represent an ongoing assessment of each student, coupled with a final evaluation relative to that student herself or himself. The grade is individualized and not necessarily to class norms and certainly not to the vague norms of the larger, mostly conventionally graded, university community. We recognize that, just as one student's A in our classes may not represent the same quality as another's A, an A or a B or a C in our classes may or may not correspond to an A or a B or a C in a conventionally graded class. We make no apologies for this. Remember, under achievement grading, the most important tasks the students accomplish involve individual growth and motivation; these, not the final grades, are their true rewards.

What about late work, sloppy work, or work that just plain doesn't make the grade? We've built some safeguards into our system. We warn students that late work can lead to a lowered grade, as can consistently hasty work. We also make it clear to students that the higher grades—B's and A's—are available only to those who do a topnotch job at the core level. We are candid about this with our students, and an important ground rule in achievement grading calls for the instructor to confront students early on with work that is not up to par. As for work that is simply not up to minimum standards, if a student has some sort of learning handicap, we make allowances even as we seek help for that person. If the work is subpar and we think the student has the ability, we tell him or her so and hope for improvement. If that doesn't come about, we've been known to give failing grades, not as punishment, but for failure to achieve.

Aren't these sliding standards? Aren't you guilty of what you attacked earlier in this article—grades or marks that are created ad hoc, as the student

writes, rather than a priori, before writing, when criteria are needed? We plead semiguilty. We do offer students generalized criteria before they write: We want writing that is clear and concise, shaped to an audience, well structured, filled with personal voice, carefully drafted, edited, and proofread. We then refine those kinds of criteria (involving the student as well) as a paper emerges. What we're doing, we think, is *acknowledging* the context specificity of most writing—that you don't really know what will make a good paper until you've written it—and thus demystifying it for the students.

What about the student who slides along all term and then does a dramatic finish? We also advise the class that we don't reward catch-up work, that the most spectacular finish in the world will not save the grade. There's no last-minute substitution or negotiation where B or A projects come to replace basic work that has been missed.

This system might be OK at the college level, where students are mature, but could it ever work at the lower levels? We've asked ourselves that, in part, because we do a good deal of work in the K–12 schools. In fact, Steve Tchudi first learned about and developed this sort of system when he was teaching public high school and working as a collaborative teacher in the middle school and elementary grades. Our experience is that achievement grading has the same successes and experiences the same problems at other levels. More important, we believe that because of its stress on goal setting and legitimate assessment (as opposed to grading), it helps teach skills of independent judgment and assessment that have, by and large, atrophied under conventional grading, K–College.

The guillotine we saw from the courtroom looms before us. The lawyer stands beside it, his hand resting on the trigger that holds the blade poised aloft.

"How's this for clarity?" he yells above the crowd, a cruel smile twisting his face.

"Here, have some more detail!" screams another ex-student, loosing an overripe tomato.

"Try this idea!" another bellows. "Is it developed enough for you?" he yells, letting fly a cabbage that smashes into the cobblestones in front of us, splattering our filthy gray clothes.

The lawyer sweeps his arms wide: "Let's show 'em a sense of audience," he roars to the crowd gathered to watch our humiliation.

"I was so confused I couldn't write for two years after I got a C in English!" shouts someone in the mob. "You're getting what all writing teachers deserve!"

"I tried to write what my teacher wanted," cries out another, "but all I was told was 'you need more voice' and 'be more specific.' What does that mean? I wish we could drag the whole bunch of them to the guillotine, and we will!"

"We were only trying to help, to give you ownership of your own writing, to help you discover your own voice," one of us pleads.

"Freedom; we wanted to give you the freedom to discover . . ."

"The freedom to discover what?!" another student screams. "That no matter what we try, it's never what we need to get an A!"

"You don't understand," we beseech the crowd. "We meant . . ."

"That's just the point," interjects the lawyer. "We *don't* understand; we *never did*. And it's your fault and the fault of every English teacher who ever dished out a C- or D+!"

A hooded executioner moves us into position under the guillotine blade and straps our necks to the block. The bailiff places a basket under each of our heads.

"Ideas, Structure, Voice!" half the crowd begins chanting as the other half responds with "Clarity, Specificity, Details!"

The lawyer grins and cracks his knuckles.

"Any last revisions before we turn in the final draft?" he sneers.

We look at each other hopelessly; we've only got one card left to play and we're not sure about it. One of us shrugs at the other and begins anyway.

"W...w...well, we could, like, just not give grades on essays at all; you know, kind of a credit/no credit approach."

"Yeah, we could try giving you a list of tasks to complete for the final grade."

"And you could decide how to approach each task and talk with us about whether your approach is acceptable in each case," the other chimes in. "We'll negotiate one on one to clarify the ambiguities."

A frown crosses the lawyer's face; his hand trembles on the guillotine's trigger. He gestures to the bailiff: "Let them up; we need to hear more about this."

The bailiff unties us from the guillotine, and we stand, hands still bound behind us. The crowd looks at us expectantly. We look at the lawyer. He's waiting.

"We want to give you room to participate in deciding what you learn," one of us begins.

"We'll give ourselves the freedom to create standards based on real papers, not vague unspecific lists of goals," continues the other.

The lawyer is resting his chin in his hand, thinking. The crowd is hushed.

Suddenly it dawns on us that we had good answers all along, that we could have faced the jury with a clean conscience. We could be graded on our own achievement! A smile splits the lawyer's face. He signals the bailiff to release us as the crowd begins chanting, "There's no grade like an A!"

Works Cited

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Interlude

Talk of power redistribution in the classroom has been popular for the past few years. But it is just talk if the teacher still retains the final evaluative say, which in the classroom is the single most powerful tool. Grades are a vortex around which all classroom activity whirls, pulled inexorably toward. They create a vacuum around which power and classroom politics cling, mooshed to that empty center by centripetal force. And at the same time, learning flies centrifugally to the farthest edges of the classroom environment.

I know lots of teachers are working their tails off to mitigate the effects of the grade. Portfolio systems are becoming more popular, in part, because they compensate for part of the ill effects by putting a bit more evaluation responsibility on students (at least in those systems where students compile their own portfolios), and they disperse a bit the authority teachers have by bringing colleagues in on the evaluation process.

I think, though, that as long as the teacher retains the final say, each effort to get past the grading barrier is going to be crippled to some extent. As long as teachers reserve that right, contracts and any other attempts to reconfigure authority can be undercut and even be disingenuous. I think if we're going to share authority with students, it's got to be authority and really shared. They have to have a real say in what grade they get, or it's just a sham and it's worse than the good old honest straightforward teacher-as-sole-judge-and-jury system.

—Eric Crump
University of Missouri-Columbia