

## Book Review *Undoing the Grade: Why We Grade, and How to Stop* by Jesse Stommel

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**U***ndoing the Grade: Why We Grade, and How to Stop* is a full-length monograph that Jesse Stommel composed of new material and of pieces that were previously published in journals, in edited collections, and on his academic blog, *Hybrid Pedagogy*. The first time I ever met Jesse Stommel was during his Digital Pedagogy Lab in 2015 at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Going into that experience, I didn't yet know Stommel was an ungrader, like me. At the time, Stommel was known for his work in digital humanities and critical pedagogy, and he had been so vocal on social media about his pedagogy and beliefs and values about education that his assessment choices didn't initially catch my attention. In fact, even now, Stommel's views about ungrading seem like a gateway into other conversations about teaching and learning. If you've attended Stommel's conferences and workshops, themes from this book will seem familiar to you. If you're unfamiliar with his work, then this book will get you up to speed. In fact, if you are unfamiliar with ungrading and alternative assessment practices more broadly, then this could be one place to start. Because Stommel takes up big-picture questions about education, *Undoing the Grade: Why We Grade, and How to Stop* is for a range of teachers across disciplines and contexts.

For Stommel, "the word 'ungrading' means raising an eyebrow at grades as a systemic practice, distinct from simply 'not grading'" (6). This is important because Stommel's contribution is primarily philosophical and, for most of the book, he resists giving readers a "set of best practices" (6) or grading alternatives that constitute "the mechanics of ungrading" (32). Instead, in Chapters 1–3, he takes us through the logics that make grading systems possible: the ranking and standardization of students. Stommel talks about how these logics also reflect and reproduce themselves in educational technology in Chapters 4–6. Drawing from his background in digital humanities and critical pedagogy, he brings up issues of learning management systems and data sets and privacy. These may not immediately evoke questions of assessment for writing teachers because they are removed from the daily routines of what we typically view as classroom "assessment mechanisms": grading, feedback, rubrics. However, in reading this book, I was struck by how much I benefited from slowing down and thinking about education and educational routines holistically, not just through the lens of grading. Stommel continues this thread into Chapter 7 as he discusses how entrenched grades are as an everyday "technology" (63) in the US schooling system. He gives several examples of the underlying messages that institutions are sending students through these technologies: "we pit students and teachers against each other; we rank students in fiercely competitive ways; we measure output with little concern for the learning process; we demean student work by crudely quantifying it; we start from a place of deep suspicion of students; we assess in ways that reinforce bias against marginalized students" (66). I appreciate how, throughout *Undoing the Grade*, Stommel reminds us

that the burden of proof should be on grades and grading; that is, institutions should have to show how their chosen assessments, like grades, serve all students and their learning.

After arguing for a more humanizing and compassionate reimagining of education, Stommel finally begins to unpack the “how” in Chapter 8. He gives a brief overview of his own practice: a series of student self-reflections. Because all of Stommel’s institutions have required end-of-term transcript grades, he also asks students to grade themselves. While he wishes that he did not have to submit a final grade, he also claims that “asking students to give themselves a grade also makes the why and how of grades a valuable subject of the conversations we have—valuable because they will go on to be graded in other courses and thinking critically about how and why grading happens helps that become more productive for them” (74). As Asao Inoue, Wonderful Faison, and others in composition have argued, the important work around assessment happens through discussion and in collaboration with students. After briefly summarizing his own approach, Stommel moves to an overview of other potential ungrading strategies: grade free zones, self-assessment, process letters, minimal grading, authentic assessment, contract grading, portfolios, peer-assessment, and student-made rubrics (74–81). I appreciate that Stommel troubles the idea of “best practices” by acknowledging that no one practice will work the same across classrooms, institutions, teachers, and groups of students. In this chapter he also circles back to his definition of ungrading as continuously questioning our assumptions about “what assessment looks like, how we do it, and who is grading for” (75). Part of the payoff here, for me, was reading these options in light of Stommel’s continuous point that teaching is “personal and idiosyncratic” (71), and although he expresses his own reservations towards certain strategies, he presents them as honest options that all of us might explore, customize, or combine to help us—and our students—rethink grades and grading.

The next three chapters, 9–11, situate ungrading within other overlapping pedagogical imperatives: humane syllabus policies; deeper conversations with students about educational inequities; and small, human acts that help build relationships with students so that we can better understand what the people in our classes need to be successful. Stommel does not shy away from the hostile institutional and academic practices that make the work of ungrading difficult. In fact, he highlights part-time, contingent faculty and the working and living conditions of teachers more than any other advocates for ungrading I’ve encountered. Writing teachers, in particular, may also want to visit the discussion of neurodiversity, extrinsic motivation, and structure in Chapter 11. Stommel maintains that ungrading attempts to reduce the harm of grades and grading and, for those learners who benefit from structure, there are several better options like “a clear schedule, concise descriptions of the class activities, clear ways to ask for help or feedback, community architecture that makes it easy for students to connect with each other” (106). This discussion of structure and its relationship to both flexibility and care could be worth putting in conversation with other writing studies texts when thinking about due dates, “participation,” or building multiple pathways and assignments for students (e.g., Womack). Essentially, Stommel wants us to “resist the notion that the shape of teaching and learning should be fixed in advance and standardized” (107).

Up until this point in *Undoing the Grade: Why We Grade, and How to Stop*, I had been reflecting on my own practice as a first-year writing teacher. Moving into the final three chapters, I started to

think about this book in the context of professional development (writing pedagogy education, faculty workshops, working groups, etc.). Chapters 12—FAQs—and 13—an ungrading bibliography—offer specific questions and resources for teachers doing the work of ungrading. They offer places to start a dialogue with ourselves, our students, and one another. The final chapter, 14, circles back to the idea of ungrading as a frame that describes these components: “(1) an active and ongoing critique of grades as a system and (2) the decision to do what we can, depending on our labor conditions, to carefully dismantle that system” (131). Stommel clarifies that ungrading is a systemic critique, not a personal call out of individual teachers who grade. Because of this move—and because he chooses not to focus on only one -ism (like ableism), on only one discipline (like English), on only one solution (like self-assessment), and even on only one problem (like grading) —I could imagine *Undoing the Grade* finding a frequent home in many cross-disciplinary and professional development spaces. The book might bring new folks into conversations about ungrading, less grading, and alternatives to grading. Stommel finishes the book with a list of assessment-related “good-for-some-people-in-some-contexts practices” and then ends with a list of “necessary practices” that make education more equitable and the work of undoing grades more possible: pay teachers a living wage, check that students’ basic needs are met, work to minimize harm, and include students in these conversations (137–39).

For me, reading *Undoing the Grade: Why We Grade, and How to Stop* felt like attending several workshops at a conference. Stommel provides a range of information that was easy for me to read, navigate, and move through in and out of order. Even in the parts where I caught my own resistance to his ideas or wished for content that simply isn’t there, I would have found this book incredibly valuable when I was a part-time community college instructor teaching developmental reading and writing at three different campuses. In *Undoing the Grade*, Stommel gives us—educators across disciplines—starter tools for negotiating how we feel about grades and grading and how we can imagine education differently in our classrooms that function within unequal social systems. What he doesn’t give us are specific recommendations for literacy education or for writing studies. He does not apply his arguments about standardization to language. Ultimately, I appreciate Stommel’s book and would recommend it to colleagues and students and include it on my own bookshelf. However, I’d follow up with recommendations for additional readings that get more specific about anti-oppressive assessment approaches in discipline-specific contexts.

## WORKS CITED

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