**Ungrading** has long been associated with the idea of purposefully eliminating or minimizing the use of points or letters to assess student work. The focus of **ungrading** is to provide extensive feedback to students and then jointly (students and instructors) come to a consensus as to what the grade should be

**Why Are Grades Important? Some Teachers Say They Do More Harm Than Good**

[***Schooled***](https://www.teenvogue.com/tag/schooled) *is a series by Zach Schermele, a freshman at Columbia University, that explores the nuances of the American education system.*

**BY**[**ZACH SCHERMELE**](https://www.teenvogue.com/contributor/zach-schermele)

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English teacher Gina Benz began to worry when several Advanced Placement (AP) students she knew were hospitalized for behavioral health problems in 2010. The need to “keep a high GPA, get that high ACT score, and get into that certain college” was taking a toll, she said. And she felt it, too. Benz used to spend hours grading papers at home — time that she said could have been better spent with family and friends and caring for herself instead of “[drowning in the waters of competitive academic culture](https://www.teachersgoinggradeless.com/blog/anxiety-benz).” Something needed to change.

“Initially, I waded into the gradeless classroom waters for my own wellbeing,” she told *Teen Vogue*. “I wanted to reduce the hours of schoolwork I was doing at home each night. After only a few weeks, I realized that I wasn't getting the benefits I'd hoped for, but my students were experiencing benefits I never anticipated.”

Benz decided to make her classroom “gradeless” two years ago. Instead of “slapping a letter or number at the top of an assessment,” she now focuses on providing her students with high-quality feedback instead. Her students test ideas, make discoveries and embrace failure in an environment where learning is “transformational, not transactional.” Although she is technically required to give a final grade at the end of the semester, that number is based on cumulative evidence of her students’ progress, not a grade average. Benz says her students’ AP test scores haven’t dropped because of the change, and that parents have embraced it. Students tell her they have more “joy for learning” and better emotional health.

“Every week, I hear students talk about being awake until 1, 2, or even 3 in the morning doing homework,” she said. “The gradeless classroom releases students of the pressure that keeps them awake throughout the night.”

Benz isn’t the only teacher who has embraced the “gradeless” movement. In recent years, teachers across the country — from elementary schools to colleges — have cited [mounting research](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4041495/#B11) to express not only their frustrations with the current standards-based grading system but also a need to change it. While most teachers can’t sidestep grades altogether, those with gradeless classrooms have managed to shift the paradigm. Instead of ranking assignments for their value, these teachers focus on giving meaningful feedback and tracking student progress. Although the trend remains nascent, initial reactions and anecdotal evidence from students, parents and teachers suggest the new learning technique may have revolutionary potential.

Aaron Blackwelder, a high school English teacher from Washington state, has been at the forefront of the gradeless movement since 2016. He co-founded [Teachers Going Gradeless](https://www.teachersgoinggradeless.com/), an international network of educators who advocate for the approach. Dozens of educators have written testimonials on the group’s website, which Blackwelder started as “sort of a Wikipedia” for others choosing to go gradeless. While he has been almost completely gradeless for four years now, he began the process of devaluing grades around nine years ago. He had an epiphany when he asked a student to evaluate her own essay during a conference.

“There was no discussion about the strengths of the works nor mention of what could be improved,” he told *Teen Vogue*. “It was a conversation about a grade and not the learning. I still believed in fostering the conversation, however, I realized the problem was with grades and grading.”

After some digging, Blackwelder ditched grades and opted for a feedback-based approach. His decision was informed by the research of several scholars, including [Alfie Kohn](https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/case-grades/), author of *The Schools Our Children Deserve* and *Punished by Rewards*. For decades, Kohn has looked extensively into the way grading can run counter to the learning process.

. “[S]tudies have shown that three things are likely to happen when students of all ages are led to focus on grades,” he told *Teen Vogue*. “First, they tend to become less interested in whatever they were learning. Second, they're apt to pick the easiest possible task — for example, the shortest book or most familiar topic for a project … Third, students tend to think in a shallower, more superficial way.”

[Dual studies](https://www.chronicle.com/interactives/20190719_ungrading?cid=wcontentgrid_6_3list_4) published in the 1980s by Ruth Butler, an education professor at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, bolster Kohn’s claims and suggest that feedback-centered approaches to learning allow students to become more intrinsically motivated, according to a *Chronicle of Higher Education* report. In one study, Butler [looked at the effects](https://books.google.com/books?id=c3YXBwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=embedded+formative+assessment+book&hl=en&newbks=1&newbks_redir=0&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiTgNrvgr3mAhUpqlkKHSAEAnMQ6wEwAHoECAUQAQ#v=onepage&q=ruth%20butler&f=false) of three types of feedback — comments only, comments and scores, and scores only — on student improvement, according to the book *Embedded Formative Assessment* by Dylan William. Her results indicated that the students who received comments on their work performed [30% better](https://books.google.com/books?id=c3YXBwAAQBAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=embedded+formative+assessment+book&hl=en&newbks=1&newbks_redir=0&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwiTgNrvgr3mAhUpqlkKHSAEAnMQ6wEwAHoECAUQAQ#v=onepage&q=ruth%20butler&f=false) in a subsequent lesson. Those who received either scores or a combination of scores and comments showed comparably little improvement.

“Grades tend to put an end to the student caring about the assignment, whereas feedback continues a conversation,” Marcus Schultz-Bergin, a lecturer at Cleveland State University, told *Teen Vogue*.

Schultz-Bergin adopted the gradeless approach because he wanted his students to be “self-regulated learners.” While he admits the implementation in his classroom has been “hit and miss,” he has received a mostly positive response from students and other educators. The flexibility has allowed him to greenlight unconventional ideas for final projects and let his students display their learning in unique ways. But because they still find themselves in graded classrooms on a regular basis, he thinks the perception from others is that it is impossible for students to totally shift their mindsets.

“Professors and students, by and large, hate grades and yet feel there is no other way,” Schultz-Bergin said. “Most people seem to clearly recognize the problems with the current system and dream of something better, but don’t think anything else is possible.”

Further research suggests that the current grading system discourages students from self-evaluating: a valuable lifelong learning skill. According to the book *Visible Learning for Teachers* by [John Hattie](https://www.amazon.com/Visible-Learning-Teachers-Maximizing-Impact/dp/0415690153/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1490846082&sr=1-1&keywords=visible+learning), an education professor in Australia and New Zealand, [one of the most effective educational interventions](https://observer.com/2017/04/teachers-going-gradeless-education-reform-grades/) is self-reporting: when students set [expectations](https://visible-learning.org/glossary/#1_Student_Self-Reported_Grades) for their own performance and strive to improve. Other critics have challenged modern-day grades as unhelpful because of alleged widespread grade inflation and the fact that individual teachers use different metrics for grading. [A 2014 article](http://ehutt.web.unc.edu/files/2019/07/Schneider_Hutt_Making-the-Grade.pdf) published in the *Journal of Curriculum Studies* argues that while the learning process is “inherently complicated and messy,” today’s students — with college applications and scholarships to worry about — can’t afford their grades to reflect that reality; “so educators have made the B minus the new D.”

“My belief is that grades can do more damage to student progress and intrinsic motivation than they can help,” Paul Solarz, a fifth grade teacher from Illinois, told *Teen Vogue*. “How does a 68% on a test help a child improve their skills or knowledge in a subject? How does a C minus on a paper help the student revise and improve their writing? I say that teachers should skip the grade and focus all their time and energy on providing explicit feedback to help each student improve.”

For teachers thinking about going gradeless, Solarz suggests starting small, one unit at a time, with a goal of working up to a gradeless approach on all assignments. While he understands the need for summative assessments, the value of “self-assessment, reflection and goal-setting” over traditional, graded exams is also key in the transition. He said when students take ownership of their learning, rather than letting teachers take the lead, their levels of interest “skyrocket” because grades by themselves simply don’t have the power to make students develop a healthy and confident relationship with the learning process. Most of the time, they do more harm than good.

“When it comes down to it, grades are fairly worthless,” he said.

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