The left has a long history of advocating for the abolition of grades, from the Public Education Association’s arguments in the 1960s, to Alfie Kohn’s work in the 80s and 90s, through to a contingent of today’s Harvard undergraduates. These groups have criticized grades as being arbitrary, detrimental to education, and generally oppressive. I share these groups’ political values and concerns, but they lead me to a defense of grades. Grading practices have an emancipatory kernel that consists in the idea that we should be evaluated on the basis of what we do rather than who we are. Rather than inherit, through bloodlines, the title of an “A” student, even the most privileged have to work for this tiny honor. And as long as we’re grading thoughtfully, as long as we’re not grading on a curve, and as long as there is equity in our teaching and curriculum, the “A” is an egalitarian honor open to everyone. Moreover, an “A” allows for, and embodies, the achievement of an imperfect kind of perfection. You can earn a perfect grade—an A—by doing imperfect work. For example, a final course grade of a 93% and, at my institution, a 90%, translates into a 4/4 or 100% in your GPA. Isn’t that a beautiful thing? We should also ask ourselves: without grades, what will distinguish the hard-won insights produced by a marginalized student from the lazy slop produced by a privileged student? Grades have always been the easy target but never the real problem.

The real knot of problems consists in how we grade, how we prepare students to be graded, and how we involve students in the grading process. These concerns seem to be at the heart of the revival of scholarship on grading contracts and so-called “labor-based grading” practices, as promoted, most recently, by Asao Inoue. My interpretation of Inoue’s argument is that we cannot be trusted to use qualitative grading criteria in a way that does not reproduce racism and white privilege, and so we must limit ourselves to quantitative grading criteria. You earn an A by writing a certain number of words, and it doesn’t really matter whether those words constitute prose that is clear, sophisticated, and truthful. Indeed, these humanistic qualities are presumed to be vessels of imperialism. Better to fall back on impartial numbers. I totally disagree with this line of thought. Anti-racist qualitative grading criteria are not only possible but consist in those very qualities of clarity, sophistication, and truthfulness, which together constitute what Thomas and Turner call “the classic style.” By “style,” they mean neither tone, diction, and syntax nor the spectrum of “high” and “low,” but rather a whole way of conceptualizing the responsibilities of writers and readers and the possibilities of language. The classic writer assumes that sensory truths and ideational truths can be shared via language, and that the writer is responsible for presenting truths whose degree of truthfulness rests in their ability to challenge cliche or common sense while also making sense to the reader in a way that feels effortless and directed.

In my four years of teaching the classic style and using it as the basis of grading criteria, I’ve found that white students have no predisposition toward it. In fact, white students’ writing is often overly formal and “gripped” by stage fright, as Keith Hjortshoj would say, which ultimately impedes clarity. White writing often consists of cliches and one-dimensional maxims, the likes of which we hear in racist discourse as well as self-help rhetoric and CBS sitcoms, not to mention banal political oratory. Many white students’ writing also lacks a fidelity to reality, that is, a refusal to submit oneself to the authority of a complex world and accept responsibility for concretely representing some of our world’s complexities. Indeed, whiteness marches in the opposite direction, toward vagueness and temporizing, embodying a Trumpian authority over reality that is unmediated by a correlative responsibility to reality. By and large, white students are far from classic, but, more importantly, students, no matter who they are, are capable of performing the classic style, as long as they are willing to work through a writing process that begins with confusion, simplicity, and distortion and moves toward clarity, sophistication, and the humanistic presentation of truths, all of which requires collaboration and exchange. It should go without saying that these qualities are open to interpretation and transformation, but that is no reason to reject them outright.

Many students have told me that learning about and performing the classic style is engaging and empowering, and none have remarked that it is “white” or in any way oppressive. Of course, there are still lessons to be learned from the critique of grades and the arguments for quantitative grading practices. Half of the time my students are free writing, or what I call “wild writing,” in preparation for classically “styled” writing. Wild writing constitutes around 20% of their course grade, and as long as they do the work and write “X” number of words or write for “X” length of time, they get full credit. These quantitative criteria are helpful horses, driving us forward. But they still need a wagon and a destination, and that, for me, is the classic style. Along the way, we discuss and perform many other conceptually distinct styles—from the impersonal practical style of instruction manuals and Wikipedia pages, to the in-your-face oratorical style of editorials and much political rhetoric, to the romantic style of much journaling and poetry, and even the “reflexive style,” which involves the constant turning of attention back to the writer and their own uncertainties and intentions. But when I think of the state of the culture today, I don’t think about the absence of these styles (in fact, they are all dominant in their own way). Rather, I think about the absence of the classic style, with its commitment to clarity, sophistication, and truthfulness. These are the values that I put at the heart of my grading practices, practices which have been, and will continue to be, one small way that we teachers of writing shape the wider culture.

Ed Hahn’s Links:

<https://www.hmhco.com/shop/books/punished-by-rewards-twenty-fifth-anniversary-edition/9781328450524>

<https://harvardpolitics.com/toward-abolition-letter-grading-system/>

<https://wac.colostate.edu/books/perspectives/labor/>

<https://press.princeton.edu/books/paperback/9780691147437/clear-and-simple-as-the-truth>

<https://www.macmillanlearning.com/college/us/product/The-Transition-to-College-Writing/p/0312440820>

My teaching slides for “Unit 1”: <https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1o4r777hctRqIcq5iY-nl7U2kWnR3VqvZIAct529qF-Q/edit?usp=sharing>

My writing activities for Unit 1: <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1Of9zvD-U82DWqeAnGvi1DtGyO2GLhqF9zk47dfskbko/edit?usp=sharing>