



UNIVERSITY OF  
**TORONTO**  
MISSISSAUGA

# Ungrading: Why grades can sometimes compromise student engagement and what you can do instead

ROBERT  
GILLESPIE  
ACADEMIC  
SKILLS  
CENTRE

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# Land Acknowledgement



Art by Christi Belcourt  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/Cia4T9euYUu/>

We wish to acknowledge this land on which the University of Toronto operates. For thousands of years it has been the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and most recently, the Mississaugas of the Credit River. Today, this meeting place is still the home to many Indigenous people from across Turtle Island, and we are grateful to have the opportunity to work on this land.

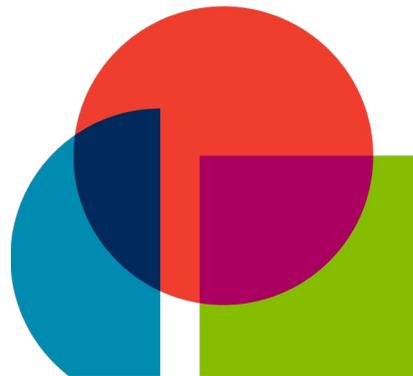
# Access Check

We encourage you to check, identify, and question your learning environment for any of the following and welcome comments if there are elements that we can support to reduce barriers.

- Technology
- Space
- Resources
- Pace

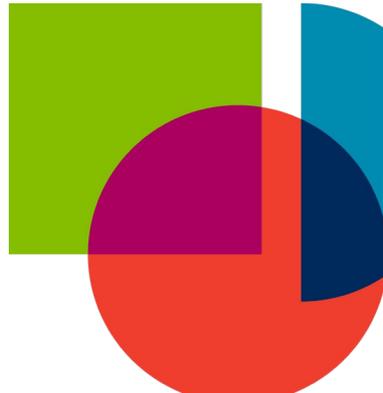
“We all have bodies, hearts, and minds. We all have needs and capacities, strengths and vulnerabilities”

*- Skin, Tooth, and Bone: A Disability Justice Primer*



# Agenda

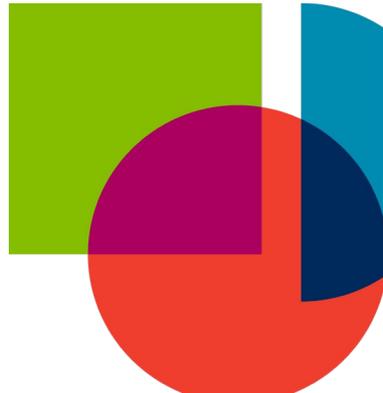
1. Introduction
2. A Brief History of Grading
3. Research on Ungrading and Learning
4. Equity and Engagement
5. Three Common Alternative Examples
6. Practice
7. Reflection + Q&A



# Session Objectives

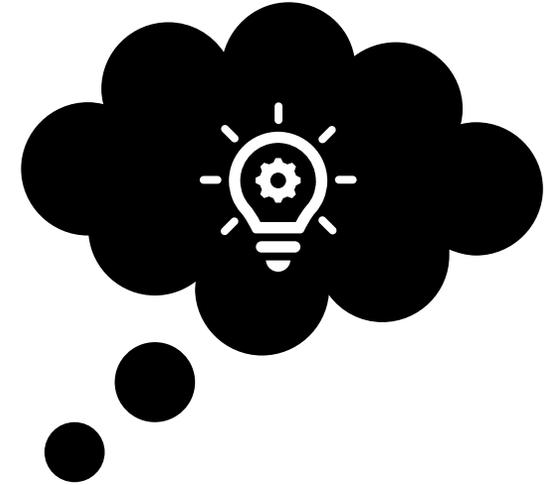
By the end of this session you will:

1. Reflect on the relationship between grading and learning
2. Develop a foundational understanding of ungrading and its impact
3. Explore some creative alternative grading strategies
4. Know where to turn for additional support

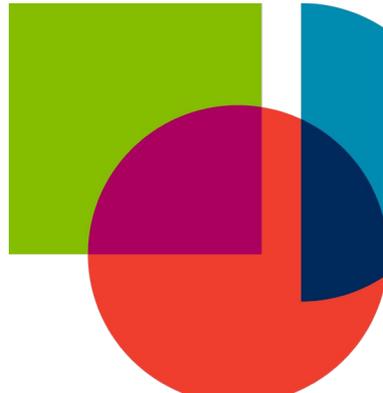
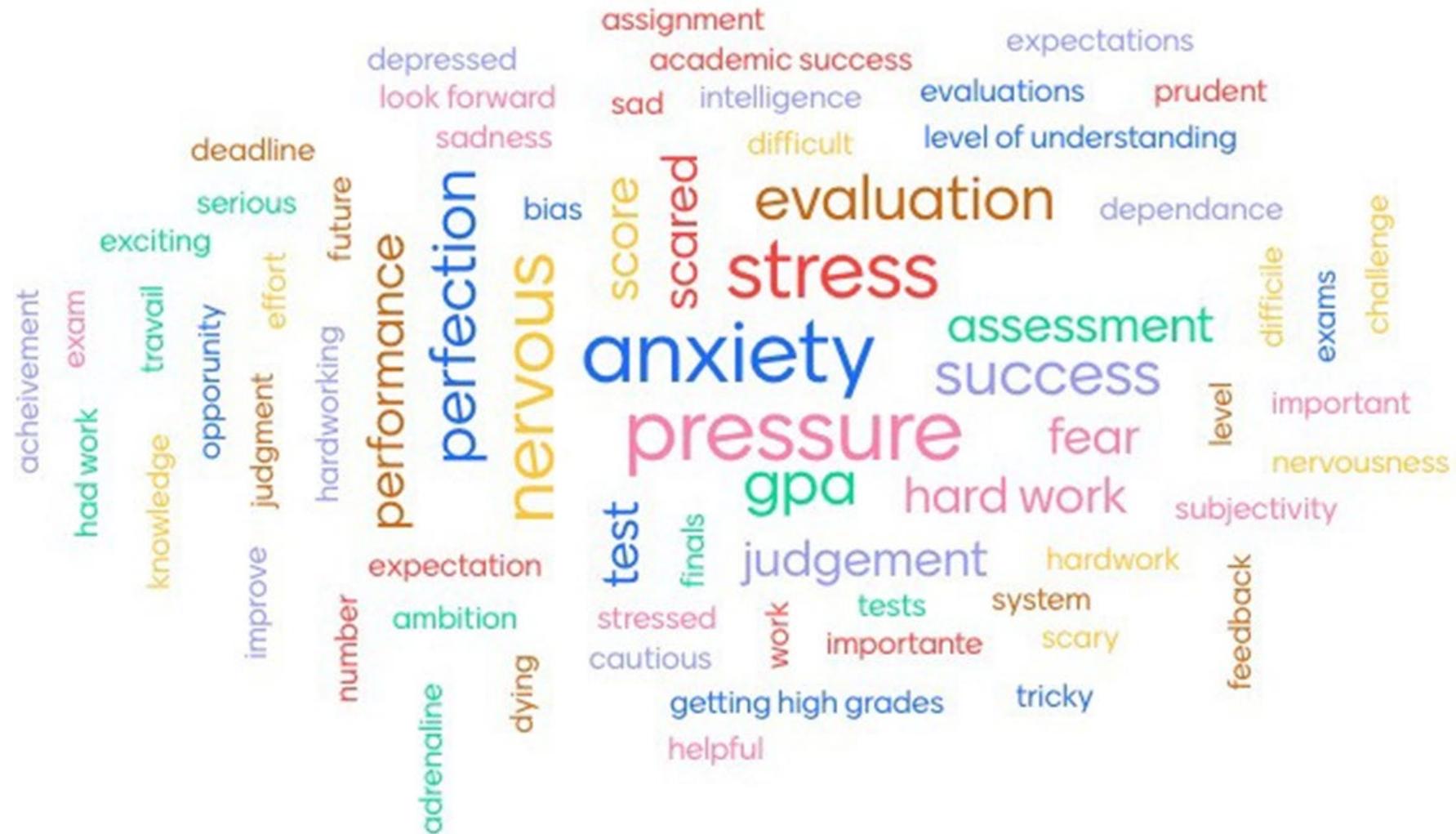


# Thought Experiment

What are the first memories that come to mind when you reflect on your experience with receiving grades?



# UTM Students on Grades

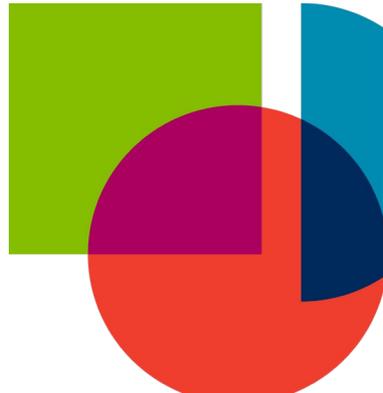


# A Brief History of Grading

1088: First University founded in Bologna

1896: Mount Holyoke added percentages

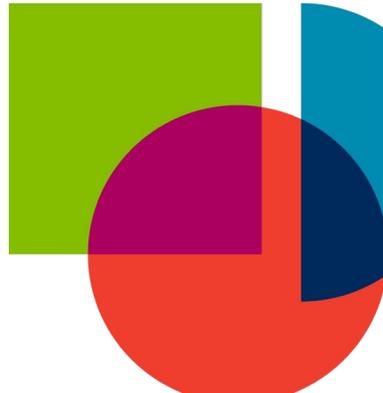
1884: Harvard conferred first letter grade



# Ungrading Defined

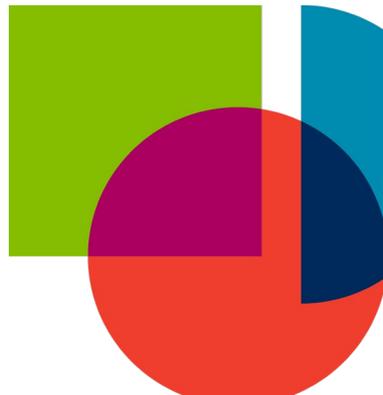
An assessment practice that minimizes or eliminates marks (points, letter grades, etc.), decenters the instructor, and instead pulls focus on:

- intrinsic motivation,
- formative feedback,
- student growth,
- the achievement of learning outcomes.



# Equity and Engagement

- Traditional grades are susceptible to bias
  - Ungrading can help build bias-resistance into your course
- Ungrading can promote equity by
  - Assessing learning and not what students already know
  - Using reassessments instead of extra credit
  - Flexibility supports access and inclusion for all students
- Ungrading can enhance engagement
  - Ungraded vs. Graded at UTM – students not only performed better in the portfolio style mathematics class, but very few dropped off altogether in contrast with the traditionally graded version.



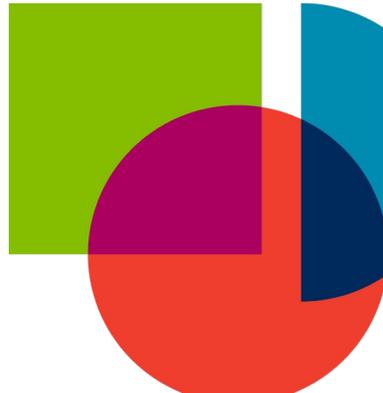
# What Does the Research Say?

Ruth Butler and Mordecai Nisan (1986)

Tested effects of no feedback, task-related comments, and grades on intrinsic motivation and performance.

Findings:

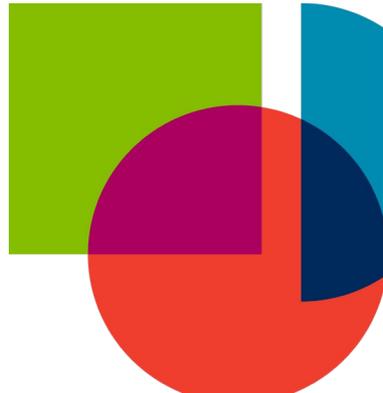
1. Comments only group highest on tasks and posttest
2. Grades and comments group scored high on task and lower on posttest
3. Grades with no feedback group scored low on task and posttest



# What Does the Research Say?

Alfie Kohn (2011) surveyed almost 100 years of educational research and found that grades:

- Tend to diminish students' interest in whatever they are learning
- Create a preference for the easiest task
- Reduce quality of thinking
- Increase levels of cheating, fear of failure, anxiety

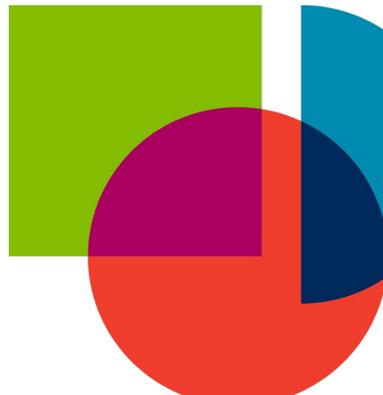


# The Four Pillars Model

1. Clearly defined standards
2. Helpful and constructive feedback
3. Marks are to indicate progress or growth
4. Reassessment without penalty

**“In feedback loops we trust”**

– Talbert & Clark

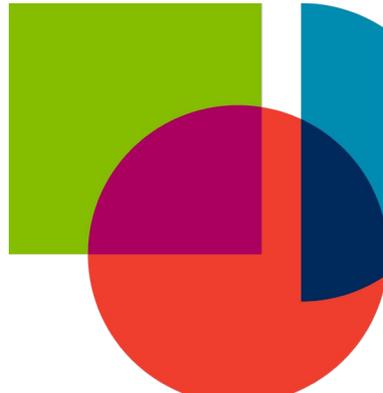


# Common Alternatives: Standards Based Grading

## Research Paper Standards:

- Research skills – 10 relevant and timely academic sources
- Critical Analysis – thorough and insightful analysis leading to a strong argument that is well supported by sources
- Writing proficiency – writing is clear, well organized and free of grammatical errors
- Citations and Referencing – all sources are cited correctly in APA with no errors.

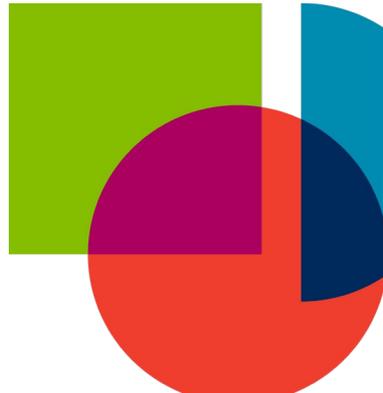
Students can revise and resubmit (with ++ formative feedback) until they have met each of the above standards.



# Common Alternatives: Specs Based Grading

Weekly module activity packages for reading assignment:

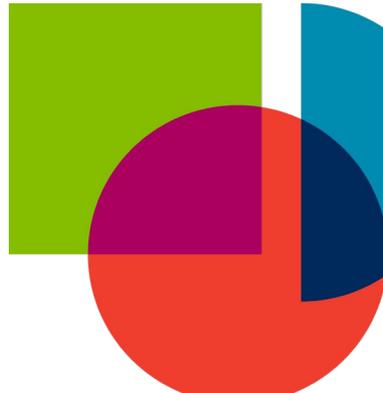
1. Level 1 – basic proficiency with fundamental concepts
2. Level 2 – students demonstrate that they can apply info and skills from module to a variety of contexts relevant to the course
3. Level 3 – major projects that cut across modules and showcase deep understanding of material



# Common Alternatives: Collaborative Grading

Students write 2-3 self-reflection process letters evaluating learning per term

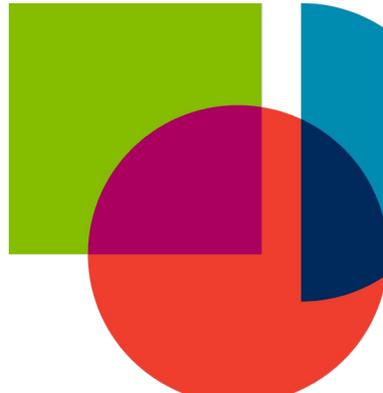
1. Instructors respond to letters with actionable and thorough feedback (scale for class size)
2. Self-evaluations and responses become a space for metacognitive dialogue
3. Students grade themselves



# Implementation

## Keep it Small & Simple

- Begin with an open conversation w/ students about grades
- Try a 'no-grade' zone of the syllabus that invites exploration and intellectual risk taking
- Use a token system - students can take extra time with an assignment w/out extension / revise and resubmit one assignment w/out penalty

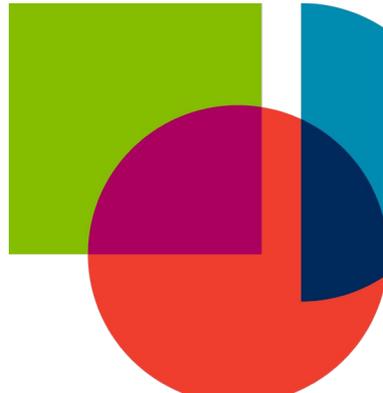


# UTM Policy

- Connect with departmental chairs/associate chairs/directors
  - ensuring academic continuity within departments and across different deliveries of the same course.

## UTM Grading Policy

- Alternative grading scales for appropriate courses are included in this policy.
  - See section 1.3 for more



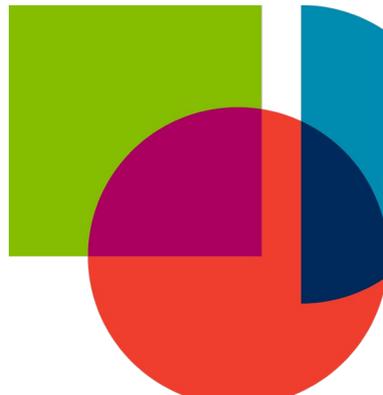
# Practice: Self & Peer Assessment

Reflect on a recent teaching experience or an assignment you designed

- What were the learning objectives?
- How did the assignment align with these objectives?
- What feedback did you provide to students?
- How did students respond to the feedback?

Peer pair (or group) and share

- Offer constructive qualitative feedback based on Qs above
- Focus on strengths and areas of improvement
- Initiate feedback loop!





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# Thank You!

Questions & Comments:  
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# References

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