

# The Trouble with “Ungrading” Toward Disciplinary Specificity in Alternative Writing Assessment

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**Abstract:** Responding to the emergent discourse around “ungrading,” this essay articulates the need for disciplinary conversations about alternative writing assessments, conversations that center work on antiracism, Black linguistic justice, and anti-ableist composition pedagogies and policies. From that foundation, we argue, we have the chance to build concrete, specific, and equitable alternative assessment practices that also include the practices and voices of the faculty and graduate students most likely to be teaching first-year composition (FYC) courses.

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## Introduction

As writing teachers, we care deeply about feedback and assessment. We view assessment as an integral part of the work we do and a key opportunity to create more equitable writing classrooms. For these reasons, we've been heartened to see wide-ranging conversations about alternative assessment practices, including *ungrading*, which has also been described as de-grading or going gradeless by its practitioners. However, current conversations about ungrading practices have not fully explored and synthesized the discipline-specific histories, needs, and practices of writing studies, though the recent publication of *Composition Studies*' "Where We Are" conversation (Davis & Taczak, 2023) and an even more recent issue of *Pedagogy* (Carillo, 2024) on the topic are steps toward such a conversation. As we argue in our contribution to the "Where We Are" conversation, "detailed, specific, contextual discussions of alternative writing assessments [and] assessments built on a disciplinary foundation" are necessary to advancing conversations about more equitable assessment practices (Fernandes et al., 2023, p. 149). We identify that conversations about ungrading are often housed in non-disciplinary spaces and without specific attention to the teaching of writing. Although these conversations serve as an entry into necessary interdisciplinary conversations about assessment, non-disciplinary conversations about ungrading lack attention to specific writing and feedback practices, diversity of faculty voices, and student needs. The kind of specificity we're calling for here is better enabled by more focused conversations with clear disciplinary foundations. Conversations about writing assessment, feedback, grading, and ungrading need to speak to disciplinary concerns about linguistic justice and accessibility and should be grounded in writing studies scholarship, including work by Carmen Kynard, Geneva Smitherman, and Asao Inoue.

Because of these concerns (and more, discussed in detail in the sections that follow), we have largely decided to eschew the language of ungrading and opt instead for *alternative assessment*. Before we continue, we want to pause and define what we mean by alternative assessment. Alternative assessment refers to any of a number of practices that ask students and teachers to interrogate traditional grading schemes, typically represented numerically and intended to mark student growth, progress, and learning. For us, alternative assessment explicitly draws connections between final grades and other classroom policies, including policies related to participation, late work, and attendance. Transparent alternative assessment policies rely on measures besides supposed "quality," assessing student work (and assigning grades) based on completion, self-assessment(s), and/or other terms, in many cases via a grading contract. There is quite a bit of flexibility in this definition because there are many ways to use assessment practices to push back on traditional grading approaches. Feedback and commenting processes in alternative assessment paradigms often prioritize students' own writing goals, encourage students to critically engage with (and sometimes discard) instructors' comments and suggestions, and reject single standard and white mainstream English-based evaluations of student writing.

Alternative assessment approaches allow us to more concretely and specifically consider concerns about linguistic variation and justice versus the lack of specificity we see in non-disciplinary conversations about ungrading. Put simply, much of the conversation around ungrading purports to tell us what we're not doing in our classes, but doesn't tell us what we *are* doing. It doesn't adequately account for the implications of assessment beyond our classrooms and how those lived experiences shape the student-teacher dynamic in ways that we can't control with syllabus language. And it lacks attention to how specific practices reflect particular contexts

and constraints. In what follows, we review our own positionality (including our relationships to alternative assessments), offer an overview of our concerns about the term ungrading, and call attention to existing disciplinary conversations about feedback and assessment, particularly those about Black linguistic justice, disability justice, and accessibility. While there are other areas in our field that would benefit conversations about assessment, these two areas in particular offer important insights about alternative assessment practices, in part because these areas of scholarship identify specific, systemic problems with traditional pedagogical and assessment practices that instructors can address, at least in part, via individual reflection work and practice. We conclude with suggestions for future conversations about alternative assessments that build from a disciplinary foundation and make room for nuance and specificity about alternative assessment in writing studies.

### **Troubling the Language of Ungrading**

A key motivation for this essay is our shared feeling that *ungrading* as a term does not describe the reality of assessment in our classrooms, despite the wealth of writing on the subject in a variety of fields. In a recent essay, Jesse Stommel (2023) responds to arguments that ungrading is a misnomer. As a response, he offers the following definition of ungrading as a critical approach to interrogating grades:

The work of ungrading is to ask questions, have hard conversations, point to the fundamental in-equities of grades, push for systemic change, and *mitigate or obstruct harm that grading*, and grades as a system, do to marginalized students and precarious educators. (p. 84, emphasis added)

We agree with the view that assessment practices can serve as harm mitigation, as we will discuss later in this article. Stommel's (2023) definition also positions ungrading as a critical approach, an institutional interrogation of grading, a conversation. In the introduction to the edited collection *Ungrading: Why Rating Students Undermines Learning*, Susan Blum (2020) likewise identifies ungrading as a "growing movement" of teachers who believe that grading should be critically interrogated and removed (p. 2). As a movement, the work on ungrading as a critical conversation has reached a wide audience of educators, especially since the start of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Instructors across disciplines and institutional contexts have taken up work such as Kohn's (2011) "The Case Against Grades," Blum's (2020) *Ungrading*, and Stommel's (2017) "Why I Don't Grade" in response to a crisis of student mental health amidst a global pandemic and the subsequent virtual shift. In rhetoric and composition, this renewed interest in ungrading intersected with longstanding conversations about contract grading (Carrillo, 2021; Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009; Inman & Powell, 2018; Inoue, 2015), which has been important in normalizing alternative writing assessment practices that have disciplinary precedent and opening the door for more innovation and curiosity about what is possible.

Despite the pedagogical contributions that have emerged from the conversation at large, the question remains: do we need the word *ungrading*? Is ungrading what we do? We believe in alternative assessment as a way forward in rhetoric and composition, as well as in the utility (and potential equity) of practices like contract grading or community-based assessment. Yet, we still grade. Beyond the gradebook, we often communicate standards of writing as well-intentioned writing teachers, even when we don't mean to. Likewise, disciplinary critiques of contract grading practices being labeled as antiracist (Craig, 2021) or decolonial (Albracht et al., 2019) offer key

reminders about the importance of specificity, particularly when designing pedagogies that support multiply marginalized students. These critiques led us to think more concretely about our students' lived experiences of power in our classrooms.

Attention to students' lived experiences is a critical piece of ungrading discourse. For example, Stommel (2023) articulates a deep investment in student experiences of grading and argues across his work that “[w]e need to stop having conversations about the future of education without students in the room” (p. 86). He recommends that instructors implement the following “good-for-some-people-in-some-contexts” ungrading practices: “change how we talk about assessment,” talk with students about grades, reduce the amount of grading in our classes and simplify our grading processes, and emphasize the importance of student reflection (Stommel, 2023, p. 86). For Stommel (2023), the word *ungrading* enables transformative classroom conversations about assessment and learning, which aligns with writing studies values about critical pedagogies, reflection, and student-centered learning. However, his more concrete suggestions for implementing these practices include recommending that instructors might “[u]se words like ‘ask’ or ‘invite,’ rather than ‘submit’ or ‘required’” (Stommel, 2023, p. 86) to discuss assignment submissions. Another recommendation for moving toward ungrading includes grading itself as a suggestion: “[u]se grading scales that feel less arbitrary and communicate more clearly to students” (Stommel, 2023, p. 86). Are we grading, or are we not grading? Are we requiring, or are we asking? What happens when we invite student feedback, and students do not say what we want them to say or do not feel comfortable saying anything at all? As writing teachers who believe in the potential of alternative assessments to help us create more equitable classrooms, we take these questions seriously, and ongoing conversations within the discipline have the potential to help us more fully and thoughtfully answer them.

Toward this end, shifting the conversation from the emergent language of ungrading to the language of alternative assessment allows us to be more honest with ourselves and our students about the role of grades and grading in our classrooms and more transparent about the impacts of assessment within and beyond our classrooms. Likewise, alternative assessment gestures to longstanding disciplinary conversations within rhetoric, composition, and writing studies about literacy, assessment, and equity and the importance of systemic critique of traditional systems of rank-based assessment that contribute to the systematic exclusion of students of color, disabled students, and other marginalized students. The uncomfortable truth is that we can make assessment more gentle and more equitable, but assessment is still present and has real consequences for our students who pay dearly for increasingly costly education, including writing courses that are required for their degree progress and completion.

At the end of the day, we *are* still doing assessment. Alternative assessment practices offer important interventions for more equitable writing assessment, but if we truly want to invite students into that conversation, then we need to be honest about our role as teachers in the system of assessment. That means we need to be honest with ourselves first.

### **A Dialogue on Alternative Assessment**

This article began as a conversation among friends. In group chats and Zoom meetings, we chatted casually about our journeys with alternative assessments. We talked about how our embodied subjectivities inform our individual alternative assessment practices as well as our institutional experiences of contract grading. Through those conversations, we realized a shared

frustration with current conversations about assessment, alternative assessment, and ungrading, largely in response to a growing conversation on Twitter about ungrading that followed the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and the subsequent push for equitable assessment and course design. In what follows, we share a dialogue that rehearses some of our more relevant discussions about our experiences with and approaches to alternative assessments.

Before the dialogue, it is important to share our positionalities as they relate to our assessment experiences. We all currently teach at public, state universities and occupy sites of power within our classrooms and beyond, both as white women with close proximity to white language practices and as the sole arbiters of grades in our classrooms. We design our course materials with little oversight from department heads and deans; likewise, we give feedback to students who have few resources to protect them from faculty harm. At the same time, our grading practices (and the final grades we give) are not the subject of any significant scrutiny: if we give all As in a particular course, it is unlikely that we would face consequences from our institutions.

At the same time, we have differing material conditions within our universities and departments. Maggie and Megan are both tenure-track assistant professors of English at a large, research-intensive university in the mid-south. Emily is a full-time instructor who is not eligible for tenure. Megan is the WPA at her institution, training and supporting the teaching assistants (TAs) in their department. While we recognize our unique paths to university teaching positions and our differing material circumstances, we see many similarities in our relationships to power as they relate to the students in our classrooms. As white writing practitioners, we work against our default linguistic racism and class-based expectations of writing discourses while recognizing that our embodiment communicates those standards to marginalized students.

Specific to this conversation, we have come into alternative assessment practices via various points of contact with multiply marginalized student populations at open-access, teaching-first, and racially diverse campuses. While we came into these practices differently, we found conversations in writing studies to illuminate the practice and politics of alternative assessment, folding these practices into our lived and embodied experiences. Like all teachers and students, we have complicated feelings about grades, grading, and our institutional affiliations at the intersections of these points of contact between the teacher, student, and university. In what follows, we will highlight three different conversations we've had amongst ourselves about our own alternative assessment practices.

Namely, we talk through our concerns with the insufficient language of ungrading, the specific assessment work we do with our students, and the connections between our alternative assessment practices and harm reduction. This dialogue more clearly frames our discussion and shows our individual points of view which work together to build meaning.

### **The Language of "Alternative Assessment" vs. "Ungrading"**

**Maggie:** We moved increasingly away from ungrading as language in our conversations together and started thinking about more specific ways to talk about these things, usually talking about accessibility, transparency, and harm reduction. I use my contract grading system to be both clear with my students about what I'm assessing and also what I'm not; I'm not assessing white mainstream English. I call my system "process grading", which has helped me communicate with my students how writing process can vary across individual contexts, circumstances, and positionalities. Process grading speaks better to what I am doing in my classroom: I am asking

students to engage with and complete steps in the writing process for each major project. Process grading helps me and my students stay focused on the function of the class.

**Emily:** A lot of our conversations on alternative assessment have thought through labor and working conditions and my work has taken me toward the service side of alternative assessment discussions by talking to other professors across departments about alternative assessment in ways that have clarified, for me, how composition needs to have its own conversation about alternative assessment. For instance, faculty in nursing and social work have brought up the implications of alternative assessment methods in their classrooms as it relates to licensure and state testing, and in facilitating workshops with professors in those disciplines, I feel strongly that alternative assessment practices must be rooted within the teaching philosophies, histories, and constraints of these individual fields.

**Megan:** I feel like the language of alternative assessment puts me in a position where I am forced to explain myself to myself and to my students. It is designed in some ways to force a conversation about what assessment looks like. What am I assessing? How am I doing that? How does that assessment produce a grade at the end of the semester? And it also makes me think about the ways that, in any given course, assessment is not just the final grade on an assignment or in the course. Assessment also includes my policies, which create an environment in which the work of the class is undertaken. For example, because I want to create accessible and flexible classroom environments, I'm transparent with students that I've designed grading contracts that include flexible late work and extension policies. As both our programmatic first-year writing syllabi and grading contract notes, "I accept late work, and I grant extensions. Due dates are to help us all work at a manageable pace. But again: I accept late work, and I grant extensions. Please come talk to me if you're falling behind."

The language of ungrading is, in some ways, for me at least, a sort of escape hatch from having to have that really hard conversation. Maybe other people don't feel that way, but for me, using ungrading was the end of a conversation: "I'm doing ungrading. Therefore, I'm not grading. Therefore, we don't have to talk about grades or grading." And that just doesn't feel authentic to either my students' experience of college classrooms, or to my experience of, as Maggie was saying, the assessment labor I do.

I think a lot about Sherri Craig's (2021) article, "Your Grading Contract Ain't It," where she says that grading contracts aren't bad but they also aren't inherently equitable; we have other work to do to make our assessments actually equitable. Equity does not by default exist within a grading contract or any alternative assessment approach. And so I appreciate the ways that alternative assessment as a term made me grapple with a lot of things that I felt like I was papering over, including the fact that there are all these other parts of assessment that are not necessarily graded but feel like grades to students.

### **"Ungrading" and "Good Teacher Energy"**

**Emily:** Marnie Twigg (2019) talks about how the woke professor is this trope of like, *I'm a white lady, but I'm with it*. And I feel like what you're saying about the much more honest conversation about what alternative assessment is which reminds me of that framework, where it's—if we don't discuss the ways that we are assessing students, we can just claim that we're not grading. And then

they get grades at the end of the semester. Then there's that dishonesty, but it also lets us absolve ourselves of the responsibility of managing and maintaining a classroom environment by acting like we're not responsible for that, and that we don't do that. In my class, I explicitly discuss the grade agreement at the beginning of the semester, so students are able to opt in to this system or opt out by dropping the class and adding a different composition or creative writing class. I also note the ways that students would earn different grades in the course—by missing assignments, by missing several classes without communicating with me, by submitting incomplete assignments—and check in with students about their progress in the course at least once a semester.

**Maggie:** My teaching career has been a steady journey for me to unravel my desire to be the “good,” nice teacher (Yoon, 2013). For me, assessment and accessibility were practices I adopted not just to be kinder to students but, on a subconscious level, to get them to like me and buy into the class. I have a cheerleader /camp counselor energy, which comes with being a young white woman teaching students who, when I first started teaching, weren't that much younger than me. It took some time for me to realize that I can let them call me by my first name and tell them I'm not grading them in a traditional way, but they still feel graded. And that's because they are—I'm having to make judgments all the time in my feedback and in how I enact policy around attendance and participation and completion. When I first introduced my flexible submission policy, which makes extensions accessible so long as students ask within the three-day submission window, I had several students each semester *insist* that they'd never need an extension because they knew it would make them look bad to me to fail to complete work on time. I pleaded with them, “no! I think extensions are good and professional and part of everyday life!” but they still projected their experiences of punitive late policies onto me, despite my protesting. I finally had to assign an extension request to make headway with students about this, and that still only does so much to influence students' experiences of me within a larger educational context. I've experienced similar conversations with students when I talk about how I grade (or don't) language variation.

**Megan:** I use a grading contract in all of my classes, including my graduate practicum for new TAs, and we also use a grading contract programmatically for all of our composition and technical writing courses. And the contract I use in the practicum is very similar to our programmatic contract on purpose because I want the TAs, who are almost all first-time teachers, to experience the same thing (or a very similar thing) that their students are experiencing in terms of assessment. Here's how I describe my approach to grading in the syllabus for my graduate composition pedagogy course:

This course emphasizes that learning is a process best served by consistent reflection. Being successful in this course means engaging in the work via reflection, experimentation, and revision. It also means sharing your experiences with your peers and supporting one another as you learn. Each of our assignments is intended to support your development as a member of a community of learners and a teacher. So: if you do all the work in this class thoughtfully and to the best of your ability, you get an A. (Also: I give extensions. Please ask for one if you need it. You don't need to explain why you need it, though I'm happy to listen if you want to tell me what's happening. And I promise I will say yes.)

This approach gives us a chance to talk about the things they like about the grading contract as students (especially the flexibility) and the things that are uncomfortable for them, as people

who mostly did very well in traditionally graded classrooms. And then we can talk about how their students are having a lot of these same sometimes contradictory feelings. So when we use alternative assessment methods, we should of course think about students' experiences, needs, and expectations, but we cannot control how they *feel* about our approaches. (And we know folks in the discipline have thought deeply about the affective and embodied experiences of assessment and alternative assessment practices for both instructors and students (Albracht et al., 2019; Caswell, 2014; Inman & Powell, 2018). We can only control ourselves; we can only really manage our own emotions around assessment. We can't control how students feel about these things. And we have to stop trying to do that. I think the key for me is to focus on what is most in line with my values, which as Emily very smartly said, requires being able to specifically articulate those values.

### **Alternative Assessment as Harm Reduction**

**Maggie:** My approach to alternative assessment has been based in harm reduction, although I didn't have that language until collaborating with Emily and Megan. I'm continuing to develop my understanding of alt assessment as harm reduction. For example, Megan, I hadn't fully considered how our commentary can perpetuate harm until we became colleagues. Before we spoke about the role of commentary in assessment, my specific assessment practice was to ask questions and gauge individual student desires for their writing. I would ask things like, "What did you mean by this? Can you expand here?" I tried to provide feedback that wasn't totally founded in the norms of white mainstream English, but I'm cognizant of the fact that I'm giving the feedback I know how to give, which is steeped culturally in habits of whiteness. My feedback, whether I mean to or not, likely promotes the types of writing that I value and appreciate. Harm reduction, for me, is both responding to my students as individuals and being transparent with students about how writing and teaching are both bound up in systems of oppression.

I specifically use my alternative assessment to promote linguistic diversity and disability justice in my classrooms, and I have to accept that sometimes my goals are at odds with student desires. Early on in my experience with contract grading, I realized that a fixed contract leaves people behind (Carillo, 2021). How do I make sense of this for myself, for my students, and for my superiors? Even feeling that contract grading is perhaps more fair in some ways, there's still one person in charge of the grade at the end of the day, and it's me. Realizing that I can't escape that power dynamic, I strive to be honest with myself and my students so that we all know what the rules of the game are in my classroom and how those rules are meant to support their growth as writers.

I think alternative assessment can help us recognize there are many ways we can try to do our best for students while also recognizing what we are actually capable of doing, not just as individuals but as individuals who operate with unequal resources and different embodied positionalities.

**Megan:** I'm with the folks in the ungrading conversation pointing out how standard approaches to grading are harmful to students. My question is, how are we going to reduce that harm and does the word ungrading get me any closer to that? I don't think it does, and so I don't find it a useful term. Or at least, I don't find it as useful a term or a conversation as the more specific contract grading conversation or the bigger alternative assessment conversation that lets me pull in all of

these other pieces of assessment that are connected to a numerical grade but are not necessarily a numerical grade.

**Emily:** If I'm able to discuss explicitly with students that they're being assessed on the completion of their writing process, they're being assessed on showing up for themselves and others with peer feedback, and they're being assessed on coming together to build a writing classroom and a writing community in fifteen weeks, I'm not going to give them an 87% on their essay. And as Maggie has said before, these terms like *alternative assessment* and *ungrading* are for teachers to think through how we're teaching, and when we use them with students, we're communicating, to use a restaurant term, with the "front of the house." But in the "back of the house," we need to be able to discuss ungrading and alternative assessment and labor based contract grading and spec grading, and all of these other things, among ourselves. For my students, I tell them about the theoretical underpinnings of process grading, but I also am not expecting my students to engage with decades of composition theory in order to be assessed in my course.

Harm reduction is about, to me, getting my students from day one to the end of week fifteen with as little psychological damage as possible from my class. Education can be psychologically damaging for students of color, students with disabilities, queer students, poor students, any sort of student. So if our assessment model is putting marginalized global majority students at the forefront, then what are we doing to put those students at the center of our assessment? In my writing courses, this means not assessing students on their use of white mainstream English and also not demanding that students center their perception of me or their classmates in their compositions. So, I don't demand that students define their terms for queerness or explain their economic circumstances; I do not assume that the composer or their intended readership is white, middle-class, cis/hetero Americans, or that those readers should be at the center of the composition process. This practice has taken unlearning from me as an instructor, because even as a queer, working class, Appalachian professor, I was taught to assess students on languages that I had adopted in college myself. Harm reduction is also about unpacking the ways that we as marginalized faculty can and do reinscribe discriminatory language practices in our classrooms.

**Maggie:** Putting people at the center of our assessment is harm reduction. Harm reduction can also be using fifteen to sixteen weeks to make a dent in a student's larger history of education that is largely about punishment, largely about discipline, largely about people pleasing your teacher to get the grade that you need to make the rest of your life happen. A harm reduction approach can let students see by the end that there's something of value to viewing writing beyond adherence to white mainstream English. Students can think, "maybe writing takes time and maybe it's okay that I need more time. Maybe it's okay to take Dr. Fernandes up on an extension every now and then." My hope is, even if students still think that they're going to be assessed on how well they adhere to neurotypical and racist standards, that my class can offer students the space to recognize that such assessment standards are oppressive and wrong. Whether students are asked to adhere to White Mainstream English grammar in other classes and professional contexts is beyond me; my goal is not to perpetuate that harm. That's what I can control.

## **Disciplinary Specificity and Citation Justice in Writing Assessment**

By discussing how our individual circumstances and contexts shape how each of us interacts with alternative assessment, we hope to gesture to the importance of specificity. Through this dialogue—and the hundreds of conversations and readings that preceded it—we find that our main sticking point with ungrading is the disconnect between instructor feelings and student needs and lived experiences. To better understand the impacts of this disconnect on students, further research is needed, but in the meantime, instructors should embrace a stance of critical honesty and specificity within our profession about the work of assessment. Each of us shared examples of doing the work of alternative assessment and finding that our intentions did not always align with student experiences and desires or institutional realities. Indeed, there are so many variables related to subjectivity and institution that we do not hope to advocate “best practices” or prescriptive practices, but rather, specific practices articulated within their specific contexts. Working and learning conditions vary across and within institutions and that faculty workloads and assessment practices are connected. Writing programs, departments, colleges, and institutions all impose their own expectations and constraints on individual faculty practices. But all of these factors require more specificity about what we mean by alternative assessment, not less.

We believe that recognizing the need for localized specificity for alternative assessment should be paired with disciplinary specificity for writing pedagogies. Writing teachers know that how we teach the writing process is intrinsically tied to assessment, which means it’s important we privilege guidance from writing teachers, especially writing teachers doing the work to champion linguistic and disability justice. We recognize, as Zhaozhe Wang (2021) reminds us, that “a discipline disciplines” calls for disciplinary can reaffirm disciplinary hierarchies of power if we are not mindful to listen to the voices of new and/or multiply-marginalized scholars (p. 160). However, we are inspired by scholars like Jacqueline Jones Royster (2003), Carmen Kynard (2013), and Eric Darnell Pritchard (2019), among others, whose calls for citation justice remind us that the work of citation is an act of “disciplinary landscaping.” Likewise, the CCCC/NCTE Position Statement on Citation Justice in Rhetoric, Composition, and Writing Studies (Sano-Franchini et al., 2022) frames citation as an issue of ethics for scholars, as a key practice that can disrupt the erasure of marginalized scholars affiliated with writing studies. When Stommel (2023) charges, in a recent article, that we must “look backward to look forward” in order to challenge grades institutionally, he gestures to scholars and thinkers like Virginia Woolf and Ruha Benjamin. While we have much to learn from both of these writers, the urgency of assessment requires more intentional citation.

For example: what is a conversation about equitable writing assessment and linguistic justice that does not draw on Carmen Kynard’s (2013) *Vernacular Insurrections: Race, Black Protest, and the New Century in Composition-Literacies Studies*? In this text, Kynard (2013) contextualizes the formation of rhetoric and composition within the larger history of Black protest and struggle for liberation and shows that there have always been challenges to deficit thinking about Black literacies. She writes that “[t]o argue that our role as literacy educators is merely to provide our students with the rules and norms of academic literacy and ‘codes of power’ contradicts an extensive black protest history . . . and, thereby, normalizes the role of higher education in maintaining social inequality” (p. 66). In doing so, Kynard (2013) makes a powerful argument against contemporary normative pedagogical and literacy practices grounded in White Mainstream English (WME). We can read the history of Black protest, which produced the 1974 Students’ Right to Their Own

Language (SRTOL), as the foundation for alternative assessment practices that attend to the value and worth of all literacies and languages.

We're thinking, too, with April Baker-Bell's (2020) work on Black linguistic justice and her calls for attention to the histories, practices, and power of Black language. In discussing the languaging of Black students, Baker-Bell (2020) notes that their practices, and the pedagogies necessary for supporting them, are necessarily "deeply complex and nuanced" (p. 11). In order to best support our students, especially our Black and linguistically diverse students, Baker-Bell (2020) argues, "we need frameworks that interrogate and examine the specific linguistic oppressions experienced by linguistically marginalized communities of color and account for the critical distinctions between their linguistic histories, heritages, experiences, circumstances, and relationships to white supremacy" (p. 18). We, therefore, need assessment and feedback practices that respond to those specific experiences and circumstances. A general theory of ungrading is not useful for these purposes.

In addition to attending to our discipline's investment in conversations about multiliteracies and linguistic justice, we should be mindful of longstanding conversations within rhetoric, composition, and writing studies about the role of feedback in assessment practices (Connors & Lunsford, 1993; Haswell, 1983; Huot, 2003; Sommers, 1982; Treglia, 2009). For some of those writing about ungrading, including Blum (2020), feedback and assessment are part of their work as an instructor within an institutional ecosystem but not central to their disciplinarity or disciplinary work. In writing studies, on the other hand, we focus the majority of our time and energy on feedback, assessment, and revision processes. Explicit questions about alternative assessment practices and grades are central to our disciplinary history, as Michelle Cowan (2020) has shown in "A Legacy of Grading Contracts for Composition." Disciplinarity is not simply about shaping the field's conversation around assessment. Such specificity is also key for us as we navigate how grades and assessment are bound up in local contexts, faculty positionality, student needs, and disciplinary values and histories. We must acknowledge that our disciplinary context includes teaching process-based courses like FYC that are often required. This matters, in part, because the students in our courses often have little control over their presence in our classrooms. We may desire to separate the writing process from grades, but it would be naive to ignore how student lives are materially shaped by grades both within and beyond our institutions for matters ranging from financial support, continued enrollment in majors of choice, participation in co-curricular activities, and admission to graduate programs (Brier, 2021).

Moreover, attention to disciplinary specificity asks us to consider who gets a seat at the table when we talk about assessment. This conversation must include non-tenured instructors and graduate students who carry out the majority of teaching labor in our field. In this way, our field needs to talk to each other, so to speak, about alternative assessment practices in concrete ways which acknowledge unique teaching and learning contexts.

### **Linguistic Justice**

Alternative assessment asks us to think about equity in assessment and how we communicate values about writing through feedback, pedagogies, and grades. Linguistic justice in writing studies is a critical area for alternative assessment scholars because we must think about how our feedback and pedagogies intersect with linguistic racism, not just how we assign grades. Scholars across the fields of linguistics, rhetoric and composition, and writing studies have demonstrated

the relationship among, race, language, and literacy and the implications of this relationship for power, privilege, and oppression (Baker-Bell 2020; Horner et al., 2011; Inoue, 2015; Kynard, 2013; Smitherman, 2006). Although some of these scholars do not address specific assessment practices in their research, these scholars have shown how white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and linguistic racism have shaped institutions of higher education and writing pedagogies which promote code-switching, despite disciplinary resolutions like SRTOL. As such, their work is linked to the assessment of language and the systemic whiteness and privileging of WME in higher education. Such conversations are important to alternative assessment because while practitioners of ungrading may promote linguistic diversity in their classrooms, the use of ungrading or contract grading as catch-all frameworks to address inequitable assessment does not necessarily address racism—linguistic or otherwise—in writing classrooms.

Alternative assessment practices must be explicitly in conversation with the 2020 CCCC/NCTE resolution *This Ain't Another Statement! This is a DEMAND for Black Linguistic Justice!* In this resolution, authors Baker-Bell, Bonnie J. Williams-Farrier, Davena Jackson, Lamar Johnson, Carmen Kynard, and Teaira McMurtry (2020) present five demands:

1. teachers stop using academic language and standard English as the accepted communicative norm, which reflects White Mainstream English!
2. teachers stop teaching Black students to code-switch! Instead, we must teach Black students about anti-Black linguistic racism and white linguistic supremacy!
3. political discussions and praxis center Black Language as teacher-researcher activism for classrooms and communities!
4. teachers develop and teach Black Linguistic Consciousness that works to decolonize the mind (and/or) language, unlearn white supremacy, and unravel anti-Black linguistic racism!
5. Black dispositions are centered in the research and teaching of Black Language!

Each of these demands implicitly calls for alternative pedagogies and assessment practices that recognize the rhetorical validity and inherent value of Black Language. Moreover, the authors further elaborate on their demand for teachers to stop promoting code-switching by demanding, too, that “teachers stop policing Black students’ language practices and penalizing them for using it in the classroom.” We must read this demand as a call for assessment practices that “recognize that multiple languages can coexist,” both in terms of grades assigned and feedback given.

In other words, this resolution is a reminder that a discussion of instructor feedback is critical to the conversations for both alternative assessment and Black Linguistic Justice in writing studies. For example, in *Linguistic Justice: Black Language, Literacy, Identity, and Pedagogy*, Baker-Bell (2020) argues that respectability language pedagogies—pedagogies that promote code-switching and the acquisition of WME for the purpose of assimilation and treat Black language as deficient and wrong—constitute anti-Black linguistic racism that emotionally and psychologically harms Black students. As Inoue (2015) argues most directly in *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies: Teaching and Assessing Writing for a Socially Just Future*, “this project (to assess everyone by standards of the same discourse, the same English) is an inherently racist project” (p. 56). Dismantling white linguistic racism in writing classrooms necessarily involves the revision of traditional assessment and feedback practices.

In our conversations about alternative assessment, we have found that the importance of instructor self-reflection cannot be overstated. This is especially true for us as three white writing instructors who hope to address white supremacy and linguistic racism in our classrooms. To do so adequately, we must be specific in our reflections. In his “Blogbook—Habits of White Language (HOWL),” Inoue (2021) argues that instructors must interrogate their relationships to the habits of white language (HOWLs), habits which include (a) “unseen, naturalized orientation to the world”; (b) “hyperindividualism”; (c) “stance of neutrality, objectivity, and apoliticality”; (d) “individualized, rational, controlled self”; (e) “rule-governed, contractual relationships”; and (f) “clarity, order, and control.” He provides the questions for teachers to “consciously” shift their relationships to HOWLs and develop an antiracist orientation to language; those questions include:

How do I already use habits of White language (HOWL) in my teaching and judgements of students’ languaging? . . . How does HOWL make up what happens in my classroom and how I arrange students’, their language performances, my assessments, activities, texts, etc.? . . . How do I not use my habits of White language against my students, but use them with my students? How do I allow everyone’s habits of language to circulate and create critical juxtapositions in the classroom, in assignments, and in responses to language?

These questions demand specific attention to the ways individual instructors discuss, teach, and assess racialized language in their classrooms. Similarly, Baker-Bell (2020) argues that there is important inner work to be done before instructors can implement an antiracist black language pedagogy. She writes that “[l]anguage and literacy educators have to be honest with themselves about the ways they uphold and perpetuate white linguistic hegemony in their classrooms and in their everyday lives” and “you can’t be out here saying that you believe in linguistic diversity at the same time of shutting students down as soon as they open their mouths” (Baker-Bell, 2020, p. 99). Moreover, Baker-Bell (2020) argues that anti-Black linguistic racism includes the act of ignoring “the role that white linguistic hegemony, linguistic racism, and anti-blackness play in educational research,” as well as research that divorces Black Language from the lived experiences, embodiment, and culture (p. 44). This means that ungrading practices that do not directly take up questions of linguistic racism and/or recognize the ways that all language is racialized perpetuate anti-Black linguistic racism, no matter the title or appearance of the assessment schema.

These calls for instructors to engage in continued reflection on their relationship to white supremacy and linguistic racism are critical for practitioners of alternative assessment. It is not enough for instructors to adopt alternative assessment practices under the umbrella of ungrading. Instructors must intentionally unpack the relationship between racism and writing assessment and make that relationship visible to students.

### **Disability Justice and Accessible Course Design**

Scholarship in disability rhetorics also emphasizes the importance of accessible pedagogies and course design and how that body of scholarship should inform our alternative assessment practices (Carillo, 2021; Cedillo, 2018; Dolmage, 2017; Wood, 2017). Alternative assessment practices, and Inoue’s version of labor-based contract grading specifically, have been criticized for “hidden inequities,” which primarily disadvantage neurodivergent and disabled students (Carillo, 2021), something Inoue (2023) has also acknowledged and responded to in his most recent book, *Crippling Labor-Based Grading for More Equity in Literacy Courses*. For example, Kryger and Zimmerman (2020) unpack the neurological ableism of a traditional labor-based contract system,

which disadvantages (or outs) neurodiverse students; likewise, Kryger and Zimmerman (2020) note the “new rules” (p. 6) of alternative assessment require additional labor, the burden of which cannot be overstated.

Alternative assessment practices do not *necessarily*, but are *more likely to*, create more accessible writing classrooms. To promote accessibility in our classrooms, we must resist ableist course design that relies on student disclosure (Kerschbaum, 2014; Wood, 2017) or resilience, which disproportionately harm neurodiverse and economically disadvantaged students (Kryger & Zimmerman, 2020). Accounting for embodied differences in time constraints, executive function, and mind/body health should take place in the development of an alternative assessment system, not post-hoc, when students disclose disabilities, neurodiversity, illness, or trauma. For example, Wood (2017) discusses the various ways that normative time disadvantage disabled students, arguing that “asking writing instructors to examine the systems of ‘normal’ and ‘able-bodied’ production they create in their classrooms initiates a type of crippling, critical self-reflection for writing pedagogy” that can have important implications for how our field can reimagine writing process and the conditions for writing (p. 279). Designing pedagogies oriented toward crip time and disability justice enables—and importantly, according to Wood (2017), requires—instructors to collaborate with students, instead of making assumptions about the efficacy of accommodations or fudging the numbers for students experiencing illness, disability, or tragedy, which gives students deemed deserving a higher grade than numerically calculated in the course. Such assumptions and fabrications do *not* improve accessibility; keeping the authority with instructors is a recipe for discrimination, ableism, racism, and trauma performance as faculty react with flexibility only for students who they deem sufficiently sick, distressed, or contrite.

We caution alternative assessment practitioners to avoid the traps of saviorism regarding disability and alternative assessment practice and expecting *more* or *better* work from students while employing alternative assessment practices. Jay Dolmage (2017) argues that neuromyths, such as brain hacking and emphasis on Multiple Intelligences and multimodality, and individualistic neoliberal ableism in higher education symbiotically reify hyperproductive modes of learning. These neuromyths argue that “[i]f we aren’t maxing out all the different ways our brains might be engaged, then our brains are somehow deficient” (Dolmage, 2017, p. 149). Likewise, we might feel that if we are not maxing out our pedagogical prowess, our teaching or our students’ work will somehow be deficient. Proponents of ungrading in the composition classroom may feel compelled to speak to the quality of student writing in ungraded classrooms, arguing no “decline” in quality with the absence of letter or numerical grades. These judgments enforce ableist notions of output, linguistic racism, and the worship of ever-increasing output in writing classrooms.

Additionally, we should not feel compelled to argue that alternative assessment practices equally benefit all students. Speaking on Universal Design (UD), Dolmage (2017) asserts, “one of the major arguments for UD is that it is good for all students. But of course there is some danger here of falling into what critical race theorists would call interest convergence—the idea that conditions for the minority group improve only once the effort can be justified as helping the majority as well” (p. 135). Students who most benefit from ranked-based grading practices—especially students for whom achieving high ranks create both personal and economic gain through praise, scholarships, and placements into Honors or graduate programs—may resent changes to their assessment and complain that such changes are “unfair.” Centering disabled and neurodivergent students in our alternative assessment practices means focusing on clear requirements for writing, multiple

means of expression and engagement with course material, and removing hidden curriculums. Students who have mastered enacting white, middle-class norms of interpersonal relationships with professors may find alternative assessment frustrating or off putting.

However, we cannot base our composition pedagogy on our perceptions of the “typical” college student, an often ableist, ageist, racist, and classist set of assumptions which obscure the students before us in our classrooms. As Dolmage (2017) states, “the self or selves that have been projected upon the space of the university are not just able-bodied and normal, but exceptional, elite. This projection unites many other discourses of normativity: whiteness, heteronormativity, empire, colonialism, masculinity” (p. 45). In developing our alternative assessment practices, disabled and neurodivergent students cannot be accommodated on an individual basis or retrofitted into our pedagogy (Dolmage, 2017, p. 79); instead, we must develop our alternative assessment practices by considering the needs of these students at the forefront.

### **Conclusion: Alternative Assessment as Harm Mitigation**

There have been ongoing, robust conversations about assessment and its consequences for students for nearly the entire history of rhetoric, composition, and writing studies as a discipline. Work on antiracist writing assessment (Inoue, 2015), Black linguistic justice (Baker-Bell, 2020), and anti-ableist composition pedagogies and policies (Dolmage, 2017) add important context to existing conversations about how alternative assessments might allow us to create more equitable, linguistically just, and accessible writing classrooms. We believe in the promise of alternative assessments, but we also believe that the conversation should begin from a foundation of disciplinary knowledge about how literacy instruction can and has perpetuated racist and ableist notions of writing and language and how those notions are reinforced by feedback and grading in writing courses. From that foundation, we have the chance to build concrete, specific, and equitable alternative assessment practices.

We also want to promote alternative assessment as a form of harm mitigation, with the intent to recognize the world beyond our classes and meaningfully gestures to the reality that the work to make our classes more equitable and accessible is never complete. To be clear, harm mitigation is a primary motivation for ungrading scholars and advocates like Stommel (2017, 2023), as mentioned earlier in this article. This is important common ground and a source of great hope for us as practitioners in writing studies. An emphasis on harm mitigation challenges us to answer important questions like, who is harmed in our classrooms and what can we do to limit that harm? While disciplinary conversations and continuous reflection can help us answer these questions, mitigating harm requires named engagement with specific harms, like linguistic racism or ableism. This practice enables us to investigate the distinct, conflicting needs that students and instructors alike have and how instructors and/or writing programs can address those needs.

Alternative assessment as harm mitigation necessitates that writing teachers and writing program administrators reflect—deeply and frequently—on their practices and motivations. Our responsibility doesn’t end there. Recognizing alternative assessment as harm mitigation reminds us that we have broader responsibilities to agitate and work for larger institution- and discipline-wide changes to how we think and talk about language education, language varieties, and the responsibilities of language educators.

If we think about alternative assessment practices as harm mitigation, how do we avoid treating alternative assessment as abstraction or universal design that responds to everyone’s

needs? We use alternative assessment knowing that it can't totally respond to systemic oppression, but we find that alternative assessment allows us to do the following:

- Talk about linguistic racism with our students and reflect our values about linguistic diversity within our student-facing assessment documents and policies;
- Enact transparent, caring course design that ensures our classes are more accessible for disabled students and students enduring hardship during the semester.
- Reflect on how policies and assignments communicate to students our values about writing, literacies, and language and about who belongs in our classrooms;
- Convey an openness to and seriousness about student opinions, feelings, and experimentation in writing assignments;
- Grapple with the lived realities of how assessment is experienced as punishment both in and beyond the classroom and the lasting psychological trauma of assessment;
- Reflect constantly on our individual relationships with assessment and equity as teachers and to think about how our experiences with assessment and teaching inform our perspectives on respect, rigor, feedback, accessible practice, and literacies overall.

Given the arguments we've made in the sections above and the pivot to thinking about alternative assessment as harm mitigation within specific contexts with their own constraints and affordances, what are some pathways forward for more inclusive conversation about alternative assessment?

- We need publication venues that amplify, promote, and support critical engagement from non-tenured instructors and graduate students. We need to recognize that, in rhetoric, composition, and writing studies specifically, practitioner knowledge *is* disciplinary knowledge and find ways to ensure the voices of teachers/practitioners show up in conversations about alternative assessments.
- We need to look at ungrading as a political movement and alternative assessment practices as related but separate spheres of influence.
- We need broader conversations that are collaborative that focus on practice and not feelings and idealizations.
- We need conversations that emphasize the need for specificity in both our practices and our conversations about ungrading.

All of these ways forward, though, require a discipline-specific foundation and specific writing assessment practices and policies that make sense within their specific contexts.

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