

AGAINST THE GRAIN: AEGIS AND EFFICACY

Start by reading Alfie Kohn's "The Case Against Grades," which you can find at www.alfiekohn.org or by clicking below:

⇒ [The Case Against Grades](#)

You might then consider the extent to which grades have been connected to learning in your academic life, whether you are a student now or a student decades ago. Consider how you define "learning" in your life, and whether grades have hindered your investment in the way Kohn argues they do.

As for the guide you are reading right now: It is not a summary of Kohn's article, nor does it reference the research he cites. The assumption we must make is that you have read Kohn, taken the time to understand his position, and accepted that an effort must be made to do what is best for students. We should, however, pull this section:

"Like it or not, grading is here to stay" is a statement no responsible educator would ever offer as an excuse for inaction. What matters is whether a given practice is in the best interest of students. If it isn't, then our obligation is to work for its elimination and, in the meantime, do what we can to minimize its impact...

[I]ndividual teachers can help to rescue learning in their own classrooms with a two-pronged strategy to "neuter grades," as one teacher described it. First, they can stop putting letter or number grades on individual assignments and instead offer only qualitative feedback. Report cards are bad enough, but the destructive effects reported by researchers (on interest in learning, preference for challenge, and quality of thinking) are compounded when students are rated on what they do in school day after day. Teachers can mitigate considerable harm by replacing grades with authentic assessments; moreover, as we've seen, any feedback they may already offer becomes much more useful in the absence of letter or number ratings.

Second, although teachers may be required to submit a final grade, there's no requirement for them to decide unilaterally what that grade will be. Thus, students can be invited to participate in that process either as a negotiation (such that the teacher has the final say) or by simply permitting students to grade themselves. If people find that idea alarming, it's probably because they realize it creates a more democratic classroom, one in which teachers must create a pedagogy and a curriculum that will truly engage students rather than allow teachers to coerce them into doing whatever they're told. In fact, negative reactions to this proposal ("It's unrealistic!") point up how grades function as a mechanism for controlling students rather than as a necessary or constructive way to report information about their performance.

That democratic process discussed in the last paragraph is the crux of our efforts here. Grades may remain on report cards, but their deleterious effects can be lessened elsewhere. It is then a matter of student choice, investment, and self-efficacy—a kind of aegis that protects you from a system that often prohibits intrinsic motivation.

Now note the "you" in the previous sentence. This is written primarily *to* you, the student; while your teachers and parents are part of the audience and meant to join the conversation, you are the centerpiece of it all. This document applies Kohn's logic to the college-level English course you are taking, and it is meant to inform your learning, not just preface it. It is a living document, so it may change as a result of your feedback or experience. To provide that feedback, however, you must be informed.

Read on to start that process¹.

¹ This, too, is a test: Can you read a complicated guide? Can you look up what you don't understand, ask the right questions, and engage with the ideas? Without this guide, you are a passive participant; with it, you are an informed collaborator.

Part 1: The Factory Floor



When students are asked about getting rid of or even neutering grades, one of the first responses often looks like this²: *It's useless to do this if we can't do it in every class, and besides, it has to start at the younger grades to make a difference.*

This reaction echoes the ideas of Ken Robinson, whose speech on educational reform is screencapped on this page. (You can load the entire RSA Animate video by [clicking here](#) or visiting the TED website and looking for Robinson's talks.) Robinson argues that our current educational system stamps out divergent thinking and creativity, and that at least part of its harmful nature comes from the factory model we've used for a century. The evidence is strong: You are sorted by manufacture date, taught in mechanical chunks, herded from station to station by bells, tested constantly for weaknesses, and so on. When you are asked to break the mold, it likely feels futile or quixotic. After all, until the paradigm shifts

entirely and the machine is rebuilt, our classroom-level changes seem very limited—good for a few months, perhaps, but nothing more.

This is all somewhat true. It's also irrelevant. If Kohn is right that "our obligation is to work for [grading's] elimination and, in the meantime, do what we can to minimize its impact," then we do not need to change the entire system. The machinery around us is a sort of Rube Goldberg nightmare, full of overly complicated and often stupefying logic; trying to change it would probably kill us.

Neutering grades is not about systemic change. It's not about the system at all, because we can't change the system. *We can* change ourselves—a little more quickly and easily, at least, than we can reboot a century of formal educational practice. We can work together to change this classroom, where you have allies and resources, so that you can answer the real question:

How can we learn best within the confines of a broken system?

² This is assuming that the students invited into the discussion read Kohn and consider his ideas. One of the more compelling pieces of evidence that we need to eliminate grades is what happens when Kohn is introduced: Students find out that the discussion will not be graded, so they move on to Physics or Math or Social Studies—the subjects with homework that *is* being graded. We all do this. We default to the heuristics that have earned us praise in the past. We are, by and large, rats in a Skinner box, and for students, the good grade *feels* good. Still, even students who read closely often see Kohn as unrealistic or naïve. We have to fight that cynicism; it is the enemy of the kind of incremental, necessary progress we need.

Part 2: Grain Through the Body of a Bird

Our answer to that question is to create students who can *survive* the system—a sort of army of academic tardigrades³ who can learn in any environment. That changes our classroom approach. If it's about individuals, it's really about introspection and self-efficacy, about learning *how* you think and how to improve that thinking, about communication and collaboration, and so on. It's really about choices.

Consider something: Your presence in this class was a choice. You must take an English class, yes, but a *college-level* English course is actually an elective. You chose to take it. You may have felt pressure from your parents or your peers or the nebulous specter of college admission, but there was another path and, therefore, a choice.

Choosing this class marks you as a particular species of student, one whose nascent traits—intelligence, honesty, curiosity—can lead to the independent motivation we are talking about when we talk about Kohnian degrading. Consider also that this course gives you choice in almost every aspect of your learning. Many of your assignments are driven by choices—in subject matter, in structure, in process—with the goal of giving you total agency over your learning and, as an inexorable consequence, total responsibility.

You understand what this means: When you blow off your responsibility, you are likely to fail; and without grades attached, the word "fail" takes on a much more troubling connotation. You've heard (or made yourself) the excuses for failure: This assignment doesn't count; this won't be on an exam; you're really busy right now; it's too cold outside; it's too nice outside; you're a senior; you *will* be a senior; you're not going to use this in your *real* life; your teacher is a soulless monster; who cares if other students are doing this; none of this really matters, anyway.

The simplest response to all these excuses is to point out what you're ostensibly here to do: You want to think, read, and write better, and you want to be exposed to good thinkers, readers, and writers. Perhaps you *don't* want that, but it's likely that learning to think, read, and write will be useful in whatever field you plan on entering. These skills make up the machinery of thought. They are the skills of life, and that makes this course fundamental to you. It doesn't matter what kind of identity you've carved for yourself so far (insisting, as some of you inevitably will, that you are a "math person" or a "music person," as if discovering some new species of human); it doesn't matter how you've fared in English before now; it doesn't even matter to this initial discussion what you hope to become in the future. Only by becoming a hermit could you *hope* to avoid the benefits of this course... and even as a hermit, you'd likely end up wanting to articulate your experience in some way. Henry David Thoreau, Miyamoto Musashi, and Ted Kaczynski, for instance, are all famous (or infamous) recluses who became famous only after what they wrote while secluded was published.

But the real warning isn't about what you'll end up lacking. It's about what you'll *create* in yourself. The ugly parts of us don't operate on a switch. Apathy, disrespect, entitlement—these aren't sweaters or jackets you can shrug off and cast aside when you're tired of wearing them. That stuff will stick to you, stay with you, for a long time. When you choose not to work, you are breeding future selves, developing right now the habits that will poison or empower you in every aspect of your life. Your daily life is inculcation in its purest form: the linking together of a chain of decisions that will protect you or drag you down.

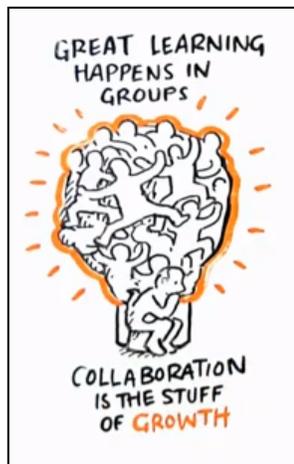
This is not some dire jeremiad, either, about your generation. You are probably—hopefully—never going to experience the effects of a sudden and obliterating choice. You should be much more concerned with the small, insidious, and irrevocable ones that you make each day, each period, each moment. In fact, we could sum this up with a borrowed Orwellian metaphor⁴:

Do you truly believe that disrespect, disengagement, or failure now will pass through you like a grain of corn through the body of a bird, undigested and harmless?

³ Also known as water bears, a species of polyextremophile that can survive in space. They also look like Toho movie monsters, which is not really a useful part of the metaphor.

⁴ It's taken from *1984*, a book about—at least in part—the destruction of reading, writing, and thinking.

Part 3: The Stuff of Growth



Back to Ken Robinson for a moment: In that same TED talk, he argues that the best learning happens not when the answer is in the back of a book, but when it is created as a result of collaborative thinking. When we talk about choices, we can't forget about that collaborative aspect. Instructions tend to focus on *you*—your choices, your self-discipline, your future—but you aren't alone in this. You are part of a group, and that group must embrace the "stuff of growth" championed by Robinson.

Another way to repurpose Orwell's metaphor, then, might be to say this: Your respect or disrespect, your engagement or disengagement, your success or failure—these things pass through this *classroom*, not just through your own gullet, and you also have a responsibility to the people around you. You are no longer in competition with your peers. They are allies, and you are part of a collaborative effort to improve the learning environment of the classroom.

Your teacher's instructional role is fundamentally unchanged. Without grades on each assignment, however, you must also collaborate much more in order to learn. You've lost the proxy of grades; your goal is no longer to earn a better grade, but to learn more and learn *better*. You might consider yourself an apprentice thinker, reader, and writer, in which case your teacher

is here to mentor you.

It's worth noting something about that sort of mentorship, by the way: Your teacher is an expert in the field you are studying. At a certain point, you must accept the idea that your opinion about our studies—about your reading, about your writing, even about your thinking—can shade off into an error of fact⁵. Debate is good; egotism is not. Many students latch onto grades as a perfect reflection of performance, and the struggle becomes *how to improve the grade*, not *how to get better at the skill*. It's a short step from there to demonizing the person who gave you the grade, or deciding that the teacher is a fool. This shuts down any improvement you might make, and it makes for a lot of uncomfortable conferences.

You must trust that we are creating this collaborative environment to *help* you, not critique or judge you. Your peers, too, are here to help—and to be helped *by* you.

The hope: Without grades, collaboration will be easier.

⁵ In an essay called "I'm a Proud Brainiac," Roger Ebert tells a story about his friend, Gene Siskel:

When a so-called film critic defended a questionable review by saying, "After all, it's opinion," Gene told him: "There is a point when a personal opinion shades off into an error of fact. When you say 'The Valachi Papers' is a better film than 'The Godfather,' you are *wrong*." Quite true. We should respect differing opinions up to certain point, and then it's time for the wise to blow the whistle.

Part 4: The Paradox of the Heap

Without grades, of course, you lose the barometer of success you've grown accustomed to. Grades in Brewster are posted online, too, so your exposure to them is constant. You have no need to develop an internal sense of how you're learning; you have a set of numbers arranged into columns to do that for you.

There might be a bigger problem: The numbers don't actually tell us what you can do or what you know. They sort of do, but grades are statistics, and like all statistics, they merely approximate the truth. As a comparison, [consider ESPN's efforts to introduce QBR](#), a statistic measuring the effectiveness of a quarterback in the NFL. From the article:

QBR requires the kind of discourse Burke, Schatz, and their sites have created over years of conversation; it's a metric built on several thousand lines of code, years of investment, and several complex concepts, all of them reduced to one number. It's a great idea, in a discourse broadly resistant to ideas.

Brian Burke isn't surprised to see ESPN giving QBR the sink-or-swim treatment. "You cannot possibly watch and accurately process all 16 games in one weekend, no less all the games of a season, including the playoffs and Super Bowl," he says. "The purpose of a statistic is to be a first estimate towards the truth, because your brain can't process all that information. So it's going to be flawed, but you have to accept that." What ESPN wanted—and what ESPN's way of talking about the NFL demands—from QBR was an argument-ender, a metric that doubled as truth-with-capital-T. But stats don't do that. They can't.

For a long time, we've all accepted the flaws in grades as a measure of student achievement. After all, it is impossible for one number to reflect all that you've done throughout a quarter, let alone an entire year. It's just that no one, you included, can continually process all of the variables that go into your learning, because learning is a vastly complex idea. What does it mean to say you've learned from one day to the next? When do you move from unskilled to skilled, from uneducated to educated? To avoid the complexities of the argument, you use grades.

Your teachers use that shorthand, too. When we discuss student growth, that's the language: *He's doing so much better! His grade has gone up ten points.* When we make recommendations, that's the justification: *I'm not sure she can go into a college-level course; she's getting a 77 right now, and she got a 75 first quarter.* We save ourselves time and energy by reducing you to a number, and you don't just let us do that—you encourage it.

In a classroom without grades, you can't circumvent the complexities of learning. We must set clear criteria for progress, and then you must monitor yourself to the best of your ability, staying conscious of each choice you make. And when we arrive at the end of the quarter, you must consider a new calculus for determining a grade: one that shines a new light on your traits, skills, and knowledge.

To do this, you will consider where you were at the beginning of the quarter, and then you will compare that student to where you are at the end of the quarter. You'll set goals for yourself after determining a set of criteria with your peers and teacher. Then you can ask yourself how you might reach those goals and meet those criteria over nine weeks or so. After nine weeks, have you learned, or haven't you? This is, in essence, the paradox of the heap⁶, and it will be pitched to you like this:

- If you adequately meet every goal in every criterion, what would you know or have learned? What could you demonstrate? What would that student look like?
- If that student not only met each goal but exceeded them, how would he do that? What would he know or be able to demonstrate? What would separate an effective quarter from an adequate one, using these criteria?
- If a student met some goals but not others, which could he fail to achieve and still be considered a limited learner? Are any criteria absolutely required to be considered an adequate learner? How else could you lose ground and fail to reach your goals with regard to these criteria?

⁶ From Wikipedia, capricious font of knowledge though she be:

The **sorites paradox** (sometimes translated as the **paradox of the heap** because in Ancient Greek, σωρίτης *sōritēs* means "heaped up") is a paradox that arises from vague predicates. A typical formulation involves a heap of sand, from which grains are individually removed. Under the assumption that removing a single grain does not turn a heap into a non-heap, the paradox is to consider what happens when the process is repeated enough times: is a single remaining grain still a heap? (Or are even no grains at all a heap?) If not, when did it change from a heap to a non-heap?

Part 5: The Blind Men and the Elephant

The most obvious concern at this point is the idea that the inmates will somehow run the asylum—the fear that there is no more teacher oversight, and that some students might coast through class and then lie about having learned.

The first answer to that concern is a transparent push for honesty and integrity⁷. If you are an ethical student, you will set appropriate goals and honestly evaluate on your progress in meeting them.

The second answer is to send you back at the section of this document that concerns choice: Your brain, after all, will atrophy as readily as your muscles, if you do not use it, so lying now will only hurt you later. You cannot escape the repercussions for long.

The third answer is a bit more blunt: There *is* no gamesmanship in here. There is no way to coast, waste time, and then lie about it. You cannot game the system, no matter how clever you believe yourself to be, because there *is* no game, no gaming, and no shortcut. If you want to read and think and communicate at a high level, you have to buy that success with time and sweat. You have to do the work. And when you don't, it will be obvious.

Your teachers are aware of what you do, most of you, and of the person you are in class, whether we are staring directly at you or not. Perhaps that is not the person you are elsewhere, but we're not [blind men with an elephant](#); in every way that counts, you *are* how you act in class. And the rules of engagement in our class, which have not changed, are now free of the obfuscating clutter of grades.

This goes back to choice. You have free will and sharp minds, and your actions are your own; it is only fair to treat those actions as choices you have made with full understanding and foreknowledge of the consequences. If you cut corners or refuse to engage in this process, you will not argue your way into a high score at the end of the quarter.

Note the lack of immediate consequences, too. Your teachers have no interest in haranguing those of you who text or visit YouTube or gossip instead of working. We have no interest in calling the homes of those of you who do not work, whether that work is graded or not. We know that we do not have to punish you; life will take care of that, perhaps when you become one of the 50% or so of college-bound students who fail to finish all four years. No, as long as you do not pull others into your orbit, all you need to know are the logical consequences of your choices.

This is partly a plea for some of you to make connections, learn shame and humility, and invest in autonomy; it's a plea for some of you to realize your potential and develop the self-respect and self-discipline that will brighten the rest of your life. But it is also a reminder that those of you who *are* ready to learn have the chance to work more closely with your teacher, to benefit more greatly from your peers, and to be exposed to the kind of learning that will enable you to survive any part of your education.

The nice thing? There are many more of you who fall into that camp, no matter how loud the other side gets.

⁷ Ethics and morality have always been the subject of the essential questions, texts, and assignments you're given in an English classroom. You know what it means to be an honest person, and you know the toll it takes on the mind to be dishonest.

Part 6: The Devil and the Details

So what does this look like? What does it mean to neuter grades and learn intrinsically?

Essential questions will still drive our studies. You will be exposed to all sorts of texts, perspectives, and ideas. We will continue to ask questions that prompt further discussion and research, and then we will work through exercises in reading, thinking, and writing to try to answer those questions. Those are our three skills, unchanged from the beginning of the year:

1. Reading closely
2. Thinking critically
3. Communicating effectively

You will use the same tools and approaches for these skills, including emulation through analysis, but it is especially worth revisiting the course rubric. It will drive all writing instruction and even some reading exercises. You should also note that each of these skills breaks down into many sub-skills, from rhetorical analysis to timed argument to annotation.

The same scaffolding skills support the central three: Reflective and metacognitive work will accompany each essay you write, novel you read, poem you hear, discussion you have, and so on. That reflective and metacognitive work will be done online and in class, alone and in groups, as full essays and in short bursts.

The first significant difference in a gradeless classroom is that you will attempt to publish your writing, when it meets certain standards, in a variety of places. You will give real-world resonance to your work by submitting it to our school's literary and journalism magazines, and by contacting the right sorts of audiences beyond the school walls.

The next difference is that struggling with any of the assignments you are given is okay. You will not suffer the stigma of low grades. You will simply be given help in improving and moving on. The more time and energy you invest in that improvement, the more you can say that you are learning effectively—and you are always pursuing the goals you set yourself.

The third difference is that we will do more exam-related prep, including significantly more multiple-choice work. You will not, however, be judged on how well you do; instead, you will be asked to *improve* how well you do, with one eye on the AP exam and another on the skills of close reading and analysis.

The last notable change is the inclusion, in a more transparent manner, of traits that matter to learning:

1. Assiduousness, or the ability to persevere in completing difficult tasks
2. Amenability, or the ability to take criticism well and use it effectively
3. Collegiality, or the ability to work with your peers to read, write, and think

You will have less direct commentary and more general discussion and feedback of assignments and texts; you will also have more guided metacognition and probably more peer models and exemplars to emulate. Most importantly, you will be able to conference with your teacher by request in and out of class if you need individual help, and that will be the teacher's orientation: to reward investment and initiative.

In terms of memorization—a skill you can also attempt to strengthen as part of the learning process—you can begin to look at the kind of knowledge the course requires, especially as we build toward the AP exam. A partial list:

1. The memorization of the course rubric (DAMAGES+)
2. The memorization of the writing process (DAMAGES/C4 Analysis)
3. The memorization of key rhetorical figures and strategies

Those figures and strategies will never be fodder for quizzes or questions on rhetoric and style, at least not that count against you; instead, they will be the tools *you* use to write. Taken from from *Silva Rhetoricae*, here is just a baker's dozen:

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|-----------------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Figures of Amplification | 6. Figures of Interruption | 11. Figures of Reasoning |
| 2. Figures of Balance | 7. Figures of Obscuring | 12. Figures of Refutation |
| 3. Figures of Definition | 8. Figures of Omission | 13. Figures of Repetition |
| 4. Figures of Division | 9. Figures of Parallelism | |
| 5. Figures of Ethos | 10. Figures of Pathos | |

There is more to the process, but the most important thing to leave you with is this: *It is a process, and you are now a part of that process.* Be open, honest, and invested, and this will work.