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## Specs Grading and the Art History Survey: A More Inclusive, Equitable, and Invigorated Foundation for the Discipline

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# Specs Grading and the Art History Survey:

## A More Inclusive, Equitable, and Invigorated Foundation for the Discipline

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The graded assignments in a traditional introductory art history class tend to assess the degree to which students can replicate the mastery of the professor. Do they have command of a wealth of slide identification data? Can they recall the precise socio-cultural conditions behind an object's creation? Often, they are asked to perform these tasks under pressured time constraints to which professors themselves are seldom subjected. During the global COVID-19 pandemic and the protests for racial justice of 2020, we began to ask ourselves if assessment tools like slide exams serve our discipline as it works towards a more inclusive and equitable future. Do they mitigate or compound our concerns about our students' mental health? Do they privilege the systemically advantaged? And most crucially, with art history (along with the rest of the humanities) hurtling towards intensifying crises, do they invite students into our discipline by demonstrating its relevance and value? In response, we embraced "ungrading" or alternative approaches to grading and assignments in our introductory art history courses. Instead of sorting students by demonstrated mastery, we rewarded them for skill development and engagement with class content. In the ensuing years, our resolve regarding "ungrading," has only strengthened based on student response and what we have experienced in our classrooms. We have seen students approach art history with greater enthusiasm and interest as the pressure of the grade has been minimized. These changes have reinvigorated our teaching, as we find ourselves participating in more meaningful intellectual exchanges in our classes.

In lieu of exams and high-stakes performance events, we now allow students to retake low-stakes weekly quizzes on course content, which we discuss in greater depth below, until they are able to demonstrate satisfactory comprehension of each unit. Regular discussion forums create frequent opportunities for low-stakes skill development. Written assignments incorporate more substantive feedback and opportunities for revision. To determine final grades, we have implemented a specifications (or "specs") grading structure, in which letter grades are determined by the degree to which the student engages with course content and demonstrates skill development by successfully completing a variable number of assignments. We are no longer vexed by point tabulations, as all assignments are deemed either satisfactory or unsatisfactory.

While we believed we were trying something new and daring, a review of the literature on grading demonstrates that there is both a rising tide of interest in “ungrading” practices and a long history of challenging the A-F grading system that has calcified in both K-12 and higher education in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Lauren DiSalvo and Nancy Ross have argued for the rich potential ungrading might bring to our discipline by inviting a diverse constituency of students to see themselves as art historians. They rightfully note that art historians must be as focused on *how* we teach as *what* we teach.<sup>2</sup> They introduce the rich scholarship on ungrading to our discipline by providing a thorough and compelling literature review that we recommend to our readers. They then demonstrate that the self-grading method did not, in fact, lead to grade inflation in Ross’s courses. They focus on advanced art history courses and discuss what benefits they have observed from a self-grading strategy. A variety of grading practices fall under the rubric of ungrading, and the art history discipline would benefit from a robust discussion of the myriad possibilities for its design and implementation. We wish to extend this important conversation. Given the disciplinary interest in expanding the field, recruiting more students, and diversifying our departments, we will focus on introductory and, in particular, larger enrollment courses where most students encounter art history for the first time.

In a specs grading approach, students possess agency in the determination of their grade. How they will earn it is fully transparent, clearly outlined at the beginning of the semester. The systematization that a specifications grading method brings to teaching decenters the final grade as the student’s primary concern. Rather than focusing on points and class standing inherent to the competitive nature of numerical and letter grade systems, we built supportive learning communities that nourished curiosity and dialogue. We adopted different types of assignments, activities, and question prompts that provided sustained engagement across the semester, inviting students to experiment with a greater variety of skills and competencies. Students were better able to focus on their own intellectual development, hone skills, and detect—and take pride in—their improvement. They were more likely to find their own interest or entry into course content and engage more critically with the material, reporting that they were not as afraid of “getting it wrong.” Their writing was more reflective, reflexive, and speculative, as they thought with and through the course material. Assignments created more meaningful and continual communication and feedback moving from teacher to student, student to student, and from student to teacher. No longer focused on explaining or defending point deductions, our feedback was more generative and substantive and we, too, found the transition liberatory. In short, specs grading made student work more engaging to read and better aligned our courses’ structure with their learning objectives, prioritizing the development of students’ critical faculties and habits of thought over the recitation of content.

In what follows, we outline the ungrading schema we implemented and consider them in relation to our courses’ stated learning objectives (Appendices A and B). We will also discuss the instructor experience with specs grading. Grading for most faculty is time-intensive and tedious—a fact that has only been compounded by the work/life upheavals and widely reported burnout precipitated by the pandemic and the financial, political, and demographic challenges plaguing American universities in the years that have followed.<sup>3</sup> Thus, ungrading’s effect on

faculty experience is an important, if seldom discussed, aspect of this pedagogical issue.<sup>4</sup> Then we will consider the student experience of specs grading, examining both qualitative and quantitative feedback received in both of our courses.

As with any grading structure, specs grading is not a perfect solution, and equity concerns linger. But in our experience, this alternative approach is far better, advancing an art history that works against elitism and mitigates disadvantage. Educators attuned to racial, ethnic, class, gender, sexuality, and accessibility inequities—those who wish to acknowledge and celebrate the radical particularity and potential of each of their students—know that a traditional grading system that ranks and sorts, presuming an equal playing field for all, is unjust.<sup>5</sup> Our findings will demonstrate that a specs grading structure significantly reduces student anxiety, which has reached epidemic proportions in higher education, by providing greater choice, flexibility, and thus, student agency. It prioritizes intrinsic motivation and intellectual curiosity, providing a path for growth and establishing a learning mindset for all students. Instructors are able to assess work earlier, and more often, and thus meet the needs of individual students and the learning community more effectively. Finally, specs grading is a powerful tool to convey the relevance of the work that we do in the world to a wider audience of students by bringing enthusiasm, curiosity, and joy back into the classroom.

### **Specs Grading in Practice**

Both of us, Gretchen Bender and Matthew L. Levy, teach at large, semi-public land grant universities, the University of Pittsburgh and Penn State University, respectively, which offer reduced tuition to in-state residents. It is not uncommon for our classes to enroll first-generation and non-traditional students, sometimes referred to as “adult learners.” Levy teaches at Penn State Behrend, a four-year and graduate college of Penn State University, which enrolls roughly 4,700 students in its in-person and online programs. Its student body is composed of a significant number of commuting students. Levy will focus below on his course “Renaissance to Modern Art,” a 100-level introductory survey course in the general education curriculum. It typically has an enrollment of about 35 students per section and is taught through a combination of lecture and discussion and without teaching assistants.

The University of Pittsburgh has a history of serving students from the region’s immigrant families who worked in mining, steel production, and other industries, yet it attracts a growing number of out-of-state and international students who come from a diversity of backgrounds. Bender teaches “Introduction to World Art” at the 00-level to 75-200 students as it meets the “Arts” and “Cross-Cultural Awareness” general education requirements. Two large-group sessions are led by Bender each week with the class divided into small groups of 25 for weekly recitation sections led by graduate teaching assistants. Despite the significant differences in course format and content between Bender’s “Intro to World Art” and Levy’s “Renaissance to Modern Art” courses, the application of specs grading in each was quite similar, though with some key differences that could be attributed to the nature of the course or the instructor’s pedagogical preferences.

Both courses dispensed with conventional slide exams in favor of weekly multiple-choice

content quizzes taken on their universities' learning management systems, which graded them automatically. These were untimed, and students were permitted to consult their notes and assigned texts and videos. Students needed to earn above a certain score to receive credit for a quiz and were permitted to retake them in the event they did not pass on the first attempt.<sup>6</sup> This approach encouraged frequent engagement with course material in lieu of more intermittent, memorization-intensive exams. It also incentivized them to learn material they missed rather than simply accept the point penalty for incorrect answers and move on. There is much flexibility here for instructors who can design quiz questions that do many things based on pedagogical goals and values. Our quizzes, for example, assess reading comprehension for key texts, identify scholarly disagreement, gauge a student's ability to apply terminology correctly, recognize historical context, and demonstrate comprehensive understanding of a work of art's content, key features, reception history, and more.

Both courses also adopted weekly discussion forums that were graded on a pass/fail basis. These assignments effectively took the place of the essay questions commonly found on a slide exam. However, where the latter often put students on the defensive, writing to minimize the deduction of points and parroting information gleaned from lectures, our discussion forums allowed for more reflective and speculative engagement with the course material. Students might be asked to apply formal principles discussed in class to previously unseen works of art; engage in brief exercises in historical fiction (e.g., "Imagine you are a 15th-century Italian humanist..."); or consider ethical or methodological questions posed by that week's material (e.g., "What are the benefits and drawbacks of the emergence of the 'commercial pole' for indigenous carvers and communities in the Pacific Northwest..."). Rather than writing to demonstrate the amount of content they had memorized, students took more intellectual risks, provided more nuanced responses, and reflected on the course material in a more individual manner, contemplating how it related to their own experiences and interests. Students were awarded credit for these assignments if their posts demonstrated a satisfactory engagement with the discussion prompt.

Bender and Levy differed in their approach to longer written assignments and class participation. Bender assigned "Slow and Close Looking" homework and "Art Lab" worksheets designed to walk students through visual and material analysis with a wide variety of works of art, images, built environments and artifacts. The former asked students to apply and then expand some of the visual strategies discussed in Shari Tishman's *Slow Looking*, while thinking about the value of slow looking itself and what it can bring to their daily lives and experience of the world.<sup>7</sup> The "Art Lab" worksheets were done during the weekly small break-out groups when students saw works of art and architecture in person at the Carnegie Museum of Art and University Art Gallery. Working in pairs or small groups, they worked through a scaffolded sequence of prompts that led them from description to interpretation. The "Slow and Close Looking" packets were more extensive versions of the "Art Lab" worksheets and often required a more carefully crafted individual essay. Students were asked to review feedback they received on these packets and reflect on how their skills were developing from assignment to assignment. The final essay compelled them to link their analysis of a particular art object to another

we studied earlier in the term and connect this work to the major themes and questions of the course. Bender defined and shared with students the criteria used to determine whether a homework packet or essay satisfactorily demonstrated “conscientious engagement.” Those who did not meet this criterion on the first try were allowed to revise and resubmit or meet with the instructor to discuss their work in fuller detail (Appendix E).

Levy assigned two formal analysis papers, one about an individual object at the Erie Art Museum and the other a compare/contrast analysis of a pair of works pulled from Artstor.<sup>8</sup> Like Bender’s homework packets, these assignments asked students to independently apply analytical skills developed in class while attending to the material particularities of works of art, and they were scaffolded so that the second paper built on the skills developed in the first. Whereas these assignments had previously been graded using a multi-category rubric, with a specs grading approach, they were simply scored with a 2 (exceeds expectations), 1 (satisfactory), or 0 (unsatisfactory) with the expectations associated with these scores clearly spelled out in the assignment prompt. Students were permitted to revise and resubmit for a better score after reviewing their original draft with the professor, thus giving them more agency in the determination of their grade and affording motivated students the opportunity to improve their writing through the implementation of written and verbal feedback.

In previous iterations of Levy’s course, class participation counted for a relatively small percentage of students’ final grades, as he was wary of penalizing students who were reluctant to speak in class due to social anxiety or language barriers. However, a specs grading approach allowed class participation to be assessed in a manner that both better reflected its significance to student learning and created another pathway for dialogue between student and instructor. Participation was defined to include both contributions to in-class discussions, as well as responses to classmates’ discussion forum posts. At the midpoint and end of the semester, students submitted a class participation self-evaluation, in which they scored their own engagement with class discussions from 1-5. They then provided a narrative statement about how they approached class discussions and how their participation affected their learning. They were also invited to discuss the barriers that might have prevented them from participating or the reasons they opted for in-class or online as their primary discussion modality. Levy gave significant weight to students’ progress in their engagement with discussions over the course of the semester in determining final scores. He could disagree with a student’s ranking but would explain the source of their disagreement in writing.<sup>9</sup> Once again, students had significant ownership over their final score, and there were increased opportunities for student/instructor dialogue in its determination.

As is customary in specs grading, final grades are determined using a “bundling” approach, in which each letter grade corresponds to specific criteria for each assignment type (Appendix B). For example, in Levy’s course, an A equated to 12 quizzes (out of a possible 12) completed with a score of at least 12/15, at least 10 passing discussion posts (out of a possible 12), a combined score of 4/4 on the formal analysis papers, and a 5/5 for class participation. An A still entailed high standards for the demonstration of learning, but specs grading shifted significant agency to the students in how these standards were met. Students could retake quiz-

zes, elect not to complete all discussion forum posts, revise papers, or decide which modality of class participation (in-person or online) best suited their learning style and personal comfort level.

One of the criticisms of ungrading strategies that has been raised pertains to structure and clarity.<sup>10</sup> Traditional grading structures are familiar, students know what to expect, and, some argue that the grade itself provides an important indicator of whether or not the student is succeeding academically. Given specs grading's relative novelty for students, we devoted considerable time during the semester to discussing our rationale behind its use and implementation in our classes. In addition to reviewing the information about grading in the syllabus at the start of the semester, Bender shared a letter to her students about her motivations as an educator and the journey that led to her embrace of ungrading strategies. Levy shared a specs grading worksheet that students could use to track their progress in each category of class performance and would periodically remind students about how grades were tabulated over the course of the semester. We found these measures to be beneficial to students who may have felt anxiety about the departure from a traditional points-based system or those who rely on a clear sense of structure to maximize their academic performance. We agree that clarity is vitally important, not just in grading systems, but in prompts and instructions given to students throughout the semester for assignments and activities. Specs grading implemented with effective communication builds a structure that improves clarity, as the path to student success is fully transparent.

Another concern regarding alternative grading strategies is that they pose particular challenges for students who are impacted by neurodivergence. We recommend the scholarship provided by Emily Pitts Donahue and Sarah Silverman as it provides a helpful framing for thinking about the complexity of deploying this term as well as meeting student needs.<sup>11</sup> Specs grading has afforded us the capacity to respond with greater attention to individual student performance, as the time we devote to 'grading' does not entail wrestling with the number of points to grant or withhold. Furthermore, the regular low-stakes assignments we administer allow us to recognize student need and respond earlier and more comprehensively, which is a benefit to students with disabilities of all kinds.

The ability for a student to revise work to have it meet the requirements of a given assignment may appear to place additional burdens on students who are pressed by numerous responsibilities in and beyond school. In a traditionally structured grading system, students need to devote intense weeks to studying or writing papers to meet deadlines for high-stakes events, but then can devote less time to the class between these high-pressure assessments. In a specs grading structure, more time does need to be given to the weekly work of the class, but the assessments align student engagement with resources. Students take quizzes or write responses while engaged with that week's specific content and provided materials. Students no longer have to go back weeks to try and recall material for an upcoming exam. Students with multiple responsibilities can better plan their weekly time commitments in a specs grading system. They quickly become accustomed to how much time is needed which aids in planning overall. As stated earlier, no grading or 'ungrading' structure is perfect. As Beckie Supiano notes in "The

Unintended Consequences of ‘Ungrading,’” any grading system will be impacted by equity issues as success in school always correlates to prior advantage.<sup>12</sup> A specs grading approach, coupled with instructor flexibility and greater student agency in meeting course requirements, is a significant improvement and an important step toward greater equity.

### **Ungrading and Learning Objectives**

Our learning objectives reflect pedagogical values that have been central to the discipline for generations and fall into two principal categories: (1) the cultivation of students’ capacity for visual, material, and spatial analysis and (2) the comprehension of the changing social and cultural functions of art as they relate to the broader currents of world history (Appendix A). For the former, specs grading created an iterative framework for the regular, low-stakes application of analytical skills. These higher order skills *could* be assessed with traditional exam essay questions, but any art historian would readily concede that the cognitive habits valued in the discipline develop through regular practice and not through one-time, pressured performance events. Specs grading enabled our courses to emphasize the incremental improvement of students’ analytical faculties over isolated demonstrations of competence. Through class discussions, group projects, and discussion boards, students learned from each other as well as the instructor and were energized by their own progress. As the weeks passed, student writing became more engaged. In posts and discussions, students were more willing to share their own experiences with each other along with their observations and questions about course content. For example, in the unit “Ritual: Image, Object, and Agency” in Bender’s class, students submitted analytical essays on their personal experiences with Thadingyut in Burmese Buddhist tradition, the Korean ritual Jesa, the celebration of Corpus Christi, the chalking of the door on the eve of Epiphany in the Lutheran faith, and the crocheting of a blanket by a student’s grandmother to celebrate the birth of a new child in the family. In each, students thought about site specificity, materiality, bodily performance and sensual response, audience, and accessibility. Through the sharing of such essays, students were more likely to recognize *why art history matters* and its applicability to their own lives than they were in a traditional class that prioritized content knowledge acquisition tested through memorization.

The second class of learning objectives was assessed through regular content quizzes, in which students demonstrated lower-order comprehension and retention skills pertaining to the contextual understanding of works of art. They could begin to identify how artistic production shapes and is shaped by historical, political, religious, cultural and/or social needs. They could certainly identify specific makers or patrons. They could define terminology and show at a base level how the situated circumstances of a maker, patron, and intended audience determine the form and function of the work of art. Because the quizzes could be retaken, students could also deepen understanding by learning through mistakes and could move on to a new unit confident in their mastery of the previous one.

Both of our courses culminated in a final writing assignment where students merged their analytical skills with their ability to situate works contextually, building description toward informed interpretation. These culminating assignments required students to synthesize

material learned throughout the term or connect works of art at the end of the semester to those encountered earlier. These moments of synthesis also occurred throughout the semester in the discussion forum assignments, ensuring that material from earlier in the semester remained fresh in students' minds.

Specs grading rectified a secondary structural issue with the assessment of content comprehension. Traditional surveys typically suffer from what might be called the "review slide dilemma." Instructors make available a selection of class slides illustrating the material students can expect to see on quizzes and exams. Because students cannot be expected to memorize every work shown over the course of a semester, these review slides reflect only a portion of the class content. Consequently, when students encounter a work projected in class that is not contained in these slides, pens fall to desks, and students' attention drifts.<sup>13</sup> The open-book content quizzes used in our specs grading approach obviated this issue. Because the quizzes no longer required onerous memorization, students could be assessed on the full breadth of class material and remained engaged and attentive throughout the class session. Bender's students reported in course evaluations that they learned more in the class than they did in other traditionally graded classes, as they were motivated to engage with all of the material, not just on what would appear on an exam.

Specs grading thus created a framework for assessment that cultivated student agency and incentivized engagement across all dimensions of class performance. It aligned what we asked students to *do* with what we asked them to *learn*, creating more effective pathways for them to think and act like art historians.

Not inconsequentially, these changes also had a salutary effect on the instructors' task of grading and overall outlook on teaching. Instead of reading similar responses to tired identification or slide comparison essays, we encountered inventive and personal student writing. A high level of achievement in the class was possible for a greater diversity of students—not just those who benefitted from a well-resourced educational path and have learned how to excel in the educational system. Through ongoing conversation, we came to better know and understand our students and learn from them and their experiences, which, in turn, enriched our own understanding of our course material. Specs grading reinvigorated our curiosity and brought joy to teaching, even through the grueling and compounding challenges of the pandemic and its aftermath.

### **The Benefits of Specs Grading as Evidenced in Student Feedback**

We have gathered ample evidence to support the claims we make for the efficacy and benefits of a specifications grading approach (Appendices C and D). In this last section, we will focus on the student response. Bender collected data during the Spring of 2021 for two sections of "Introduction to World Art," one enrolling 201 students and another 45. She reviewed qualitative comments voluntarily provided by students in the regular teaching evaluations for the course, as well as responses posted to a discussion board after she asked students to reflect on the grading model, assignment structure, and their own learning in the course (see Appendix B). Both of these were issued to students as they were finishing the term.

Students in Levy's two sections of "Renaissance to Modern Art" in the fall semester of 2021 received a quantitative survey and qualitative reflection questions conceived through Levy's participation in a study organized by Penn State's Schreyer Institute for Teaching Excellence (see Appendix D for study design details and results). Both of these instruments were administered one-third of the way through the semester and at the end of the semester via the university's learning management system. Of the 58 students in Levy's two sections, 24 completed the questionnaire, and 19 responded to the reflection questions. 133 of the 246 total students enrolled in Bender's sections completed the University's teaching evaluation survey and 89 provided more detailed information by responding to her own prompt questions. Below, we discuss what we learned from our students.

### *The Usefulness of Grades?*

When asked about their motives and goals for the course in the pre-survey, a desire to learn and fear of poor performance were the most agreed upon responses cited by Levy's students ("I want to learn as much as possible from this class"  $n=14$ ; "My goal is to avoid performing poorly."  $n=13$ ). When asked to rank statements on the importance of grades, "incentive to perform well" and "administrative requirement for graduation" were the most highly ranked responses. However, comparatively few students in either Levy's or Bender's classes viewed grades as an accurate indicator of their academic abilities. In Bender's class, one student noted in an end of semester survey, "I think that the feedback we were provided... on each assignment was just as effective as getting a grade to know how we were doing and where we could improve." Constructive feedback need not be attached to a point score or letter grade. Another shared that "the pressure to achieve high scores clouds the desire to become enlightened and enriched by the knowledge university classes provide."

In short, these students' attitudes towards grading aligned with prevailing wisdom in the scholarship of teaching and learning: grades are an administratively imposed convention that serve as a powerful, if extrinsic, motivator and a flawed evaluative measure—important to their sense of academic success, though peripheral to the learning process. And when grades are centered, experimentation, taking chances—and making mistakes—are often strenuously avoided. In sum, one of Bender's students notes, "I think the way this course was taught really turned our current grading system upside down. I think one of the biggest problems with grades and learning is that it usually assumes that tests are the end of learning. I think... people learn a lot more from their mistakes than from being perfect the first time."

### *Clarity and Fairness*

A high percentage of Levy's students reported knowing what they needed to do to get an A in the course (mean=4.4/5) in the pre-survey and believed they would be graded fairly in the course (mean=4.5/5). Notably, for Levy's students, their faith in the clarity and fairness of the grading process did not equate to certainty that they would get an A themselves, as comparatively fewer indicated confidence that they would earn an A in the course (mean=4.04/5). This will be of great interest to educators concerned about ungrading's potential impacts on grade inflation. Indeed, the students' intuition proved to be correct, as the grade distribution in

Levy's class was roughly similar to that found in earlier iterations of the course that used a more conventional percentage-based grading system.

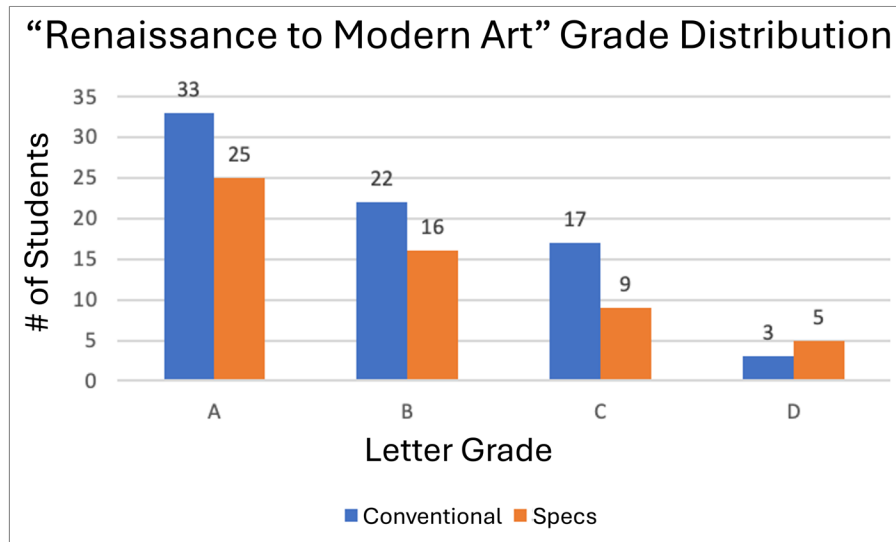


Table 1. Grade distribution in Levy's "Renaissance to Modern Art." Totals reflect two sections in the fall semesters of 2020 (conventional grading) and 2021 (specs grading).

### *Engagement and Intrinsic Motivation*

Levy's students reported statistically significant shifts towards self-motivation in goal orientation survey items such as: "My goal in this course is to get a better grade than most other students," and "It is important for me to do well compared to others in this class." These results suggest that specs grading reduced the extrinsic performance incentive of peer competition. With students no longer focused on the accumulation of a single point total, they were less inclined to measure their academic success vis-à-vis their peers'. Survey results revealed that students instead focused on maximizing their own learning, as indicated by statistically significant shifts in questions such as, "I want to learn as much as possible from this class." These results, along with those obtained by Bender, offer quantitative evidence to support the claim often made by practitioners of ungrading that it replaces the extrinsic motivation of grades with the intrinsic motivation of learning for one's own gratification.

In order to assess the degree of student engagement and intrinsic motivation for learning, Bender tabulated the number of students enrolled in the two sections of her course who submitted satisfactory essays responding to course content beyond the number that were required to earn an A in the class. Eight written responses were needed to earn an A. We were surprised to find that many discussion posts rivaled a typical exam essay in length and degree of detail. In the large enrollment section, 142 out of 201 students (70.6%) submitted nine or more essays, with twenty students (10%) choosing to submit written work every week of the semester even though this was not required. In the smaller enrollment section, 34 out of 45 students (75.5%) submitted assignments beyond those needed for the A grade.

Qualitative responses also indicated that specs grading restored intrinsic motivation to the learning process. Students described how specs grading de-centered grades as the primary focus of their education, creating a space for genuine intellectual curiosity and meaningful

learning, and at times even joy. We include below only a very small sample of the positive responses we received that mention true and enthusiastic learning. We interweave those received from Levy's and Bender's students as it is noteworthy how much they echo each other despite our different enrollment numbers, institutional contexts, and the diverging approaches we take to the introductory survey course.

I really felt like I could take a breath and think about what the materials were on my own instead of learning the content relative to an exam. In other words, I feel like this structure allowed for independent and free-flowing thinking.

[T]he grading structure has created an environment in which I know I am learning for my own gratification. I am becoming more invested in the class as it continues, and I am trying harder to retain the info by improving my notes.

This was a unique way of grading that allowed me to perform better. I could focus on the work instead of worrying about grades constantly and there was less pressure in memorizing and more importance was given to curiosity and learning. I would definitely recommend that this format is continued for future semesters because it is a lot more engaging.

I am a student who can easily become concerned about grades to the point where I am solely focused on doing good on the next test rather than actually trying to embrace the course material. This course didn't do that to me and I couldn't be more grateful for that.

I feel like I am more inclined to focus on not only learning the material but also enjoying it...I enjoy how this approach to grading has motivated me to focus on learning for not only a good grade but to broaden my intelligence.

This class allowed me to focus intently on the material...It allowed me to take a "slow and close look," if you will, at the material and wrestle with the meanings and knowledge on my own terms in order to gain a greater understanding. I thoroughly enjoyed my time in this class!

The [grading] structure makes me want to do the assignments because I want to, not necessarily because I have to.

I felt passionate about what I was writing, learning, and engaging with rather than feeling burdened. Combining this passion and creative freedom that this class enabled, I feel that I am walking away with more learned skills and knowledge as opposed to my other classes.

If you looked at my notes, there are pages on pages of quotes and notations of things that I knew wouldn't be on the... quizzes, but I found important to remember anyway. For our slow looking homework, I found myself muting my timer to look at the details of a piece longer than the suggested time, despite no scaled grade being given.

Such enthusiasm is particularly remarkable coming from students taking art history for general education credit. Levy's campus does not offer an art history major, and only one respondent indicated that the course was required for their major (either in error or indicating an intention to transfer). At Bender's institution, over 97% of students who enroll in "Introduction to World Art" do not intend on completing a major in the department. For institutions that do offer an art history major and rely on general education courses to attract students to their programs, these results indicate that ungrading could serve as a powerful recruitment tool.

### *Student Well-Being*

"As someone who works two jobs and has a sick dad at home that I travel back from campus to visit often, I really appreciated the flexibility of this course."

The global pandemic taught us a great deal about the diverse challenges our students face in their daily lives. By far, the single most popular reason that students in Bender's class gave her for retaining the specifications grading approach was the reduction of stress and anxiety (55 out of 89 respondents; 61%). Similarly, Levy's students reported a statistically significant decline in anxiety from pre- to post-survey. Notably, that decline coincided, as previously mentioned, with an *increased* desire to learn as much as possible in the course.

Responses to the qualitative feedback questions for both Levy and Bender supported this finding:

Because of the ungrading approach, I strive for excellence without all of the pressure. I am understanding and retaining the class material because I am not stressing out about the next quiz.

I feel very motivated to review content and complete assignments because I do not feel all the stress of worrying about my grade constantly. It is easier for me to complete assignments when I am not feeling overwhelmed with stress about passing the class.

This semester, there were often many weeks for me in which I had difficulty mustering up the energy to care for my future and care for my grades due to personal issues, and this course did not stress me out.

Specs grading's structural clarity and flexibility transfer some of the instructor's authority to the students, who have greater responsibility for their own outcomes and thus greater agency. One of Bender's students wrote, "I personally love specs grading because it places all the responsibility of the students' grades on the students themselves. Especially for an introduction course in which many people have different starting points for what they know."

It is important to emphasize and linger on this last part: “many people have different starting points.” And, we would add, different personal circumstances. Specifications grading is, overall, a flexible structure that provides room and space for individual trajectories through the material, asking students to focus on their own goals, paths, and accomplishments while minimizing or eliminating competition fostered through the ranking system of traditional grades. As one of Bender’s students noted, “the structure of the course encourag[ed] individualism instead of comparing us to each other with graded exams and strict deadlines.”

### **Conclusion: Individual Growth, Supportive Learning Communities and a Strengthened Discipline**

In conclusion, the two most significant impacts specs grading has brought to our introductory survey courses are a focus on learning as *process* and the creation of a supportive learning community. Assignments and activities, graded solely on the satisfactory/unsatisfactory basis, coupled with a focus on revision, iterative practice, and improvement based on feedback encouraged students to focus attention on their own learning, to prioritize inquiry and development over point tabulations. In weekly discussion forums and assignments in our classes, we noted that students were more likely to make mistakes, take chances, and provide creative responses.<sup>14</sup> In these spaces, they were also able to regularly hone visual literacy and analytical skills.

As teachers and scholars, we are fully cognizant of the necessity of revision, the role it plays in honing ideas and our ability to communicate them effectively. Revision is often central to advanced courses in our major, particularly writing seminars. Converting introductory survey courses to a specs grading approach has enabled us to center iteration and revision for general education students as well. In Levy’s class, the option to revise papers yielded more opportunities for students to grow as writers, something that is often assumed to be unattainable in these types of courses. The requirement to meet with Levy prior to resubmitting ensured that students received substantive, individualized feedback. While individual meetings were not possible in Bender’s large enrollment course, personalized feedback on visual and material analysis assignments was possible through a “feedback guide” that enabled students to identify their strengths and weaknesses and chart progress (see Appendix D).

In short, students—even in Bender’s 200-seat course—were able to receive more substantive attention from us. They felt valued as individual learners rather than ranked as students. An overwhelming number of students reported appreciation for our efforts to minimize stress and anxiety from the classroom which was achieved in large part through the opportunities given for revision and the elimination of exams and points. We were both able to observe students pushing past their initial reticence towards speaking in class or sharing ideas, observations, and questions with their peers in discussion boards. With bolstered confidence, students grew more comfortable speaking about art. Many students enter the art history survey with preconceptions about the elitist nature of the subject.<sup>15</sup> This can lead to apprehension when faced with writing assignments or activities undertaken in museum spaces that are perceived by many to be intimidating. It is not reasonable to expect students to overcome these feelings in the high-stakes environment of a slide exam or in courses structured around point accumu-

lation. Frequent, low-stakes assignments can gradually chip away at student apprehension and develop an awareness of the fact that art relates to all facets of human experience and is thus for everyone. An inclusive art history for everyone—is that not, at root, our most crucial goal as educators? Specs grading has opened a path toward this horizon in the introductory survey where most students encounter art and art history and form perceptions that are longstanding. This is a starting point for those of us dedicated to demonstrating why art and art history matter.

## APPENDIX A: Resources Provided to Students on Assignments and Grading

### *Bender's Letter on Grading*

Dear Students,

I Do Not Care About Grades.

As an art historian, I am particularly interested in how learning happens in museum spaces. In the best museum experiences, visitors are inspired to explore, to play, to find something new. To discover something about the world, themselves and others. To be surprised, to marvel and wonder. To follow curiosity for curiosity's sake. To remember and reflect, and to join in this with others who are there with you. Museums can encourage personal association, memory, imagination, emotion, fantasy, consternation and, also, boredom. Museums can lead to a form of day-dreaming, removing oneself from the cares of the world to let the mind wander. The best museum experiences make you feel as if you are a welcome member of a community and that you are free to choose your own path, to linger as long as you want over one thing or another. It is my hope that this class will help you to grow and discover by sparking these modes of intrinsic learning.

I have taught Introduction to World Art at Pitt almost every year since 2002. In 2020, during the pandemic and ongoing protests for Black lives, social, and environmental justice, however, I significantly re-evaluated my teaching practice. I did much reading and thinking about how to structure this large enrollment class, what my goals are for you as a group and individually, and what work we should be doing together. In a collaborative session I had with my colleagues in May of 2020 on teaching, I was influenced by this TED talk about learning in digital spaces and online environments: John Green, [“The nerd’s guide for learning everything online,”](#) TEDxIndianapolis, November 2012.

Green, author of *The Fault in Our Stars* and other books and co-creator of the YouTube series Crash Course, talks about the many ways in which schools, traditional classrooms, and their methods failed him. He fell into a passion for learning despite the rigid expectations and uniformity of educational institutions. While I'm not onboard 100% with all the assertions he makes, I was particularly swayed by his advocacy for curiosity, for the importance of finding or building a community of learners, and for thinking about learning as “cartography.” As you learn, your original horizon expands and new territory unfolds before you. Your world gets bigger. As you learn, and these new horizons emerge into view, your potential paths become more numerous. As you find new answers, new questions emerge. These questions lead to new questions and so on. To engage in these questions is to engage in “learnly ideas” simply for the sake of learning. Learning can be playful if your enthusiasm and curiosity are allowed to flourish.

In the summer of 2021, a group of colleagues and I focused on “Ungrading.” There is much written about the “ungrading” philosophy,\* but this podcast might be most helpful: Laurie Santos, [“Making the Grade,”](#) The Happiness Lab podcast, Nov. 19, 2019. Santos is a cognitive scientist and professor of Psychology at Yale University. In short, the ungrading

approach argues that when students are compelled to devote their time to memorizing facts for quizzes and exams and writing essays with tightly circumscribed expectations, working to accumulate as many points as possible in order to earn the highest grade possible, intrinsic and deep learning are actually suppressed. When grades are the primary focus of both students and teachers, the goal is not to learn more or discover something new or find inspiration or make connections between different kinds of classes or disciplines, or between school and life, but simply to demonstrate content knowledge (following the quickest route possible) and get the A. You're not doing it for the love of learning. Grades, Santos and others argue, do more harm than good. They are born from and support a system founded on competition and pressure to excel—to be better than others. Santos cites studies that have demonstrated that the students with the best grades are often the ones with the lowest levels of happiness, self-esteem, and optimism. Anxiety and mental health challenges are reaching crisis levels in high schools and institutions of higher education. Students are trapped in a cycle that does not end: get the best grades to get the best GPA, get the best GPA to get into the best colleges; get the best grades to get the best GPA; get the best GPA to graduate at the top of your class; graduate at the top of your class in order to get the best job or get into the best graduate or professional program. Throughout, you are focused on who might be doing better than you. Who has more than you.

In some small part, this class is designed to try and break this cycle.

Unfortunately, however, this class is situated in an institution that deploys grades and requires them of you and of me. I want to make it crystal clear at the outset that I am prepared to give all of you an A in this class if you all meet the criteria for an A. (See the grading info document on the details.) It is my hope that all of you earn an A in this class.

Here are my learning objectives broadly:

I want for students to:

- Feel that they are part of a welcoming community and work to foster this sense of belonging for all.
- Become better at analysis, understanding texts, images, visual art, material objects and built spaces as things that construct meaning and shape the world.
- Be open to the ideas of others.
- Learn to convey their ideas with clarity and persuasiveness, as speakers and writers.
- Be able to recognize multiple and diverging perspectives.
- Accept ambiguity and complexity and feel comfortable inhabiting “and” positions.
- Feel confident as thinkers after considering deeply where their own ideas emerge and are situated.
- Be able to identify their own blind-spots.
- Recognize that we know more together than any one person knows alone.
- Be comfortable in the fact we do not have all the answers.
- Be curious... it's ok to stray off the path the course offers.
- Care more about learning than grades.
- Become engaging and thoughtful story tellers.

More specific learning objectives directly connected to the “Introduction to World Art”

class can be found on the syllabus.

I tend to provide much material for students to access: pre-recorded lectures and lecture notes, videos, readings, podcasts, websites... I do so because I want to provide you with multiple points of access. As your teacher, I want to lean more toward providing rather than withholding information and material. I want to share with you interesting things I have found. I want for you to engage with a wide range of material that enables you to think about the course content and the questions it raises from new or shifting angles. I purposefully use the word “Resources” in the weekly modules rather than “Required Readings.” I try my best to be mindful not to overload you, but I also want this course to be intellectually rewarding. I am absolutely ok with you letting me know how I am doing in striking this balance. I am absolutely ok with you devoting more of your time to some of the resources provided in a weekly module over another. I will try to give you choices in weekly discussion prompts that invite you to approach the material in a way that’s engaging for you personally.

It is my hope that despite the fact this is a large-enrollment class, one that meets, for most of you, a required general education requirement, that it draws your curiosity, is enjoyable and rewarding intellectually and personally—one that enables you to connect with others and think about who you are as a human living with other humans and other species in this world.

\*A great start is Susan Blum, ed., *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What To Do Instead)* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2020). See especially the foreword by Alfie Kohn and Susan Blum’s introduction.

*Bender’s Assessment Guide for Intro to World Art (with annotations **bolded**)*

Institutionally, we are required to assign you a grade for this course. This will be determined as follows:

**Assignment Overview for Introduction to World Art**

What you will do	How it will be graded	Due
<p><i>Module Assessment Checks</i></p> <p>Upon completion of each module, you will take a quick quiz to determine your comprehension of the material. Because the point is to learn the material and not to test you on what you’ve memorized, students can take the assessment quizzes multiple times. It is ok to refer to any notes you may have taken</p>	<p>80% accuracy (4/5 or 8/10) or above will indicate the module is complete.</p> <p>*There is no need to retake the quiz once you have earned an 80%. The quizzes are marked complete or incomplete.</p> <p><b>Students told us that they</b></p>	<p>Students can take as long as they need to complete the assessment check quizzes, and can take them multiple times until they earn an 80%. However, we highly recommend you try to complete one</p>

<p>or material you've reviewed.</p> <p><i>Content Knowledge Acquisition</i></p> <p><b>Multiple Choice Quizzes</b></p> <p><b>Graded Automatically in LMS (Canvas)</b></p> <p><i>Course Objectives Evaluated:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Global Understanding: Begin to develop a critically informed knowledge of artistic traditions in a global context</li> <li>• Contextual Understanding: Identify how artistic production shapes and is shaped by historical, political, religious, cultural, and social contexts and needs</li> <li>• Contextual Understanding: Identify specific makers and patrons and consider how their situated circumstance, living in a particular place and time, determines the form and function of art</li> <li>• Contextual Understanding: Trace how the purpose and meaning of art shifts in different contexts in different historical moments</li> <li>• Close Looking and Analysis: Develop terminology to describe and analyze works of art in various media</li> </ul>	<p><b>used these quizzes as guides to the course material, checking their work, going back to readings and lectures to think about the questions with which they struggled or answered incorrectly.</b></p>	<p>module's assessment quiz every week. If you get behind it will be difficult to catch up with the material.</p>
<p><i>Engagement—Discussion Board Posts or Reflection Assignments</i></p> <p>Each week, we will give you the opportunity to respond to a prompt on your group's discussion board (seen only by the instructors and your fellow group members) or respond to a reflection question (seen only by</p>	<p>Complete—Satisfactory engagement with assignment.</p> <p>Incomplete—Work submitted but too minimal, or student chose not to complete assignment.</p>	<p>Submit these the day before your discussion group is scheduled to meet, after completing the work for that week's module.</p> <p><b>We did not require a response every week.</b></p>

<p>the instructors).</p> <p>*Note that you do not need to post weekly to earn an A in the course! See chart below.</p> <p><i>Contextual &amp; Situational Thinking; Reflection and Association</i></p> <p>These were short writing assignments, typically 150-200 words. (Roughly equivalent to the length of writing submitted during an essay exam.)</p> <p><i>Course Objectives Evaluated:</i></p> <p>Rethinking “Art”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop a more critical definition of “art”</li> <li>• Articulate a more complicated and capacious understanding of the purpose of art</li> </ul> <p>Contextual Understanding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify how artistic production shapes and is shaped by historical, political, religious, cultural and social contexts and needs</li> <li>• Identify specific makers and patrons and consider how their situated circumstance, living in a particular place and time, determines the form and function of art</li> <li>• Trace how the purpose and meaning of art shifts in different contexts in different historical moments</li> <li>• Think reflexively about your own role as an observer and interpreter</li> </ul> <p>Global Understanding</p>	<p>Students were usually given several options each week, answering questions or activity prompts. They posted these to a smaller learning community of fellow students (15-18). Students were particularly appreciative of having the choice to decide how they would engage in the weekly material and the questions it posed, and which weeks to complete these assignments.</p>	<p>Compulsory discussion posts or weekly writing assignments become routine and laborious. We were surprised to discover at the end of the semester that 72% of students enrolled in the course completed <i>more</i> than the required 8 assignments needed to secure an A in the class. Some students completed a reply or activity every week of the semester even though they were not required to do so.</p>
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider how a global approach to art challenges Western assumptions about art and the Eurocentric biases of the discipline of art history</li> <li>• Think critically about cultural contact and the role art (its production, collection and circulation) plays in establishing, maintaining or challenging political and social power</li> </ul> <p>Extend Curiosity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrate engagement in the course through an eagerness to extend one’s thinking about art and its place and purpose in the world</li> <li>• Bring something new to the class, share what you are learning with others in our learning community</li> </ul> <p>Pose Good Questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider what you do not know about ‘art’ and other world cultures and formulate critically astute questions about a specific art object</li> </ul>		
<p><i>Homework Packets and Final Essay</i>          These focus on developing your visual, material and site analysis skills.</p> <p><i>Analytical Skill Development and Practice</i></p> <p><b>Carefully designed packets were developed to guide students through the process of “Slow and Close Looking”—how to engage with and interpret a work of art, relying on observations, visual analysis practices, material analysis, and contextual</b></p>	<p>Complete—Satisfactory engagement with assignment.</p> <p>Incomplete—Work submitted but too minimal or hastily composed or student chose not to complete assignment.</p> <p><b>Each student in the class was provided with a “Feedback Guide” after completion of the assignment which identified</b></p>	<p>Packet 1: Feb. 21          Packet 2: March 21          Essay: April 18</p> <p>*Note, every student in the class has one “extension chip.” You can complete an assignment late by turning in your chip, no questions asked.</p> <p>No worksheets will be accepted after Mon-</p>

<p>information. The final assignment required students to write a summative essay of 500-750 words that linked a work of art from the end of the semester to one we studied in the first weeks of class.</p> <p><i>Course Objectives Evaluated:</i></p> <p>Close Looking and Analysis</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Study a work of art in person</li> <li>• Make precise, accurate and comprehensive observations about an image, object or space that supports an interpretation</li> <li>• Develop terminology to describe and analyze works of art in various media</li> <li>• Through practice, hone attention, visual acumen, and develop a heightened awareness of environments, images and material objects</li> </ul> <p>Pose Good Questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider what you do not know about ‘art’ and other world cultures and formulate critically astute questions about a specific art object</li> </ul> <p>Contextual Understanding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Think reflexively about your own role as an observer and interpreter</li> </ul> <p>Extend Curiosity</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrate engagement in the course through an eagerness to extend one’s thinking about art and its place and purpose in the world</li> </ul>	<p>strengths and weaknesses in analytical and interpretive practices and visual acumen. We shared strong examples of student work with the class so students could see how others responded to the same work of art.</p>	<p>day, April 26th.</p> <p>Students were expected to read the feedback they received carefully and identify how they worked to improve their analytical skills in subsequent submissions. In other iterations of the course, we asked students to complete less comprehensive “worksheets” more regularly, coordinated with field trips to museums and galleries.</p>
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*Levy's Assessment Guide for "Renaissance to Modern Art"*

This course approaches grading differently from what you might have experienced throughout your educational career. We will apply an approach called "ungrading." Advocates for ungrading argue that traditional grading practices are detrimental to student learning. Grades encourage the memorization and regurgitation of class content instead of deep reflection, curiosity, and intellectual risk-taking. Grades are born out of a philosophy of competition that sorts students by arbitrary criteria. Grades can perpetuate systems of social and economic inequality. Grades contribute to student stress and anxiety.

Alas, we are at Penn State, and this institution requires that I assign conventional letter grades at the end of the semester. However, the way I will determine those grades will not follow a traditional point system. Instead, I will apply an ungrading framework that rewards student engagement over mastery of content. Students will receive credit for completing an assignment at a satisfactory level, and I will not be using a rubric or point scale to discern the difference between a B and a B+. I should stress that this ungrading approach does *not* mean that the class requires little work. To the contrary, this course will require more assignments and more writing compared to how I have taught it in the past. However, those assignments are intended to reward engagement with the course rather than differentiating between varying degrees of quality or mastery. If an assignment is completed at a satisfactory level, it earns credit for the course.

The evaluation framework for the course consists of the following categories:

*Content Quizzes*

12 quizzes, consisting of 15 multiple choice questions each, to be taken on Canvas, typically due on Mondays. Quizzes are open-note, open-web, and untimed. You may retake each quiz once to correct mistakes and shore up gaps in your content knowledge. To receive credit for a quiz, you must score at least a 12/15. A score lower than 12 does not earn credit for that quiz.

*Discussion Forum Posts*

12 short writing assignments, typically one-paragraph in length, due on Fridays. Of the 12, only 10 need to be completed to earn full credit in this category. I will provide a prompt on Monday asking you to reflect on various aspects of our class content. Each will be scored with a 1 (satisfactory) or 0 (not satisfactory). An unsatisfactory score indicates that the post did not demonstrate a reasonable effort or did not adequately respond to the prompt.

*Papers*

Two formal analysis papers, one 2-3 pages in length, another 4-5 pages in length. The first paper will require you to write about a work of art at the Erie Art Museum. The second will be a compare-contrast paper about two works that will be viewable online. Each paper will be scored 0-2. A 0 indicates an inadequate effort or incomplete assignment; a 1 indicates satisfactory quality; and a 2 indicates more than satisfactory quality.

*Class Participation*

Vibrant class discussion is what I value most as an educator. It results in the deepest learning, and the exchange of ideas and observations can be exhilarating. At the midpoint and end of the semester, students will assess their own participation with a short, written evaluation and a number score ranging from 0-5. Additional guidelines on how to score your participation will be provided later in the semester. I reserve the right to disagree with your self-evaluation and change your score (either up or down) accordingly. If I do change your score, I will explain why in writing.

I recognize that people have varying comfort levels with contributing to in-class discussion. Thus, I will also count your engagement with the discussion forum beyond your initial post towards your class participation. For example, if you respond to one of your classmates' posts with a question or additional comment, that is considered participation in class discussion.

## APPENDIX B: Specifications Grading Structures

The tables below, shared with students at the beginning of the semester, demonstrate how we translated student work into a letter grade at the end of the term.

### Earning a Letter Grade in “Intro to World Art”

Learning goal areas	Assignments	D grade minimally passing	C-	C grade Satisfactory engagement S Grade if taking the class S/NC	C+	B-	B grade Commendable engagement	B+	A-	A Grade Exemplary engagement
Content Knowledge	Module Assessment Checks									
	Completed (scoring 80% or higher) (Multiple choice “quizzes” in Canvas)	10	11	11	11	12	12	12	13	13
Skills and Critical Thinking	Homework & Activity Worksheets (S/N grading)									
	(Completed in class, during field trips)	1	1	2	2	2	2	3	3	3
	Reflective writing responses to prompt questions (Submitted in a discussion board or in a journal) (S/N grading)									
				5	6	6	7	7	7	8

**Earning a Grade in “Renaissance to Modern Art”**

A	B	C	D	F
Quizzes: 12 (score of ≥12/15)	Quizzes: 10 (score of ≥12/15)	Quizzes: 8 (score of ≥12/15)	Quizzes: 6 (score of ≥12/15)	Below D standards
Discussion Posts: ≥10	Discussion Posts: 9	Discussion Posts: 8	Discussion Posts: 7	
Papers: 4	Papers: 3	Papers: 2	Papers: 1	
Participation: 5	Participation: 4	Participation: 3	Participation: 2	

Plus and minus grades will be determined at my discretion based on how student work falls within these bundles.

### APPENDIX C: Bender's End of Semester Survey and Quantitative Analysis of Results

In order to determine whether or not to continue teaching the course with a specifications approach, Bender asked students to respond to an optional discussion board post which posed this question along with several others:

- What were the advantages and disadvantages to this approach?
- Would you recommend changes for future semesters?
- What purpose do you think grades serve?
- What is the relationship between learning and grades?
- Did this course enable you to focus more or less on what you were learning?

89 students (36.5% of all enrolled students in both sections) chose to respond by posting free-form essay replies. No students said we should return to a more traditional grading model. Three students cited positive aspects of the method, but indicated they were uncertain if the method should be retained. The remainder (86 students or 96.6% of respondents) stated specifications grading should be retained and listed positive outcomes in support.

An analysis of their written responses to the open-ended questions revealed the following broad range of positive benefits students themselves listed to justify the retention of specifications grading.

#### *Frequency of Benefits Reported by Students*

Outcome	# of Students Reporting this Benefit
Reduced stress; less detrimental to mental health than traditional grading practices	61% (55)
Enabled students to focus or engage more with course content or felt they learned more than in a traditionally graded course	55.5% (50)
Provided flexibility regarding when to devote time to coursework and set one's own pace	43.3% (39)
Provided greater clarity about course expectations and how to succeed	19% (17)
Enabled students to enjoy the course	19% (17)
Provided desirable flexibility for responding to course material	14% (13)
Encouraged students to return to or review assigned materials more often	11% (10)

Enabled students to care more about the material	10% (9)
Enhanced curiosity, generating more creative or independent thinking	9% (8)
Reduced the fear of making a mistake and/or provided the opportunity to learn from one's mistakes	9% (8)
Enabled students to focus more intently on skill development	8% (7)
Reduced competition; students more likely to share with and learn from peers	5.5% (5)
Enabled students to set own goals for learning	5.5% (5)
Enabled students to better apply what they were learning to contexts beyond our class	4.5% (4)

## APPENDIX D: Levy's Study Design and Results

Levy participated in a multi-classroom, mixed-methods study through his university's center for teaching and learning. In the Fall semester of 2021, students in two sections of "Renaissance to Modern Art" were invited to participate in a pre- and post-course electronic survey (disseminated through institutionally-owned Qualtrics). The survey consisted of 35 questions, including two previously validated scales: academic goal orientation (12 items) and beliefs about grading (modified from the widely used Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire, or MSLQ, 8 items) as well as newly created scaled items related to perceptions of the purposes of grades (6 items). Finally, the survey included nine (9) demographic items (semester standing, major, GPA, age range, gender identity, race/ethnicity, transfer student status, sub-population, and first-generation status). In addition to their responses to the survey, students were asked to provide written consent for the use of responses to a series of reflection prompts, administered three times over the course of the semester as part of a classroom assignment.

Out of 58 students, 24 provided responses to the survey and 19 consented for their reflective writing prompts to be included in the study; for a response rate of approximately 50%. Students did not receive any additional incentives for participating in any part of the study. Survey responses were collected without identifiers and reflection prompts were not collected until after final grades had been submitted; names (as well as any other identifying information) were removed prior to the artifacts being included in the study. Consent administration and data collection and storage were managed through the institution's center for teaching and learning, which also secured ethics approval for the study through the institutional review board (IRB) office.

For all courses participating in the study, scaled survey items were analyzed using descriptive (mean, media, frequency) and inferential statistics using R. For the latter, both standard t-tests and Wilcoxon (non-parametric) tests of significant differences were used to compare pre- and post-course responses to scaled survey items, as well as between gender identity and semester standing. No significant differences were found for gender identity or semester standing. Statistically significant findings were reported for 4 items in academic goal orientation, 3 items in beliefs about the purpose of grades, and 4 items in the perceptions of grading scale. In L's course only, an additional item from the goal orientation scale ("I want to learn as much as possible in this course") also showed significance (t-test p-value .05\*, t-statistic of 2.31; Wilcoxon p-value .02\*\*, W=144.5).

Table 2: T-test and Wilcoxon Results with Significant Difference in Pre and Post Surveys (All Classes)

Question	Question Topic	t-test p-value	t-statistic	df	Wilcoxon p-value	W
Better grades than others	Goal Orientation	0.10	1.65	291.58	0.09*	12202.5

Important to do well compared to others	Goal Orientation	0.01**	2.52	285.05	0.01**	12764.5
Afraid of not understanding as well as would like	Goal Orientation	0.00**	4.09	281.37	0.00**	13714.0
Worry about not learning as much as possible	Goal Orientation	0.02**	2.43	290.83	0.01**	12696.5
Indicators of achievement relative to others	Purpose of Grades	0.03**	2.15	265.78	0.03**	10985.5
Incentive to perform well	Purpose of Grades	0.07*	-1.79	268.67	0.09*	8275.0
Communication between you and the instructor	Purpose of Grades	0.07*	-1.80	275.90	0.08*	8674.0
Grades are very important	Beliefs about grades	0.15	1.45	283.27	0.07*	11494.5
I am anxious about my grades in this course	Beliefs about grades	0.05*	1.94	262.90	0.10	11501.5
I need good grades for future graduate school/career	Beliefs about grades	0.15	1.43	282.99	0.07*	11420.0
I am confident I will get an A in this course	Beliefs about grades	0.01**	2.56	244.79	0.12	11324.5

(\*) Indicates if p-value is  $< 0.1$

(\*\*) Indicates if p-value is  $< 0.05$

For the post-survey, an additional open-ended question was added, asking students to respond to the following prompt: “based on your experience in this course, would you recommend grading differently, as was done in this course, to other students and instructors? Why or why not?” The 7 responses received to this question were added to the corpus of reflective writing prompts from classroom assignments. For the written artifacts, two independent coders (the two instructors) reviewed the corpus for emergent themes; then the separate themes were merged into a single set of insights through a process of critical interviewing. The finalized themes (transparency, engagement, and well-being, described below) were then checked for trustworthiness by an external evaluator, an educational researcher from the institution’s center for teaching and learning.

**APPENDIX E: Bender’s Intro to World Art Feedback Guide for Slow Looking<sup>16</sup>**

Student observes and considers	Accurate, thorough and precise observations evident	Careful observations evident, still developing (could be more precise or thorough)	Vague or minimally evident	Not yet evident	N/A
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**Description**

*Material and Condition*

Materials used to make work					
Process of making/fac-ture					
Signs of age, use or wear					

*Recognition of Formal Elements*

Format or overall shape of work itself					
Scale					
Color					
Light and shadow					
A sense of movement (how eye is ‘led’ or directed)					

Shapes					
Texture					
Organization of space					
How constituent parts relate to the whole or are arranged and composed					
Perspective and/or viewing position					
Handling or technical manipulation of material					

**Contextual Thinking**

Their viewing experience if encountering work in person					
Intended audience and/or first spaces of use					
The maker's decision-making process					

**Interpretation**

Student...	Yes	Developing	Not Yet
Applies concepts or terms learned in class materials to work			
Uses descriptive language evocatively (e.g. adjectives or adverbs) to help reader imagine the work or see it in a new way			
Considers and discusses work's mood, affect, or impact on viewer			
Recognizes what is unknown or not evident and how this impacts the analysis			
Analysis develops productively as new information or evidence is revealed or becomes known OR student builds a logical argument			
Effectively moves from description to interpretation (moves from what one sees or notices to what one wonders or assumes about the work)			
Fully engages reader with an analysis or interpretation that is compelling			

## Acknowledgments

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## Notes

1 A comprehensive overview of the diverse practices that constitute “ungrading” in a variety of disciplines and educational contexts is provided by Susan D. Blum, ed., *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning (and What to Do Instead)* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2020). Alfie Kohn (<https://www.alfiekohn.org/>) and Jesse Stossel (<https://stosselintheclassroom.org/>) have also worked extensively on this topic. For a history of the specific societal and institutional conditions that led to the implementation of the grading system now widely used in the United States and opposition to it, see Jack Schneider and Ethan Hutt, “Making the Grade: A History of the A-F Marking Scheme,” *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 46, no. 2 (May 2013), 201-224, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2013.790480>.

2 DiSalvo, Lauren and Nancy Ross, “Ungrading in Art History: Grade Inflation, Student Engagement, and Social Equity,” *Art History Pedagogy & Practice* 7, no. 1 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.14713/ahpp.v7i1.2190>. In addition to providing evidence from courses taught by DiSalvo, they provide an extensive summary and literature review of ungrading.

3 For a small sampling of the vast reporting on the challenges facing university labor during and since the pandemic, see Beth McMurtrie, “The Pandemic is Dragging on. Professors are Burning Out,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 5, 2020, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-pandemic-is-dragging-on-professors-are-burning-out>; Angela B. Fulk, “Is this Armageddon?” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 26, 2023, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/is-this-armageddon>; Kevin R. McClure, “Colleges Are Still Failing Their Employees,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 23, 2024, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/colleges-are-still-failing-their-employees>.

4 An exception is John Warner, “Wile E. Coyote, the Hero of Ungrading,” in Blum, *Ungrading*, 204-217.

5 Peter Elbow, “Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking: Sorting Out Three Forms of Judgment,” *College English* 55, no. 2 (Feb. 1993): 187-206.

6 We both require a score of 80%. Bender allows unlimited quiz attempts, while Levy has started allowing one additional attempt. Because students can retake the quizzes, Bender has designed more complicated questions that often require multiple correct answers.

7 Shari Tishman, *Slow Looking: The Art and Practice of Learning Through Observation* (New York and London: Routledge, 2018).

8 Following the migration of Artstor’s image database to JSTOR, this assignment now uses the latter.

9 Levy reported that disagreements between instructor and student scores rarely occurred, but when they did, the student's self-evaluation was usually lower than the professor's. This phenomenon was also observed by Bender in her courses that deployed self-grading and in a faculty workshop held in Fall 2021 where those who were experimenting with self-grading mechanisms overwhelmingly reported the same.

10 A useful overview of critiques of ungrading is Beckie Supiano, "The Unintended Consequences of 'Ungrading,'" *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 29, 2022, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-unintended-consequences-of-ungrading>.

11 Emily Pitts Donahoe and Sarah E. Silverman, "Neurodivergence and Alternative Grading (Parts 1-3)," *Unmaking the Grade* (Substack), August 1, 2025, <https://emilypittsdonahoe.substack.com/p/neurodivergence-and-alternative-grading>. For a consideration of ungrading through the lens of disability studies with a particular focus on labor-based grading, see Asao B. Inoue, *Crippling Labor-Based Grading for More Equity in Literacy Courses* (Fort Collins, CO: The WAC Clearinghouse, 2024).

12 Supiano, "Unintended Consequences."

13 This phenomenon illustrates the "mini-max principle." See Blum, "Ungrading and its Necessary Accompaniments," in Blum, *Ungrading*, 56. If a student focuses on the grade, a reward beyond the activity itself, they will do as little as possible to attain that goal, following the shortest and easiest path to the desired outcome. See also Alfie Kohn on how grades reduce students' preference for challenging tasks in "From Degrading to De-grading," accessed June 29, 2022, <https://www.alfiekohn.org/article/degrading-de-grading/>.

14 These points are underscored by Kohn, "From Degrading to De-Grading," and Aaron Blackwelder, "What Going Gradeless Taught Me About Doing the Actual Work," in Blum, *Ungrading*, 42-52.

15 This was noted at least as early as 1995 by Mark Miller Graham, "The Future of Art History and the Undoing of the Survey," *Art Journal* 54, no. 3 (Autumn 1995), 32-33. That volume of *Art Journal* was dedicated to "Rethinking the Introductory Art History Survey."

16 Many thanks to Isaiah Bertagnolli and Sarah Daiker for their assistance on the development of this guide.