

## Incorporating ungrading into writing classrooms

JENNIFER ALTMAN

*Summary: Incorporating ungrading into writing classrooms via self-assessment surveys, ungraded reflection essays, and the first two, ungraded essay drafts afforded three teachers at the UW Intensive English Programs time and cognitive energy to give students the best writing guidance we could, resulting in final drafts with clear arguments and support. Ungrading freed us to offer the best constructive feedback we could and our students to experiment with ideas and language.*

*Keywords: DEI, ungrading, grading, assessment, writing*

### Introduction

As discussions around Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) have increased in post-secondary educational institutions, conversations around grading have emerged: What is it, what is its purpose, and what is its impact on learning? Kohn (Blum, 2020), in his introduction to Blum's *Ungrading: Why rating students undermines learning (and what to do instead)*, discusses how the fixation on grades can lead to students cheating, gaming the system, and not learning. Delpit (2019) asserts that assessment encourages learning where grading does not. Moreover, learning a language requires students to take risks, and yet grades discourage that (Akimoto, 2023). Over several years of department conversations in the University of Washington's International and English Language Programs' Intensive English Program, my colleagues and I struggled with how to "grade" writing: how could we simultaneously give students room to take risks, and grade their writing? Two colleagues and I embarked on an experiment with "ungrading" in an academic reading and writing course at an upper level of our IEP and found success. We found that students' writing skills and confidence were boosted when we taught students how to set and assess their learning goals, to write reflection essays that would be ungraded, and to write the first two drafts of their content-based essays that would be ungraded, but to write the third draft that would be graded. In this article, I will first define grading, launch into three classroom activities we employed, and end with a discussion of the implications of employing aspects of ungrading in our Intensive English Program (IEP) writing classes.

Until August 2020, the University of Washington's International and English Language Programs included an Intensive English Program. As the program was closing, the IEP had approximately 200 students, aged 18+, from approximately

15 different countries who were planning to matriculate into an undergraduate or graduate program in the US. The IEP had 5 levels (5 was the highest level and 2 the lowest; while we had curriculum for level 1, we never had a lot of level 1 students) and the academic reading and writing course that inspired this research was a level 4 course that met 5 days a week for 2 hours a day.

### Grading versus ungrading versus assessment

While differentiating *ungrading* from *grading* and *assessment* is challenging, it is important to understand each term. *Grading* involves evaluating students' performance, but it is an unreliable measure because it incorporates criteria like attendance and participation that are not direct measures of learning (Carnegie Mellon University, n.d.; University of South Carolina, n.d.) and may be based on vague or inconsistently applied standards (University of South Carolina, n.d.). *Assessment*, on the other hand, can measure learning from ungraded, beyond-the-course skills like critical thinking, and emphasize achievement of specified learning outcomes (University of South Carolina, n.d.; Carnegie Mellon University, n.d.). Furthermore, *assessment* can be employed to determine how a course's assignments and tests are meeting specific learning outcomes (University of South Carolina, n.d.). *Ungrading*, however, according to Blum (2020), involves changing the question from *What score did I get?* to *What did I learn?* especially when it involves self-assessment and instructor-student conferences. Furthermore, *ungrading* means using a single-point rubric (was the assignment completed or not?), which affords students the opportunity to take risks and experiment with writing while it affords instructors cognitive energy to offer high quality constructive feedback (Blum, 2020).

## Case study 1: Skills self-assessment surveys

Turning from extended definitions of grading, assessment, and ungrading to the first case study, we will see how ungrading, as employed via self-assessment and conferences, becomes a circular process in that students receive feedback and incorporate it until there is no more feedback to give (Blum, 2020). The first element of ungrading in our sections of the level 4 academic reading and writing class became a series of three self-assessment surveys that we gave students over the course of a quarter: a pre-course, mid-course, and end-of-course skills assessment (which were initially created by Giurca and then adapted by Altman, Giurca, and Smolker). In the pre-course skills assessment, we asked students to identify which of the learning outcomes represented their strengths and which their challenges. Then, we asked them to set specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and timely goals to improve their language skills. With the mid-course skills assessment, we asked students to assess how they were doing in terms of meeting their goals: Were they meeting them or did the goals require revision? With the end of the course skills assessment, students evaluated how effective their goals were. In asking them to set, revisit, and revise their goals, these surveys helped students recognize that learning is their responsibility, assessment is circular, and knowing how to self-assess learning is important because as students advance beyond language learning programs into degree programs or jobs, they will be expected to assess themselves (Akimoto, 2023).

## Case study 2: The reflection essay

Once students had set their goals for the quarter, we introduced the reflection essay: a weekly reflection on whatever we had read and discussed plus a topic-relevant discussion question for their group. To build automaticity into essay formatting so that students could focus on expressing their ideas in writing, the reflection essay was a one-page essay that conforms to North American academic essay conventions. If students had reflected on the readings and on class discussions as well as included a discussion question, they earned full marks—this is ungrading (Blum, 2020; Inoue, 2022). In other words, we did not evaluate the quality of their writing; we just used a one-point rubric: had they followed the instructions and submitted the assignment (Blum, 2020). This freed us to offer high quality feedback on how well they had communicated and supported their ideas and to offer language instruction tailored to each student. In the classroom, we put students in small groups of 3 to 4 and had them read their ungraded reflection papers aloud and discuss their questions. This presented us the opportunity to conference with each student about the third, graded draft of their essays while everyone was meaningfully engaged listening and discussing with their group. In addition, it presented students the opportunity to both hear one another's work (which normalized reading one's writing aloud, a useful revision strategy) and engage in civil discourse.

## Case study 3: Multi-draft essay writing

With the practice gained in the process of writing the reflection essays, students embarked on writing essays in response to a prompt that asked them to support their position using the course readings. In coordination with my colleagues, we asked students to submit three drafts of each essay. The first two drafts would be ungraded while the third graded would be graded using the department writing rubric, in compliance with department policy. We found that ungrading the first two drafts gave us the cognitive energy to give thorough constructive feedback. Following a lot of work on the readings (including, but not limited to vocabulary, focus and discussion questions, paraphrasing, and summarizing for each reading), we gave the students a writing prompt and did an in-class write for the first draft so that we could support them as they were writing (which has the side benefit of making it more difficult to cheat). We returned each of the first two drafts, gave students (who were already in groups of three to four) time to read through our feedback and then they were to help each other incorporate the feedback. While the students were doing that, we sat with each group and conferenced with students individually or as a group according to their needs. In these conferences, students would get answers to their questions and we would get answers to ours. Ungrading allowed us to focus on giving quality constructive feedback and conferencing allowed students and teachers to work together on writing so that by the third draft the students' writing had improved significantly.

## Conclusion

Ungrading helped the students feel included in the writing process because we teachers were asking them to clarify their ideas. Additionally, it allowed us as teachers to embrace the diverse ideas and writing skills our students had. When we conferenced with each student, we had time to personalize writing instruction to each student's diverse needs as a writer.

My colleagues and I found that incorporating ungrading into our writing classrooms via self-assessment surveys, ungraded reflection essays, and the first two, ungraded drafts of content-related essays afforded us the time and cognitive energy to give our students the best writing guidance that we could give. The result was final drafts that had clear arguments and support. Previously, when we were grading all three drafts against the rubric, we had to split our energy between offering feedback and evaluating, and this left us and our students wrung out and dissatisfied, and our students less skilled as writers. Ungrading freed us to focus on offering the best constructive feedback we could give, and it freed our students to experiment with ideas and language, and to learn how to express themselves clearly in another language. Furthermore, ungrading helped the students feel included in the writing process because we teachers were asking them to clarify their ideas. Additionally, ungrading allowed us as teachers to embrace the diverse ideas and writing skills our students had. What more could we ask for?

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