

Rethinking Letter Grades

***Caren Cameron
Kathleen Gregory***

**Co-authors of the *Voices of Experience* series
and the *Knowing What Counts* series**

Chapter 2

Arriving at Letter Grades: Focus on Learning

In this chapter we provide an overview of a five-step process for arriving at standards-based letter grades. We constructed this process, over a period of years, as a direct result of our dissatisfaction with a totalling-up approach, which is described in the previous chapter. And, along with many of our colleagues, we felt frustration with the amount and the variety of evidence that we were collecting. Our grade books now contained more information on students than we knew what to do with (both qualitative and quantitative). They included test scores, project marks, percentages, rubric scales 1-2-3, checks and pluses and minuses, self- and peer assessments, checklists, comments, our observations, homework scores, portfolios, journals – and more. How could we determine the appropriate information to use to arrive at a single letter grade – one that was standards-based?

The five steps that we developed gave us a way to stop our overreliance on numbers and to focus our attention on the learning underneath the letter grade. The steps include:

- Step 1:** Identify three to five Big Ideas for one subject area.
- Step 2:** Write three levels of performance for each Big Idea.
- Step 3:** Identify evidence that shows student performance.
- Step 4:** Highlight descriptions of learning on the Learning Map.
- Step 5:** Determine a letter grade.

We have been using this approach for the last two decades, refining it every year for our own students, and along with colleagues, using it for various subjects from kindergarten to university level. To show what each step could look like, we include examples from British Columbia's English Language Arts curriculum.

The Five-Step Process

Step 1: Identify Three to Five Big Ideas for One Subject Area

We start by asking: *What are students supposed to learn and be able to do in this subject?* Rather than looking at all the learning standards in our documents (the number can be overwhelming) we categorize them under three to five broad concepts that we call Big Ideas. These Big Ideas are not topics, such as “Egypt”; they are not assignments, such as “novel study”; they are not activities, such as “a lab report”; and they are not specific skills, such as “multiply fractions”. Rather, identifying a Big Idea is something like finding the largest Russian doll into which a number of smaller dolls fit.

For example, in English you might assign a novel study, but a Big Idea would be for students to understand what they read; in social studies you might assign the topic of Egypt, but a Big Idea would be for students to understand what has been learned from people (e.g., Egyptians) who lived long ago.

We use Grade 7 English Language Arts (from the British Columbia curriculum) to illustrate the five-step process for arriving at standard-based letter grades (English Language Arts Grade 7 Integrated Resource Package [IRP], from the British Columbia Ministry of Education).

The challenge for us is to make it clear to our students what they are expected to learn (Big Ideas) without confusing them (and their parents or guardians) by using too many words or educational jargon. Figure 2.1 shows an example of Big Ideas for Grade 7 English Language Arts. In this figure we’ve used the term *read* to include viewing; the term *write* to include communicating, and the word *text* to include written, visual, digital, and oral texts.

LEARNING MAP STEP 1

STUDENTS...

- Read a variety of text and understand what they read
- Respond in a variety of ways that show understanding of text
- Write in a variety of genres using language, forms and formats appropriate to purpose and audience
- Use rules and conventions
- Work collaboratively

Figure 2.1. Step 1: Identifying Big Ideas. These are for Grade 7 English Language Arts.

Step 2: Write Three Levels of Performance for Each Big Idea

In step 2 we answer the question *What does the learning look like?* by writing descriptions of each of the Big Ideas at three levels of performance. To help us differentiate the three levels, we use our knowledge of students at their grade level, criteria for assignments, student work samples (provincial, district, school), provincial performance standards, and any other current curriculum and assessment documents we might have access to.

This step is like creating a map of the learning: we identify it as the Learning Map. In it, we include enough detail so that students (and parents) can see what they are expected to learn and what the learning can look like. This Learning Map becomes our reference point for arriving at a letter grade and helps keep our focus on the learning over the course of the term. When students ask “Am I passing?” or “Am I getting an A?” we can answer by showing them where they are on the Learning Map rather than giving a number. Figure 2.2 shows the beginning of a Learning Map with Big Ideas and levels of performance for Grade 7 English Language Arts.

Step 3: Identify Evidence that Shows Student Performance

In step 3, we ask the question *What type of evidence can I use to find out how well students are doing in relation to each Big Idea?* As this letter grade is for a summary report, we are not referring to our entire list of practices, pretests, or drafts, for example, that students do daily throughout a term. Instead, we select specific evidence by deciding which tasks, tests, or talks offer enough variety to best capture student achievement and which represent a student’s learning as close to the end of the reporting period as possible.

Once we determine which evidence (e.g., assignments, tests, observations) best shows a student’s performance in relation to each Big Idea, we record it on the Learning Map. Figure 2.3 shows the evidence that the teacher has selected and recorded on the Learning Map for each Big Idea.

LEARNING MAP STEP 2

English Language Arts Grade 7				
Students...	A	B	C	
BIG IDEAS	Read a variety of text and understand what they read.	Consistently read a great deal of sophisticated material in different genre, often of complex style and form at an independent level. Show a deep understanding of material at both literal and inferential levels.	Typically read age-appropriate material. May lack variety in choice of genre (e.g. may read a series) Understanding is accurate and consistent with the information in the text.	Read minimal (on request) amounts of short, simple material. Often will stick with a familiar genre. Usually understand the gist of the material, but may not show an understanding at a deeper level.
	Respond in a variety of ways that show understanding of text.	Consistently respond with a deep and insightful understanding. Make powerful connections to their own life, to lives of others, to other texts.	Make deliberate connections with their previous experiences and tend to go beyond simple responses. Can offer reasons in their responses.	Make connections between what they are reading and personal understanding. Responses may be loosely connected to text.
	Write in a variety of genres, using language, forms and formats appropriate to purpose and audience.	Consistently write with ease in a variety of genres and use specific techniques appropriate to the type of writing/form/format/topic. Use reasons and details to create a precise meaning.	Writing shows awareness of genre/form/format/topic. Language could be more precise with the use of details, reasons and examples.	Writing is simple and straightforward. Can follow a format with support. May struggle to make meaning clear and often need support and encouragement to develop ideas and elaborate with details.
	Use rules and conventions.	Independently follow basic rules and conventions and apply the more complex rules of language. Make no errors that interfere with meaning.	Can follow the standard rules and conventions they have been given for language use and for different forms of writing. May make 1 or 2 errors that require revision.	Use conventions in many areas but a number of errors interfere with meaning. Typically require encouragement and support to pay attention to conventions.
	Work collaboratively.	Participate willingly. Take on a leadership role.	Participate and willingly contribute to what's asked and required.	May need reminders to participate and show appropriate collaborative skills.

Figure 2.2. Step 2: Learning Map Showing Big Ideas and Levels of Performance

LEARNING MAP STEP 3

English Language Arts Grade 7			
Students...	A	B	C
1. Read a variety of text and understand what they read.	Consistently read a great deal of sophisticated material in different genre, often of complex style and form at an independent level. Show a deep understanding of material at both literal and inferential levels.	Typically read age-appropriate material. May lack variety in choice of genre (e.g. may read a series) Understanding is accurate and consistent with the information in the text.	Read minimal (on request) amounts of short, simple material. Often will stick with a familiar genre. Usually understand the gist of the material, but may not show an understanding at a deeper level.
EVIDENCE: list of books read test on novel 20/25 reading interview			
2. Respond in a variety of ways that show understanding of text.	Consistently respond with a deep and insightful understanding. Make powerful connections to their own life, to lives of others, to other texts.	Make deliberate connections with their previous experiences and tend to go beyond simple responses. Can offer reasons in their responses.	Make connections between what they are reading and personal understanding. Responses may be loosely connected to text.
EVIDENCE: reader response #1: fully meets reader response #2 exceeds poster on novel 18/20			
3. Write in a variety of genres, using language, forms and formats appropriate to purpose and audience.	Consistently write with ease in a variety of genres and use specific techniques appropriate to the type of writing/form/format/topic. Use reasons and details to create a precise meaning.	Writing shows awareness of genre/form/format/topic. Language could be more precise with the use of details, reasons and examples.	Writing is simple and straightforward. Can follow a format with support. May struggle to make meaning clear and often need support and encouragement to develop ideas and elaborate with details.
EVIDENCE: descriptive paragraph 7/10 explanatory paragraph 8/10 writing folder (drafts)			
4. Use rules and conventions.	Independently follow basic rules and conventions and apply the more complex rules of language. Make no errors that interfere with meaning.	Can follow the standard rules and conventions they have been given for language use and for different forms of writing. May make 1 or 2 errors that require revision.	Use conventions in many areas but a number of errors interfere with meaning. Typically require encouragement and support to pay attention to conventions.
EVIDENCE: punctuation test 10/15 writing rubric conventions "1"			
5. Work collaboratively.	Participate willingly. Take on a leadership role.	Participate and willingly contribute to what's asked and required.	May need reminders to participate and show appropriate collaborative skills.
EVIDENCE: oral book review 9/10 group presentation rubric score "3"			

BIG IDEAS

Figure 2.3. Step 3: Selected Evidence for Each Big Idea Recorded on a Learning Map

Step 4: Highlight Descriptions of Learning on the Learning Map

In step 4 we ask, *Where is each learner in relation to the Big Ideas?* Using a copy of the Learning Map for each student, we examine the evidence selected and highlight the descriptions that most closely match the evidence for the student. Sometimes we highlight partial descriptions; sometimes we highlight part of one level and part of another level, as students are often all over the map.

We repeat this process for each of the Big Ideas. When we use the evidence to highlight the descriptions for an individual learner, it is much like plotting places on a map. Looking at the map, students see where they are supposed to be going in the first place, how far they have been able to go, and see a direction for their next step.

When we have a Learning Map highlighted for an individual student, the map becomes our basis for determining his or her letter grade. Figure 2.4 shows a highlighted Learning Map for an individual student.

Step 5: Determine a Letter Grade (and a Percentage if Necessary)

In step 5 we answer the question *Which letter grade is the closest match for each student?* by looking for patterns of student performance on the highlighted Learning Map. It is typical for students to have descriptions highlighted at more than one level of performance. We look for the pattern and use our professional judgment to determine the letter grade that is the best match.

If you are required to give a percentage (in British Columbia, percentages are required only at the Graduation Program level; in grades 10, 11, and 12), you can assign a letter grade first and then change it to a percentage. This can be done by assigning a range of percentage points for a low, middle or high grade (see Appendix 1, page 51, See also page 13, *Reporting Student Progress: Policy and Practice* [British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006], for the range of percentages for each letter grade.)

Questions to Guide the Five-Step Process

- Step 1:** What are students supposed to learn and be able to do in this subject?
- Step 2:** What does the learning look like?
- Step 3:** What type of evidence can I use to find out how well students are doing in relation to each standard?
- Step 4:** Where is each learner in relation to the Big Ideas?
- Step 5:** Which letter grade is the closest match for each student?

LEARNING MAP STEP 4

English Language Arts Grade 7			
Students...	A	B	C
1. Read a variety of text and understand what they read.	Consistently read a great deal of sophisticated material in different genre, often of complex style and form at an independent level.	Typically read age-appropriate material. May lack variety in choice of genre (e.g. may read a series) Understanding is accurate and consistent with the information in the text.	Read minimal (on request) amounts of short, simple material. Often will stick with a familiar genre. Usually understand the gist of the material, but may not show an understanding at a deeper level.
	EVIDENCE: list of books read test on novel 20/25 reading interview		
2. Respond in a variety of ways that show understanding of text.	Consistently respond with a deep and insightful understanding. Make powerful connections to their own life, to lives of others, to other texts.	Make deliberate connections with their previous experiences and tend to go beyond simple responses. Can offer reasons in their responses.	Make connections between what they are reading and personal understanding. Responses may be loosely connected to text.
	EVIDENCE: reader response #1: fully meets reader response #2 exceeds poster on novel 18/20		
3. Write in a variety of genres, using language, forms and formats appropriate to purpose and audience.	Consistently write with ease in a variety of genres and use specific techniques appropriate to the type of writing/form/format/topic. Use reasons and details to create a precise meaning.	Writing shows awareness of genre/form/format/topic. Language could be more precise with the use of details, reasons and examples.	Writing is simple and straightforward. Can follow a format with support. May struggle to make meaning clear and often need support and encouragement to develop ideas and elaborate with details.
	EVIDENCE: descriptive paragraph 7/10 explanatory paragraph 8/10 writing folder (drafts)		
4. Use rules and conventions.	Independently follow basic rules and conventions and apply the more complex rules of language. Make no errors that interfere with meaning.	Can follow the standard rules and conventions they have been given for language use and for different forms of writing. May make 1 or 2 errors that require revision.	Use conventions in many areas but a number of errors interfere with meaning. Typically require encouragement and support to pay attention to conventions.
	EVIDENCE: punctuation test 10/15 writing rubric conventions "1"		
5. Work collaboratively.	Participate willingly. Take on a leadership role.	Participate and willingly contribute to what's asked and required.	May need reminders to participate and show appropriate collaborative skills.
	EVIDENCE: oral book review 9/10 group presentation rubric score "3"		

BIG IDEAS

Figure 2.4. Step 4: Highlighted Learning Map

In Summary

In chapter 2, we've outlined a five-step process for arriving at letter grades. We begin by categorizing learning standards under broad concepts that we call Big Ideas, develop a Learning Map, and plot student performance as a basis to determine a grade.

A Next Step

In chapter 3 we offer practical advice for working through each step. We explain some things we have learned to do, and some that we would never attempt again. If you are interested in going further and making your own Learning Maps, read on.

References

- British Columbia Ministry of Education. *English Language Arts, Grade 7 Integrated Resource Package (IRP)*. Victoria, BC: British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2006. <www.bced.gov.bc.ca/irp/pdfs/english_language_arts/2006ela_k7_7.pdf>
- British Columbia Ministry of Education. *Reporting Student Progress: Policy and Practice*. Victoria, BC: British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2009. <www.bced.gov.bc.ca/classroom_assessment/09_report_student_prog.pdf>