

# Rethinking Letter Grades

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## Chapter 1

# Arriving at Letter Grades: Focus on Numbers

In this chapter we look back at the first approach we used for arriving at letter grades, which was to focus on numbers. We scored just about everything our students did, including assignments, tests, participation, effort, projects, and homework. We gave bonus points, took marks off, added marks for participation, gave zeros – and ended up with a long string of numbers. More seemed better. Then we added, weighted, averaged, converted to percentages, and translated totals into a single letter grade. We were dissatisfied with this totalling-up approach for arriving at letter grades, but we did not know what else was possible.

To illustrate our growing dissatisfaction with this approach for arriving at letter grades, we have included our stories to encourage you to talk about your own.

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### Story 1: It Doesn't Add Up

At the end of the term I totalled Andrea's marks, but they didn't add up to what I knew about her learning. Andrea was definitely not a C. I looked back: my computations were all correct. She knew the course work; I saw it demonstrated every day in class. Did I weight the assignments incorrectly? Had she been away? What had I missed?

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At the time I taught Andrea (Story 1), I trusted the numbers. I had little confidence in including my own observations. I worried that others (whoever they might be) would question my judgment. Numbers seemed so certain, objective, and hard to argue with. I had yet to discover that numbers do not take the place of a teacher's professional judgment.

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### Story 2: The More Numbers the Better!

Kevin came to me to complain about his grade in math. I'd given him a *D*, and he thought he deserved a *B*. He explained that at the start of term he "just didn't get it" but now he got it. When I looked back at his weekly quizzes and test scores, he did have low marks - until the last weeks of the term. After that, his scores were excellent. I told him I couldn't change his letter grade because when his term marks were averaged, he had failed.

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I remember thinking that I had more than enough marks to justify the failing grade I had given Kevin (Story 2). I also knew that the grade did not show his actual learning. He had learned the concepts; it had just taken him longer. The grade was not right, and I knew it.

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### Story 3: Does Effort Count?

Jason's father came to the reporting conference to find out why his son had not received an *A* in science (his best subject the previous year). I explained that, although Jason was one of the brightest students I'd ever taught, two projects had been handed in late and three homework assignments were incomplete. Marks had to be taken off for lack of effort and for handing assignments in late. These behaviours lowered his mark to a *B*. He needed seven more points to earn an *A*.

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I knew (and so did Jason and his father, Story 3) that the letter grade I had assigned Jason was not accurate. By including homework and taking off marks for handing work in late, I had distorted his actual achievement. My belief at the time was that I could control Jason's behaviour by lowering his grade. I thought it would motivate him to try harder. It didn't.

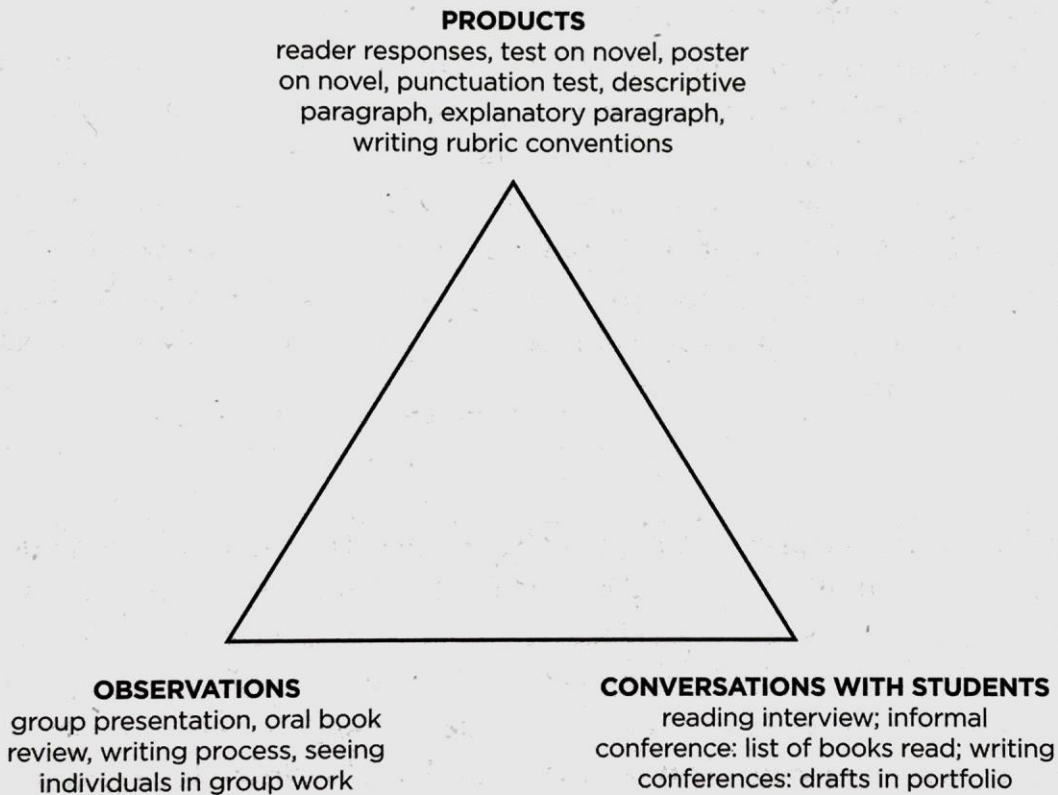
Our growing dissatisfaction with our focus on numbers caused us to look for a different approach to determine letter grades. How did other educators figure out their letter grades? We started to talk with colleagues, ask questions, and build on the shoulders of experts.

We learned that we need to think about and talk through what we did to arrive at letter grades *in the past* as a way to clear a path for a new way of reporting *today* - in the 21st century.

## Some Key Research Findings

### Observation

Y. S. Lincoln and E. G. Guba (1985) show how important it is to collect multiple sources of information, including observation, in order to provide more accurate assessment. Triangulation, as shown in figure 1.1, highlighted the importance of expanding what we collected as evidence of learning. In particular, it gave us the confidence to include our own observations as a reliable source of information.



**Figure 1.1: Triangulation - Evidence of Student Learning in English Language Arts from Three Distinct Sources**

### The Use of Zero

R. L. Canady and P. Hotchkiss (1989) give a list of “counterproductive grading practices,” such as averaging, using zeros indiscriminately, and grading first efforts. Ken O’Connor and Rick Wormeli (2011) take a current look at the still-problematic practices of including zeros and averaging. For us, this research prompted many debates with colleagues. It was through these conversations that we were able to clarify our thinking and recognize that we had to let go of these practices to move to standard-based letter grades.

## Motivation

Thomas Guskey (2011) links motivation to letter grades. He notes that “no research supports the idea that low grades prompt students to try harder. More often, low grades prompt students to withdraw from learning” (18–19). Motivation was one of the reasons we decided to rethink letter grades in the first place. This critical information confirmed what we knew to be true: All of our students are not motivated in the same way – and many students are demotivated by letter grades.

## Standards-Based Letter Grades

Grant Wiggins (1998) shows how essential it is to directly connect the letter grades we assign to the prescribed learning standards: “Reports must summarize what the student has accomplished in terms that any reader outside the classroom can understand. This requires educators to provide a frame of reference ... whereby outsiders can see the student’s performance in some wider context” (242). Wiggins’s information was essential to the development of our five-step process (see chapter 2). He pointed out that we needed to make the link between learning and letter grades clear for everyone – especially our students and our parents/guardians.

## Effort

Ken O’Connor (1999) explains where effort fits in terms of letter grades: “Hard work (effort), ... participation, and attitude ... are all highly valued attributes, but they should not be included directly in grades because they are very difficult to define and even more difficult to measure” (47). This was a challenging idea to work through, as effort is so important to learning. O’Connor’s examples helped us separate achievement from work habits and encouraged us to take another step towards increased accuracy in our letter grades.

## Averaging

Robert Marzano (2000) makes it clear that averaging is not appropriate when calculating a letter grade: “An average score does not accurately reflect a student’s knowledge and skill at the end of a grading period” (70). He goes on to say that “the traditional method of scoring classroom assessments using points or percentages usurps the evaluation process. That is, people rarely question whether percentage scores truly represent student learning.... Teacher judgment is replaced by the ‘power of the points’” (86). This quote gave us a way to talk with colleagues and parents/guardians about the importance of not relying on numbers alone to tell the story of a student’s learning.

## Changing our Focus

By the 1990s, we both had made some important changes in our reporting practices. We became more selective about which numbers to include as evidence and which to leave out. Instead of blaming numbers for our dissatisfaction, we came to understand their limitations and recognized that we knew more about our learners than the numbers could show. Our overreliance on numbers had ended, and our professional judgment became more a part of the process of arriving at letter grades. Our next move was to continue to have conversations with our colleagues. The following questions helped us to continue to think about how to move away from a totalling-up approach and move towards standards-based letter grades.



Is the achievement we are reporting on connected to the prescribed learning standards? If so, how?



What about students who can clearly explain exactly what happened in a science experiment and show that they understand the concepts but struggle to write their ideas in their lab reports? How are we supposed to assess this? How accurate are our letter grades?



Are we leaving out important and hard-to-quantify learning standards? How do we put a number on critical thinking or teamwork skills?



How can we show clear links between the learning that has been accomplished and the letter grades assigned? For our students? For their parents?



What do we do with our growing variety of assessment data, such as rubrics, student and peer reviews, informal interviews, anecdotal notes, and portfolios? How can we add all of this up?



How can we help our students be clear about their specific strengths and the areas needing improvement?

## In Summary

In this chapter we described our dissatisfaction with a focus on numbers and a totalling-up approach for arriving at letter grades. The more report cards we wrote, the more we knew that a different mathematical equation was not what we were looking for. We also summarized some key research findings that informed our thinking.

## A Next Step

What are some of your stories about letter grades? What are some of your questions? If you are interested in moving away from a totalling-up approach that focusses on numbers, to a “matching” approach that focusses on learning, read chapter 2.

## References

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