

# Sowing Seeds for Success: Equitable Grading in the Information Literacy Classroom

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Hello!

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<https://padlet.com/avaandering/LOEX24>

# Who's in the Room?

Please use the QR code to the left to share the following information with the room:

- Your name
- Your institution and job title
- Your relationship with grading
- What satisfies *and* dissatisfies you in respect to your current grading practices

# 1

## Challenges in Traditional Grading

Where does our current system of grades come from?

What do “grades” communicate?

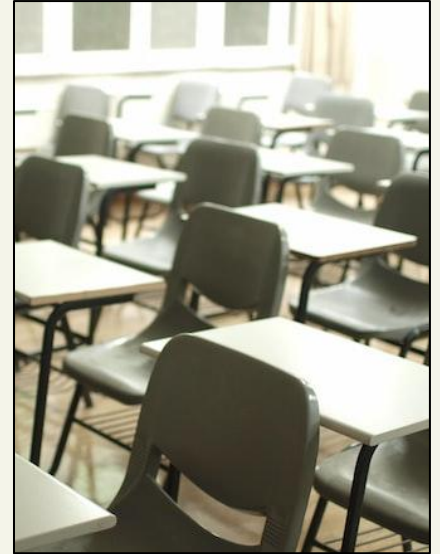
How do grades intersect with issues of equity in education?

# The Rise of the A-F Grading Scale

Gained popularity during the turn to the 20th century with the rise of mass schooling (Rojstaczer & Healy, 2012; Feldman, 2019)

In conjunction with 4.0 and 100% system, the dominant grading scale by the 1940s (Schneider & Hutt, 2014)

Marked a movement from grades as internal communication to external communication (Schneider & Hutt, 2014)





# By show of hands, have you ever been...



1. Worried that your grading was too subjective?
2. Concerned that your grading wasn't reflecting the learning and growth of a student (or class of students)?
3. Overwhelmed, irritated, or disheartened by students' complaints about grades or frequent requests for extra credit opportunities?
4. Worried that your students ignored your feedback?
5. Upset that your students didn't use your feedback?
6. Worried that your grading disadvantaged some of your students?



# Traditional A-F Grading Scale

## *Challenges in Communication & Motivation*

- Failure to accurately communicate student progress (Dressel, 1968; Rojstaczer & Healy, 2012; Feldman, 2019)
- Problem of extrinsic motivation (Beck et al., 1991; Elbow, 1997)
- Negative impact of grades on student performance and interest (Butler, 1988; Pulfrey et al., 2011)
- Leads students to “think less deeply, avoid taking risks, and lose interest in the learning itself” (Kohn, 2006, p. 12)



# Traditional A-F Grading Scale

## *Equity-Related Challenges*

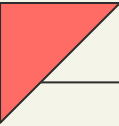
- Implicit bias (Rapchak et al., 2023)
- Challenge of the one-size-fits-all approach for students (Gorichanaz, 2022)
  - Diverse backgrounds and experiences
  - Different levels of knowledge of course content
  - Different classroom experiences
- Impact of COVID-19 pandemic

**EQUALITY** VS. **EQUITY**

**EQUALITY = SAMENESS**  
**GIVING EVERYONE THE SAME THING**  
It only works if everyone starts from the same place

**EQUITY = FAIRNESS**  
**ACCESS TO SAME OPPORTUNITIES**  
We must ensure equity before we can enjoy equality

(Cornell University ILR School, 2019)



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*...“opponents and their critiques have never occupied more than the margins of the discussion over grading and they have done little to dislodge formal marking systems. Grading remains a central feature of nearly every student's school experience.”*

(Schneider & Hutt, 2014, p. 202)



# 2

## Ungrading: An Introduction

What is ungrading?

What is the purpose of ungrading?

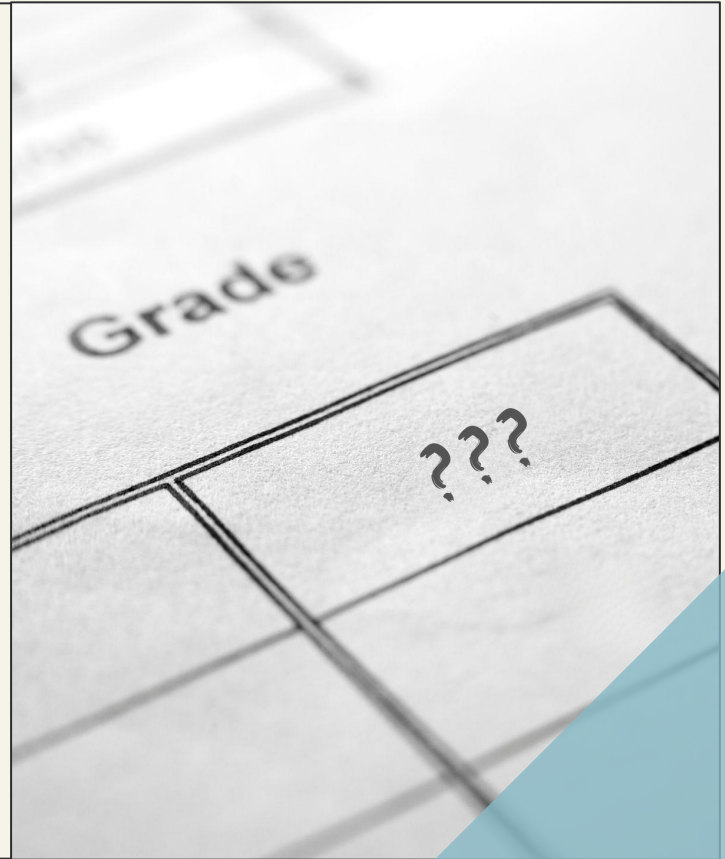
What does ungrading look like in action?

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- 
- 

Let's start by tackling a misconception:

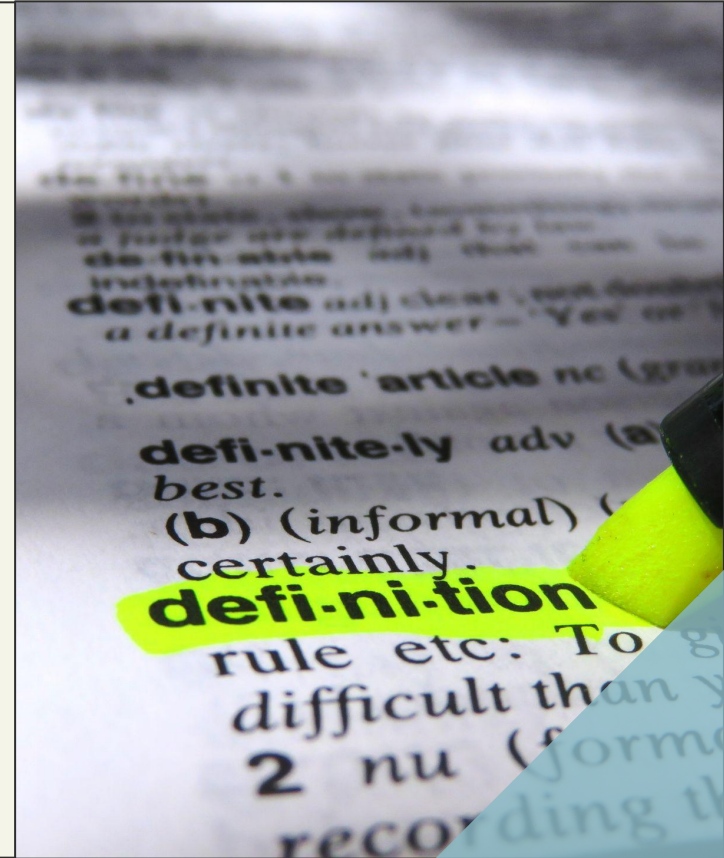
Ungrading  $\neq$  no grades\*

*\*at least not usually...*



# A Flexible Definition of Ungrading

A broader set of assessment strategies and practices that challenge aspects of traditional grading methods (Supiano, 2019; Greenberg et al., 2022)








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# Key Aspects of Ungrading

*An approach that...*

-  □ Decenters the instructor in the grading process
-  □ Provides students with greater autonomy
-  □ Encourages students to engage with critical reflection and self-assessment

(Blum, 2020)

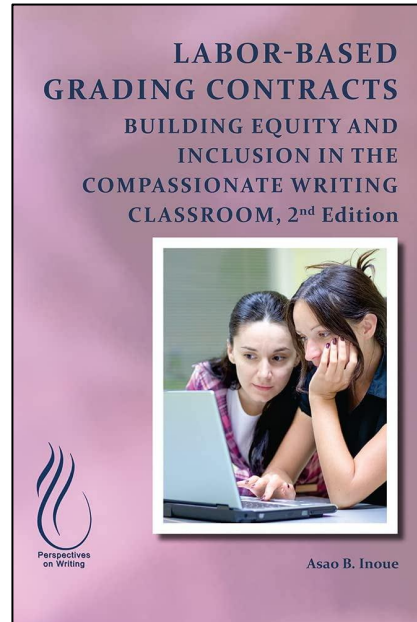
# Ungrading in Action: Examples

Labor-Based Contract

Standards-Based

Specifications

Ungrading



## *How It Works*

- Instructors work with students to develop grade expectations together
- Written contract between student and instructor to outline the work the student will complete (Litterio, 2018)
- Aims to “emphasize activities and behaviors that will lead to learning” (Elbow, 1997, p. 133)



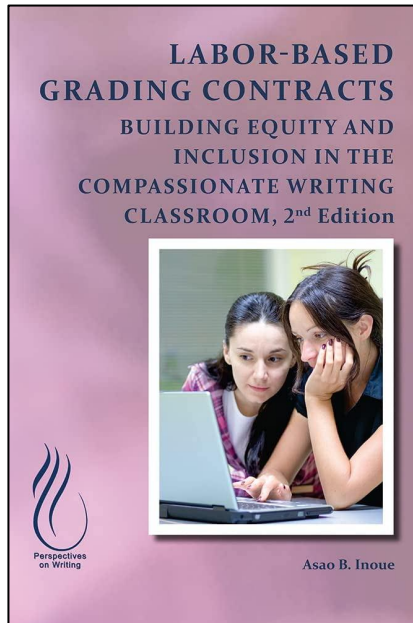
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*Grade could include...*

- Completion of assignments
- Completion of assignment drafts
- Assignment revisions
- Meeting specific assignment requirements (e.g., page length, presentation length)
- Attendance in class
- Participation in class
- Leadership in class

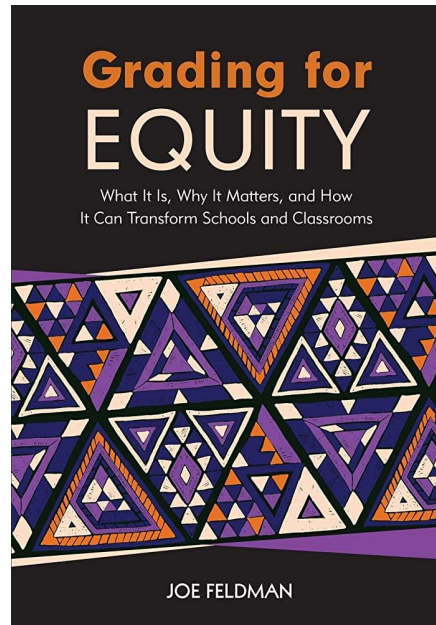
# Ungrading in Action: Examples

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## *How It Works*

- Instructors look holistically at submitted and in-class work to determine how well students have mastered course content
- Concentrates on content-mastery by the conclusion of a course (Feldman, 2018)

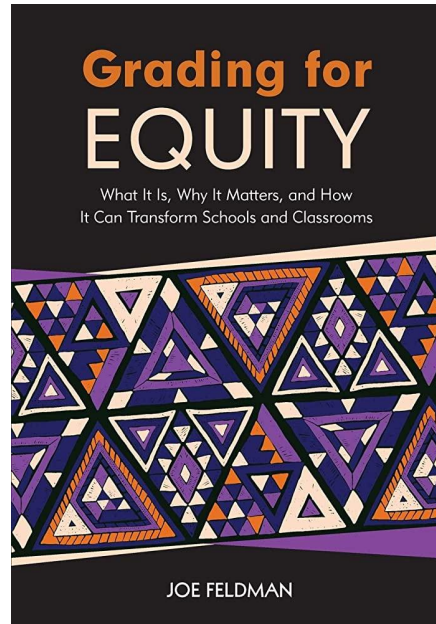
# Ungrading in Action: Examples

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## *Common Practices*

- Elimination of grading homework, participation, and attendance
  - Removal of penalties like late submissions
  - Allows for revisions
- (Feldman, 2018; Alex, 2022)

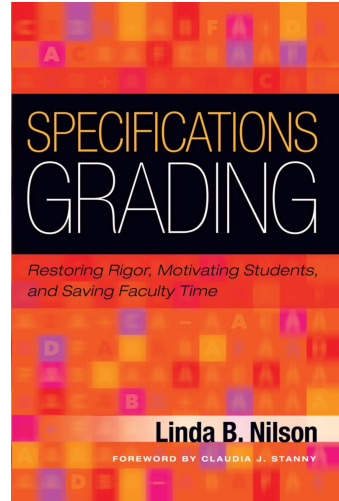
# Ungrading in Action: Examples

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## *How It Works*

- Grading based on achievement (not ranking) of objectives
- Assignments and/or modules bundled to determine grade (Leslie & Lundblom, 2020)
- “Earn higher grades by jumping more hurdles that show evidence of more learning...and/or jumping higher hurdles that show evidence of more advanced learning” (Nilson, 2014, p. 25)

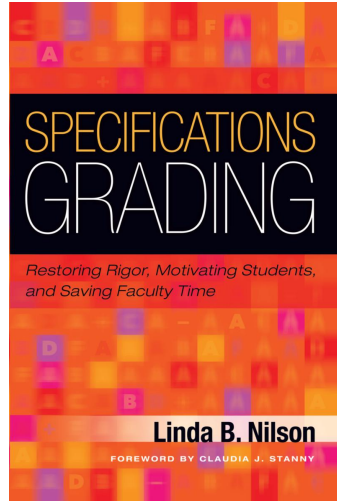
# Ungrading in Action: Examples

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## *Common Practices*

- Assignments graded pass/fail or satisfactory/unsatisfactory
- Provides opportunities to revise work that fails to initially pass
- Detailed instructions explain what constitutes as “passing” assignment
- Bar for success is set with “high yet reachable standards” (Earl, 2022, p. 51)

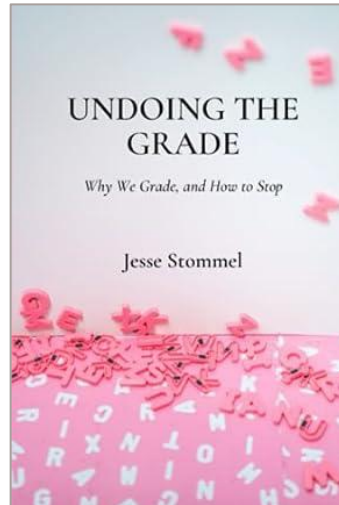
# Ungrading in Action: Examples

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## *How It Works*

- Assignments and projects receive feedback without grades attached (Stommel, 2018)
- Students take an active role in reviewing their progress and assigning their own comprehensive grade
  - Narrative of progress
  - Discussion with instructor
  - Instructor often reserves the right to adjust grade (in discussion with student)



# Common Aims of Ungrading



Center course learning objectives

Encourage reflective thinking

Provide greater flexibility to students

Involve students in assessment process

Increase student agency and motivation

Increase creativity and risk-taking

**IMPROVE EQUITY IN ASSESSMENT AND GRADING**



# 3

## Ungrading in LIB 150

What was the context for this implementation?

Which ungrading method was used?




How was ungrading implemented?





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# LIB 150: Search Strategies for the Information Age



“Introduction to the exploration and practice of information literacy and library research concepts and skills, with an emphasis on the communication of information in today’s world.”

## Logistics:




- 3-credit General Education course
- 24 students: Mostly first or second year
- Multiple sections offered each semester (taught by library faculty)
- Modality: In-person



# Learning Outcomes & Objectives

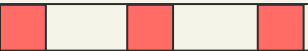


## Course Objectives

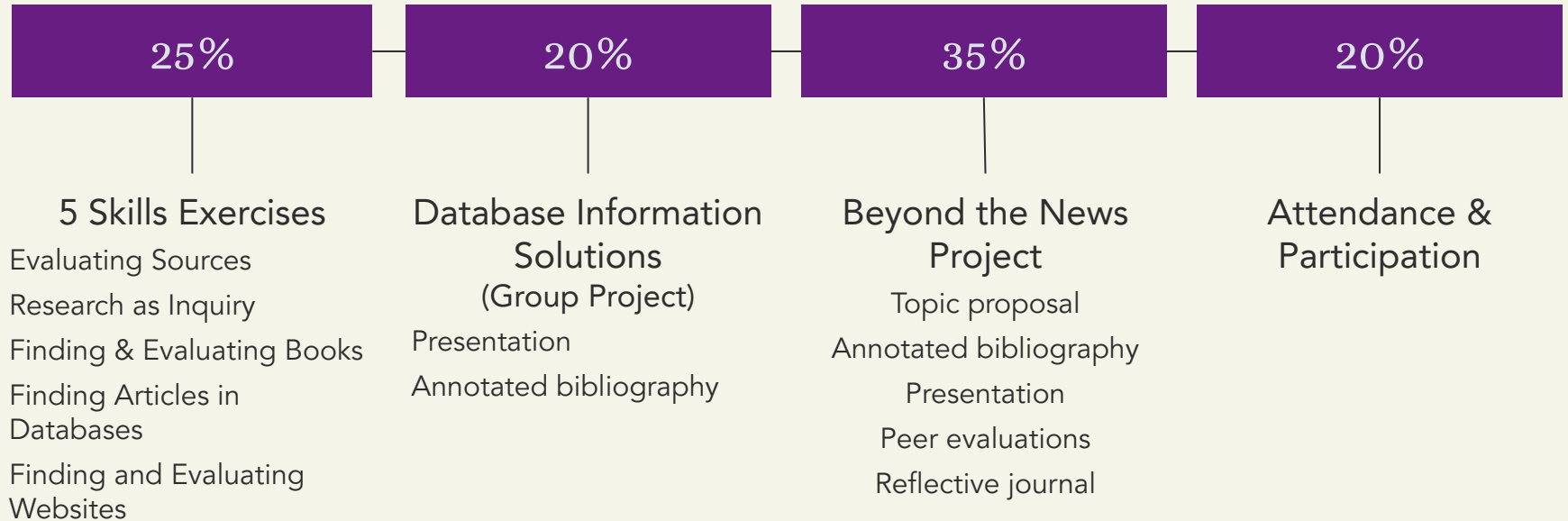
1. Students will be able to navigate print and digital information research tools and use them for both college-level research and lifelong learning.
  2. Students will be able to differentiate information formats and quality and be able to apply these to college-level information research assignments.
  3. Students will be able to communicate their findings effectively to specific audiences.
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## General Education Learning Outcomes

1. Information Literacy
2. Communicating Effectively

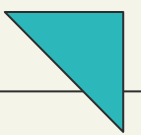


# Traditional Grading: Original Grading Scale



# Traditional Grading: Rubric Example Skills 2: Research as Inquiry

Criteria	Exemplary	Proficient	Developing	Beginner	Criterion Score
Article Investigation	2 points Chart thoroughly and thoughtfully completed. Communicates major ideas, knowledge gained from the article, and finds potential areas of research.	1.6 points Chart completed. Communicates most major ideas, knowledge gained from the article, and potential areas of research.	1.4 points Chart completed. Communicates minimal major ideas, knowledge gained from the article, and potential areas of research.	1.2 points Chart incomplete or not understandable. Chart not submitted. (0)	/ 2
Concept Map	1.5 points Identifies central topic with 4 or more subtopics with several concepts for each topic.	1.2 points Identifies central concept with 4 subtopics. Identified at least 2 concepts for each subtopic.	1 point Identifies central concept with at least 3 subtopics. Identified at least one concept for each subtopic.	0.8 points Wrong central concept identified. Identified 0-2 subtopics. Did not submit a concept map. (0)	/ 1.5
Research Question	1.5 points Includes one compelling open-ended research question that seeks to investigate or solve an issue.	1.2 points Question is open-ended and the issue or problem is clear to the reader.	1 point Question has potential as an open-ended question and/or the issue or problem is unclear.	0.8 points Question is close-ended. No research questions included. (0)	/ 1.5
Total					/ 5



# Initial Roll-Out of Specs Grading

- Why specifications grading?
  - Appeal of pass/fail grading
  - Benefit of revisions to student learning
  - More structure than some other ungrading methods
- First specs grading: Fall 2021



# Specifications: Rethinking the System

## Big Picture

Building grade bundles:

What is the minimal work that can be done to meet all course objectives and learning outcomes?

Which assignments demonstrate basic application of course content? Most complex application?

## Alignment

Revising assignments:

What do the students *need* to do to show they have mastered the content for each assignment?

How can revisions be structured to support student learning?

What does this look like in our LMS (Brightspace)?

## Other Changes

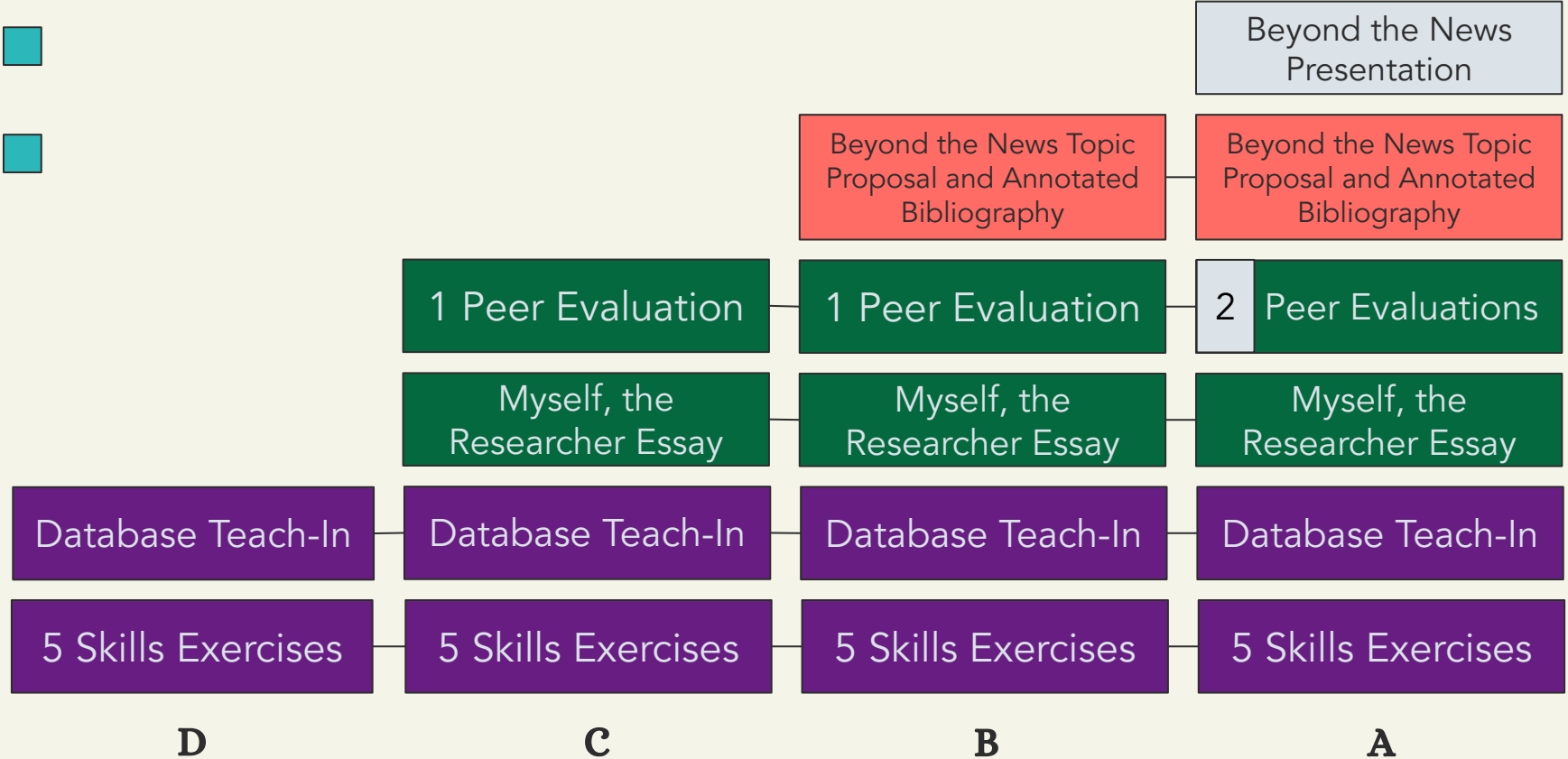
Increasing flexibility and student agency:

Flipped learning

New in-class activities (some menus of activities)

Updates to assignments and projects

# Specifications: Specs Grading Scale



# Specifications: Rubric Example Skills 2: Research as Inquiry

Criteria	Accepted	Revise	Unsatisfactory	Not submitted	Criterion Score
Building a Research Inquiry	<p>10 points</p> <p>Identified at least 3 major ideas, 3 things you know, and 2 things you want to know more about in the article investigation.</p> <p>Created a concept map with a central idea from the article as your major idea, at least 3 main subtopics, and at least 2 concepts for each subtopic.</p> <p>Created one open-ended, innovative research question using the ideas from the article as your inspiration.</p>	<p>2 points</p> <p>Missing one or more of the following requirements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify at least 3 major ideas, 3 things you know, and 2 things you want to know more about in the article investigation.</li> <li>Create a concept map with a central idea from the article as your major idea, at least 3 main subtopics, and at least 2 concepts for each subtopic.</li> <li>Create one open-ended, innovative research question using the ideas from the article</li> </ul>	<p>1 point</p> <p>Missing one or more of the following requirements and work not resubmitted:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify at least 3 major ideas, 3 things you know, and 2 things you want to know more about in the article investigation.</li> <li>Create a concept map with a central idea from the article as your major idea, at least 3 main subtopics, and at least 2 concepts for each subtopic.</li> <li>Create one open-ended, innovative research question using</li> </ul>	<p>0 points</p> <p>Not submitted</p>	<p>/ 10</p>

## To pass this assignment, you must:

- Identify *at least* 3 major ideas, 3 things you know, and 2 things you want to know more about in the article investigation.
- Create a concept map with a central idea from the article as your major idea, *at least* 3 main subtopics, and *at least* 2 concepts for each subtopic.
- Create one open-ended, innovative research question using the ideas from the article as your inspiration.





# Additional Details and Considerations

## *Revisions/Resubmissions*

Unlimited: Allow unlimited resubmission of assignments.

Use of tokens: Provide students with tokens at the start of the semester that they can use for resubmissions.

## *Attendance and Participation*

Ungraded (mostly—limit on number of unexcused absences before failing course).

Use of tokens: Provide students with tokens at the start of the semester that they can use for unexcused absences.

## *Extensions*

Automatic 24-hour extension if contacted prior to deadline.

## *Late Work*

Removed penalties

# 4

## Challenges & Successes

What were initial successes I experienced with ungrading?

What barriers did I experience?

How has my use of specifications grading evolved?

# Initial Successes



## More Equitable Opportunities to Succeed

Revising assignments helps students overcome initial barriers or misunderstandings and build the skills they need to succeed.



## Increased Conversations Around Learning

Students have to engage with instructor feedback in order to strengthen their work.



## Supporting Mental Health

Opportunities for revision helps students mitigate stress and encourages them to take chances in their work.



## Less Pressure during Grading for Instructor

The revision process puts the responsibility for improving work on the student rather than requiring the instructor to provide solutions.

# Challenges



## Communication

Do students understand how their grade will be determined?  
Do they understand how this is designed to support them?



## Rushed Revisions

What if students don't take the time to read feedback and revise their work?



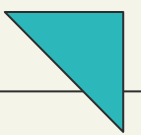
## Doing the Bare Minimum

Will students just do the bare minimum to meet the assignment specifications?



## Flexible Deadlines

When does flexibility start to have a negative impact on student learning? On students' mental health?



# Making Specifications Work

*How has my use of specifications grading evolved?*

- ● Communication (a lot of it!)
- ● Increased student check-ins
- ● Use of tokens for unexcused absences
- ● Introduction of more time to work on assignments in class



# 5

## Final Considerations: Flexibility and Advocacy

What if you're not ready to fully implement ungrading?


Where else can you promote and engage in conversations about ungrading?



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# Mix and Match / Choose Your Own Ungrading Adventure

- ● Consider allowing revisions on early assignments (or assignments that serve as building blocks)
- ● Convert (or create) some pass/fail assignments, particularly metacognitive assignments
- ● Rethink approaches to grading attendance and participation
- ● Use pass/fail on lower-level assignments and traditional grading on higher-level work



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# An Advocate for Ungrading: Engaging with Faculty, Librarians, and Academic Units

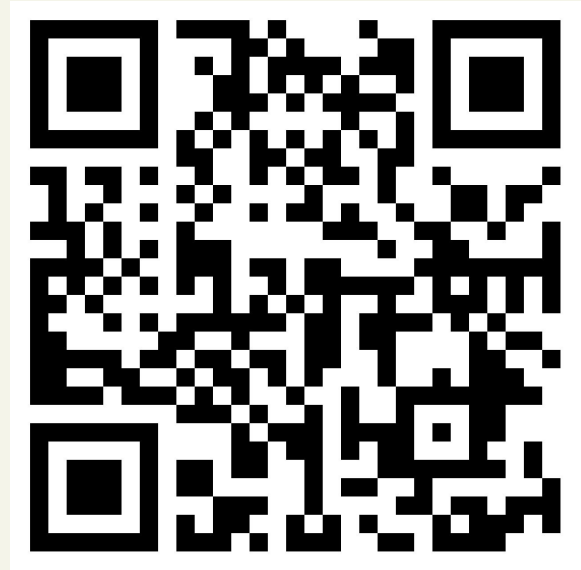
- ● Discuss challenges and/or shortcomings of traditional grading with other librarians and faculty
- ● Share the *what* and *why* of ungrading
- ● Explain why implementing ungrading methods would be useful to specific contexts
- Find campus partners (WRT program? Center for Teaching and Learning? Other faculty?)



# Reflection

How can you apply ungrading to your own work?

- Is there any ungrading method that you can use in your own course?
- Are there ungrading principles you can apply to your assessment?
- Are there faculty or other campus partners you can engage with?



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# 6

## Q & A

Have more questions?

Contact me at

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