

## I. DEFINING TERMS

When we began, the operative word was *degrading*, and we borrowed its usage from Kohn's article, "The Case Against Grades." He also uses the term *neutering*. Neither has been all that precise, however, because the connotations are too weird/persistent. I keep imagining your parents asking you, "What are you up to in English these days?" and you replying, "We're focused on degrading right now." So you're degrading—humiliating, belittling—others? You're *being* degraded? And then you rush to qualify things: "No, we're really just *neutering* stuff..."

We need a better term. That leads us to *abatement*, which has this definition and etymology:

### **a·bate·ment (n.)**

1. Diminution in amount, degree, or intensity; moderation.
2. The amount lowered; a reduction.

"put an end to" (c.1300); "to grow less, diminish in power or influence" (early 14c.), from Old French *abattre* "beat down, cast down," from Vulgar Latin *\*abbatere*, from Latin *ad* "to" (see *ad-*) + *battuere* "to beat" (see *batter* (v.)). Secondary sense of "to fell, slaughter" is in *abatis* and *abattoir*.

What we are reducing is the obsession with—and general toxicity of—grades. We're diminishing the power they have to obscure and corrupt your learning. The secondary etymology, of beating or felling something, is there to remind us how difficult grade abatement is (and perhaps because school often has a sort of *abattoir* feel to it, especially around exam week).

Why change terms now? Because we're at the end of a quarter, and grades have reappeared, lurching out of the darkness like the disfigured killer in a horror film. We haven't eliminated them. But we aren't at their mercy, either. There's a kind of Final Girl<sup>1</sup> still running around (to stretch the metaphor to its breaking point): You can take the consistent self-monitoring and metacognitive work we do and wield it against grade obsession, turning this into a useful moment of self-assessment.

## II. THE RHINOCEROS TEST

One of the first things you were told about this self-evaluation process was that

[y]our 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.

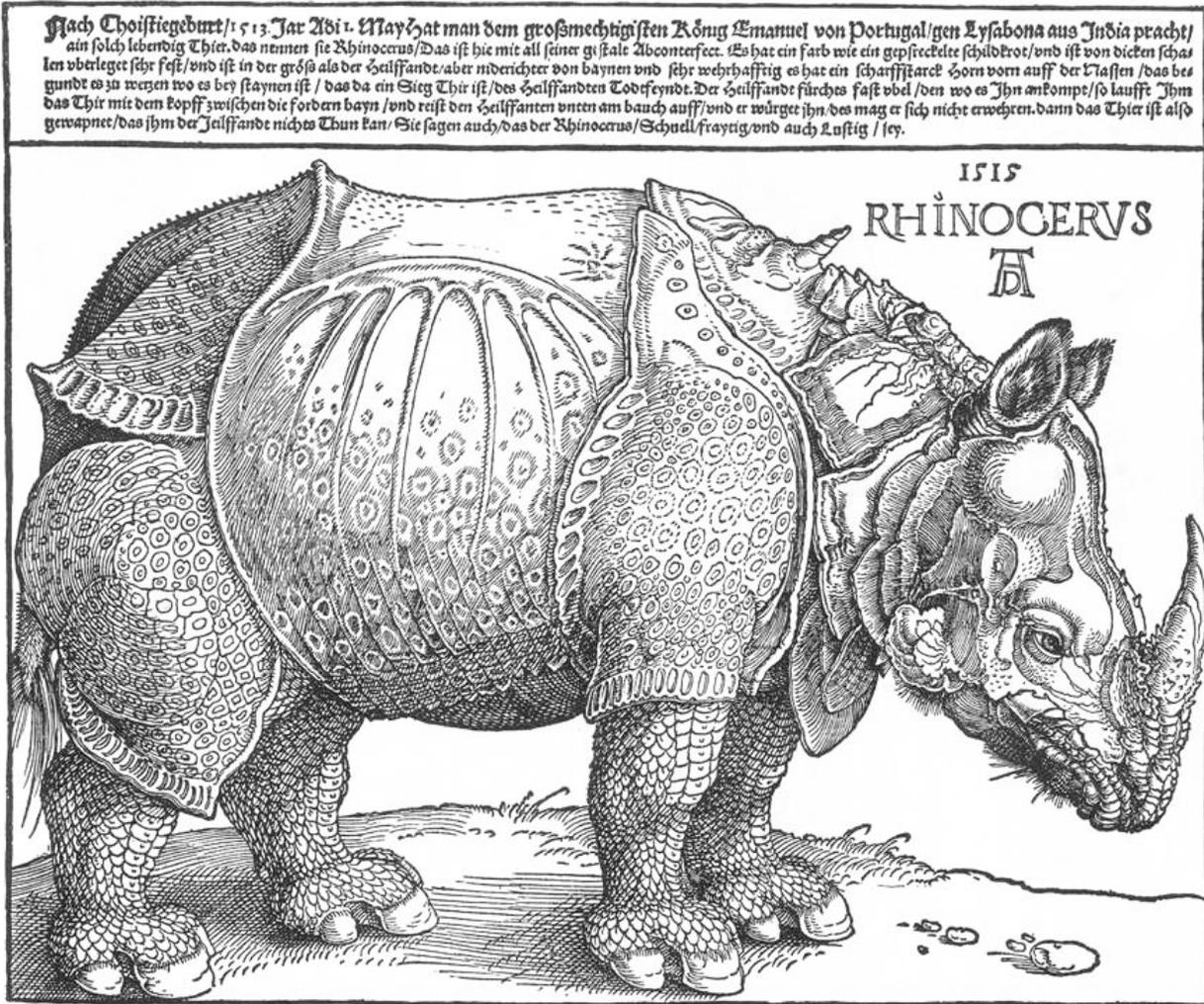
The story of the blind men and the elephant gets to issues of relativism and perspective, and it reminds us that no one person has all the answers. Elephants are bizarre animals when they're atomized: giant legs like tree trunks, weirdly prehensile trunks, massive ears, and so on, until weaving it all together in a description becomes kind of difficult. As soon as you step back, however, we'd all agree: Yep, that's an elephant.

This is called **the elephant test**—the term used when something is hard to describe, but instantly recognizable to most people. Even if you get a few of the details wrong, it's still obvious what you mean when you're trying to describe something as distinctive as an elephant. Another example is Dürer's Rhinoceros, a 1515 etching by a man who'd never seen a rhino, based on a written description from someone who had.

It's kind of nuts:

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<sup>1</sup> From *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* by Carol Clover. Let's quote Wikipedia: "The **final girl** is a trope in thriller and horror films (particularly slasher films) that specifically refers to the last woman or girl alive to confront the killer, ostensibly the one left to tell the story." The site TV Tropes has an excellent rundown of examples from various media, too.



Despite the inclusion of alien armor and dragon scales, it's still obviously a rhino<sup>2</sup>. That's why we're going to call our particular version of this holistic appraisal **the rhinoceros test**. You may quibble with points here and there as we arrive at a score for your report card, but when you step back:

1. You can't call yourself an effective student if you don't look like an effective student.
2. You can't call yourself an adequate student if you don't look like an adequate student.
3. You can't even call yourself a limited student if you don't actually look like a limited student.

And so on. You fit the bill or you don't. When you're done cataloguing your work and analyzing your performance for this quarter, you should be able to step back and say, "Yep, that's a rhino."

Keep in mind something else about this process: You don't start with a 100. You *earn* your way into effectiveness, and that's the kind of progress that can be tracked. It takes time and effort and consistency.

That said, the rhinoceros test is a cousin to **Occam's razor**, a philosophy where you favor the simplest theory or set of data, avoiding needlessly complicated or convoluted reasoning. That means that highlights and lowlights from the quarter should matter more than minutiae.

<sup>2</sup> Back to Wikipedia: The entry for this drawing has the translation of the German text at the top. It is also kind of nuts, including the idea that a rhinoceros is invulnerable.

**III. THE BREAKDOWN**

To arrive at a score for the quarter, you and I have to conference and then converge in our thinking. To begin, open a Google Drive document and state clearly at the top what score you believe best reflects your performance this quarter. Then justify that score fully in a series of new paragraphs. The structure and style of these paragraphs is up to you, but you should not really exceed 250 total words.

(Suggestion: Draft a much longer form of this self-assessment in a separate document or by hand. Use that first draft as the raw argumentative stuff that you then refine into a 250-word submission.)

The first set of criteria to consider:

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

These skills are the crux of our course, and any self-assessment must include them. You should also consider:

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

These are the traits identified at the outset as critical to advancing your reading, thinking, and writing, and they have been part and parcel of everything we did this quarter. Effective students can point to consistent evidence of each trait. Those students can also claim to have completed more specific goals:

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

The list could be longer, and would necessarily include the goals you set for yourself. You should also review the following categories; the quarter’s work has been delineated by central skill or text and then by date assigned. Use this to inform your argument, keeping in mind Occam’s razor and the rhinoceros test. Be succinct, and know that if you are not specific, too, you will have to start over.

**1. SELF-MONITORING AND METACOGNITION**

1/29	Midterm reflection and metacognition
2/5	Criteria- and goal-setting
2/7	Essential questions on lying, authenticity
2/20	Kohnian shift: journaling, self-monitoring
3/1	Progress reports: canned comments
3/4	Self-diagnostic narratives
4/3	Reading life compendium entry

This section is really about assiduousness and insight, or how often you reflect and how meaningful it is. For the Kohnian journaling and self-monitoring requirements, you should have a significant amount of regularly completed writing that answers the prescribed three questions:

- Q1: What have I accomplished?*  
*Q2: What have I learned?*  
*Q3: What's next?*

## GRADE ABATEMENT: FINAL SCORES

### 2. ETA WRITING

2/22	Oppenheimer emulation: parallelism with purpose
2/25	Commenting on Oppenheimer post
3/12	C&D symposium setup; self-monitoring case studies
3/13	C&D symposium: annotations as collaboration
3/15	C&D symposium: revising for publication
3/20	C&D symposium and essay revision/submission
4/1	Ursus Ephemeris: setting up real-world writing

Our emulation-through-analysis work ranged from online paragraphs to a lengthy argument completed over several weeks. Reflect here on the editing, discussion, and revision that framed your final output, plus the extent to which you seriously and directly applied the model essays to your own. Consider also how much you invested in the symposium and publication processes at the end of our classification and division work.

### 3. TRADITIONAL ANALYSIS

2/21	Timed multiple-choice practice and discussion
2/28	MCQ: Tannen; discussion and ETA notes
3/18	MCQ collaboration and testing (Schneller et al)
4/5	MCQ/QORAS station work

Effectiveness here is as much about the number of answers you had correct as your deconstruction of each question and answer choice. Consider both aspects as you evaluate yourself.

### 4. READING AND ANNOTATION

1/30	Kohn, "The Case Against Grades"
1/31	Grade abatement documents: "Aegis and Efficacy"
2/12	Ericsson, "The Ways We Lie"
2/22	Oppenheimer paragraph and deconstruction lecture
2/26	Classification and division exemplars
2/27	Tannen, "There Is No Unmarked Woman"
3/6	Schneller, "A Culture Saturated in Sexism"
4/2	Francine Prose, "I Know Why the Caged Bird Cannot Read"
4/2	Jerry Jesness, "Why Johnny Can't Fail"
4/2	<i>Harper's</i> letters: readers respond

Your reading processes will differ from text to text (and certainly from student to student), but effective readers, as you know, interact with the writing on the page. That usually translates into annotation, multiple reads of a single text, and discussion of the author's writing on multiple levels. The best students also considered all blog posts, handouts, and teacher documents distributed, and did so carefully enough to internalize them.

**IV. GRADE ABATEMENT PROFILES**

The score you receive at the end of this quarter should reflect your effectiveness, and that means you need to know what true effectiveness looks like. We have to avoid Jesness' floating standard and the inflation of grades just to make all the players happy. That's a kind of con game, as he says, and all it does is hurt you in the long run—and I'm as guilty of perpetuating the system as Jesness was.

I curved your Q1 and Q2 averages. I removed entire assignments, redesigned entire units, and shifted pieces of the gradebook. I offered extra credit and enrichment for almost any writing you were willing to do. While I never made your assignments easier (no arts and crafts for me), and while I never sugarcoated your errors or deficiencies, I also knew that you'd only care in the end about that final average. And those averages did not always accurately reflect your performance and ability to read, to think, and to write.

What this grade abatement requires now is a radical shift: You must see yourself as you truly are. You must have the integrity and courage to abandon gamesmanship, to accept your choices—the choices about when to work, what to prioritize, etc.—and to accept the hard truth that not all of you are effective writers, readers, and thinkers. You're not all equally invested or prolific or efficient. There is a spectrum:

**A. EFFECTIVE / EXCEPTIONAL**

SCALE EQUIVALENT			
LETTER (A-F)	AP (1-5)	DAMAGES (1-9)	NUMERICAL (50-99)
<b>A</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>8-9</b>	<b>90-99</b>

These are very strong readers, thinkers, and communicators in virtually all facets, from individual essay writing—among this group are essays that already look and feel polished and professional—to online commentary and discussion with peers. They collaborate extensively and effectively, in and out of class, in various ways. They ask the right questions of peers and their teacher, and they do so at the right time; they even conference when necessary, taking time out of their schedules to write emails or sit with me for advice and clarification. Their analytical work is also exemplary, and when they struggled slightly, they pushed until they understood the mechanisms of that sort of test. This is the group that pushes itself to do more than what is required, and does so for personal edification and enrichment. These students might write two classification and division essays, just to try out a different thesis, or take on the stress and pressure of publishing peers' essays online. They are autodidactic, curious, thoughtful, mature students. They see that there is always room for improvement and always more to do and learn, so there is little or no complacency or self-assuredness in their reflections or metacognitive writing.

**B. ADEQUATE / ABOVE-AVERAGE**

SCALE EQUIVALENT			
LETTER (A-F)	AP (1-5)	DAMAGES (1-9)	NUMERICAL (50-99)
<b>B</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>6-7</b>	<b>80-89</b>

The next tier—students who can argue for a score between 80-89—have done all of the work at the pace required, missed nothing, and generally performed well on all assignments and assessments. They've been adequate at all times. If they are ever off-task during a class period, they immediately recognize and correct themselves, and that is a commendable thing. They are curious and invested in all that we do. Most importantly they avoid the limitations of the average student (see below.)

**C. LIMITED / AVERAGE**

SCALE EQUIVALENT			
LETTER (A-F)	AP (1-5)	DAMAGES (1-9)	NUMERICAL (50-99)
<b>C</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>70-79</b>

## GRADE ABATEMENT: FINAL SCORES

Limited students are off-task during the class period often enough to create a pattern. They might read ESPN, talk about their recent trip to China or Dublin, or recount last night's play rehearsal. They don't always complete reading or outlining in preparation for class, so they often find themselves behind the adequate and effective students. They also struggle more with reading and writing. This is the group that produces weaker essays and performs less strongly on analytical assignments. They may need help to understand directions or texts for assignments. They tend to work less effectively with others and may not take criticism well. Their saving grace is that they demonstrate effort and strength in *some* area—enough to say that they are learning.

### D. INADEQUATE / LACKING

SCALE EQUIVALENT			
LETTER (A-F)	AP (1-5)	DAMAGES (1-9)	NUMERICAL (50-99)
<b>D</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3-4</b>	<b>60-69</b>

These are the students who have not submitted assignments, or whose output is lacking or incomplete. They do not enter many collaborative forums, choosing habitually to ignore group discussions online and in class. They waste our time together even more than their limited classmates. In fact, they tend to disengage in class—often by gossiping or becoming distracted by unrelated things online for massive chunks of the period. Their analytical work is lacking, too, with weaknesses in close reading, comprehension, and specific assignments like multiple-choice passages. These are also students whose approach to reading lacks discipline; they do not annotate (or they annotate haphazardly), and their retention of ideas in the reading is minimal. They often lose track of *why* we are doing what we do (e.g., forgetting about the "Aegis and Efficacy" documents) and fail to make the necessary connections.

### F. INEFFECTIVE / LITTLE SUCCESS

SCALE EQUIVALENT			
LETTER (A-F)	AP (1-5)	DAMAGES (1-9)	NUMERICAL (50-99)
<b>F</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1-2</b>	<b>50-59</b>

A student in this category will have been spoken to before any sort of grade abatement takes place. If you have to ask, it doesn't apply to you—although inadequate students may be on the cusp...

One of those fits you. After you've looked back closely at the quarter, after you've conducted your version of the rhinoceros test, and after you've applied Occam's razor, you will give me the information I need to help you arrive at the right one. But here is another hard truth: The best students often fail to see their strengths, while less effective students tend to ignore their weaknesses. Neither is acceptable, so:

- 2001970                      • 11475                      • 9715304                      • 9716371                      • 9716074                      • 9713750
- 9716444                      • 9714903                      • 9716347                      • 9718002                      • 11440

These students have all earned the right to a 90 or higher this quarter. The rest of you probably (almost definitely) have not. Try to understand why *before* I have to speak directly with you; it will save you time and frustration. It is only your addiction to inflated grades that tells not to accept anything below a 90<sup>3</sup>.

And remember: Most of you are doing phenomenal work under this new paradigm, and we won't have to talk about any of this except in a positive, collaborative way. Use this guide as it is intended, think back to what we've been doing all year, and you will be fine.

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<sup>3</sup> A small number of you—maybe three or four—are on the cusp of effectiveness, but it will take a convincing argument to justify moving you to this list. I will listen to those arguments, but know this: If you find yourself grasping for reasons to justify the score you want, that probably isn't the score you deserve.