

The Assessment System That Made Me Love Grading Again (Yes, Really!)



By Alexis Wiggins

A revision-based assessment system, driven by clear rubrics, can mean less stress, more effective feedback, and greater student learning.



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When I was a young English teacher just starting out, I would take home a stack of my high school students' papers and stay up late into the night, slogging my way through them. I felt that giving good quality feedback to my students was a vital part of my job, even if it often felt like drudgery.

The trouble was, the feedback never seemed all that effective. I would fill the margins of my students' papers with suggestions, questions, and edits only to see their next round of papers plagued with the very same issues: fragmented sentences, vague language, superficial thesis statements.

Then I attended a workshop on feedback and assessment given by my father, the late Grant Wiggins. During the workshop, he shared one of his favorite tongue-in-cheek lines: "Teach, test, and hope for the best." It was an ironic phrase born from the umbrage he took with the notion that a teacher's job is to "cover" the content and that a student's job is to learn it. He felt it was wrong for educators to wash their hands of responsibility, that "I taught it, and they didn't learn it" was not an excuse for poor learning outcomes. That was an aha moment for me: I realized I was guilty of the same erroneous thinking. In my case, it was, "I gave feedback, and they didn't absorb it." I knew I needed to try a different way.

I had heard about a university professor who never gave grades on his students' papers but instead assigned one of two categories: "Publishable" and "Not Yet Publishable." At the end of the semester, the students' grades in the course were determined by how many "Publishables" they had achieved by the final submission date, with unlimited revisions allowed up until that point.

I wanted to try this method, but I knew high school students would need a little more scaffolding, so I built a comprehensive rubric with specific writing criteria ("Content," "Organization," and "Language/Mechanics"), changed the "Not Yet Publishable" to "Revisable," and added a third designation called "Redo." I told my students that "Publishable" was *A*-level work (from *A+* to *A-*), "Revisable" meant something needed to be fixed (the equivalent range would be from *B+* to *D-*), and "Redo" had just completely missed the mark because the assignment had not yet been fulfilled ("Incomplete" or "*F*"). I allowed my students to revise their papers as many times as they wanted to until they reached "Publishable" status. The results were fascinating. Most of my students worked tirelessly to move from the "Revisable" column to the "Publishable."

The only downside? It was killing me. I couldn't handle the volume of revised papers. As a result, I abandoned the practice after one year.

Finding Rubrics That Work

I spent 10 years after that experiment immersing myself in assessment best practices and standards-based grading and reporting before once again attempting a revision-based assessment model. This new method I trialed in 2018 in a class I taught alone, my 12th-grade English course Film and Composition.

Over the summer, resurrecting the "Publishable," "Revisable," and "Redo" categories, I created rubrics for each assessment type the course required, rubrics specifically designed with the principles of standards-based grading in mind. Our high school English program focuses nearly as much time and energy on oral and digital presentation skills as on writing skills. As a result, my film students only needed two different rubrics for this kind of seminar: one for written film reviews and one for oral presentations. For the written film review assessment, I developed detailed criteria such as being able to make a persuasive argument, employ an engaging and compelling "voice," and show an understanding of the film and its directorial choices without spoilers. The oral presentation assessment had similar criteria, but it also asked students to use digital media effectively, embedding images and film clips in slideshows, and to employ strong public speaking skills, such as facing the audience, making good eye contact, and speaking in a volume, register, and tone that engaged.

On the back of each rubric, I added the breakdown of how the course grade would be calculated based on the letter-grade system in our school, explaining clearly what combination of "Publishable," "Revisable," and "Redo" statuses of their assessments resulted in what letter grade. For example, four Publishable assessments and one

Revisable assessment would result in an *A*, whereas three Revisable and two Redo assessments would equal a *C* grade, and so forth.

I was hopeful the detailed rubrics would alleviate some of the burden of grading revisions, especially since my department had decided on department-wide criteria that all rubrics would be built from. The rubric descriptors could be written only for the "standard" (highest level)—either the student hits the standard or doesn't. In this way, I wouldn't be wasting time looking over an analytic rubric to decide if the language they used was "good" or "very good," I would only be looking to see if the Revisable criteria had been improved upon. But I was also prepared to throw in the towel in the second half of the year if either I or the students were struggling.

So what were the results? The best assessment system I had ever experienced in my nearly two-decade career as a teacher, hands down.

More Revision, Less Stress

My aims for this system had been straightforward, and all were met.

1. Develop a model that made feedback more effective for my students.

The new rubrics offered clear, standards-based criteria and specific descriptors of the attributes of "Publishable" work. Critically, this allowed my comments on papers to be far less time-consuming because the rubric did half of the work for me already. I could simply highlight the rubric descriptor, leave a short comment, and suggest a meeting if the student needed more feedback. Additionally, I had a series of professional and exemplar student film reviews from years past that I could link to in my online feedback via Microsoft Teams or Turnitin or attach hard copies if grading on paper. These models offered students concrete examples of what I was suggesting in the feedback, saving both of us a lot of time. For example, if a student had written a technically strong film review that nonetheless lacked "voice"—one of the criteria—I could suggest in my comments that she read a review written by a professional film critic or one of my former students that was replete with humor and sarcasm, giving her permission to flex her creative, sardonic abilities. After seeing models like this, students would often say, "Oh, I get it now. I didn't know you were allowed to be funny." Between clear feedback against criteria and models, students were able to better see what the standard was and work toward it.

2. Put the focus on learning rather than the grade.

I had grown so weary of students waiting until the end of the semester to ask, "What can I do to get my grade up?" Even worse, every time I would give a paper back, I saw several students' faces drop with disappointment, sometimes culminating in tears.

Now, as if someone had waved a magic wand, I suddenly had zero conversations about grades with students. *Zero*. The only questions students now had were about how to improve their work. It was like all my English teacher dreams had come true.

I'll never forget one of my seniors, Lauren, saying to me, "Since 8th grade, I've been told by teachers that I have problems with MLA citation, but I finally learned how to do it right in your class because I had to in order to get Publishable." That comment made me laugh, but it also made me wince. How often are our assessment systems set up to reward point accumulation versus actual learning? Lauren had managed to get good grades throughout high school but had never learned a basic requirement in the discipline because there wasn't enough incentive to focus on the *learning*.

3. Make the grading/assessing as streamlined and manageable as possible for me and other educators who want to try this method.

Throughout that first year with my film students, I kept experiencing the feeling that I was grading more often, but that it somehow seemed like less effort than ever. I dare say it was even *enjoyable*. That was new. While I loved my job as an English teacher, I had always dreaded grading. But with more precise rubrics, grading was faster. I wasn't rereading whole drafts each time; now, I would merely review the previous rubric's feedback and look for the criteria that had been marked as not yet Publishable. For instance, if Lauren had Publishable in all criteria except MLA citations, then I was just scanning her essay to see if she had fixed the citations, which could take as little as 30 seconds. And, since students were revising the same type of assessment multiple times, as the year progressed, they became pretty adept at writing in this particular genre. By January, first drafts were often "Publishable" or only needed a few tweaks to get there, so the grading time was further reduced.

But the best part was that I was able to achieve a couple things I wasn't even aiming to do. First, I realized that the dreading, loathing, and avoiding of grading I had experienced in my younger years wasn't related to the drudgery of correcting but to the actual decision of what grade to give. I had often agonized about whether a student's paper was closer to an *A-* or a *B+*, knowing that the *B+* could have long-lasting impacts on that student's college ambitions.

In this new system, grading didn't feel like the worst part of my job anymore because it was merely feedback against the goal of "Publishable." Without the assigned value—a number or a letter—that students often saw as representative of their *own* value as learners, there were no more charged emotions. No more tears or crushed looks. Uncoupling the work from lettered and numbered values allowed all of us to refocus on the work itself, not the student. Assessment suddenly felt like the tool it was meant to be, not a weapon. This allowed me to have a new relationship with my grading, one that felt less like a chore and more like an effective exercise in feedback.

The most unexpected benefit of all, though, was that the students reported in the anonymous surveys that *their* stress and anxiety diminished greatly. That first year, 19 out of 20 students chose this option on the survey: "This is the best assessment system I have ever experienced. Every class should do this." The majority said they had never learned more, and never stressed less, in any high school course. I was sold.

Scaling It Up

There was just one question: Was it scalable? I wondered whether other educators would have the same experience I did. What if I was just a fast grader? What if it only worked with older students and not younger, less mature ones?

In the past two years, I asked two of my trusted colleagues to pilot the system in their senior English courses. Both had similar outcomes: Students paid attention to feedback more than ever before. One of those teachers shared with me that a struggling student of his chose to revise an essay 20 times that spring, even when he suggested she stop and move on to another project. He told me it was one of the highlights of his career to see her get that final Publishable, to see her radiate with pride when she did.

As a result of these successes at the senior level, the sophomore and junior English teachers at my school have chosen to try revision-based assessment with their students. So far, after trying this method with more than 200 students, we're seeing deeper learning and less stress reported at all age levels.

In surveys, our students have been very positive with their feedback. "I like how we can continue to work on a specific paper or assignment as many times as we like, with as much feedback as we want," said one senior. "I often get confused in other classes because grading seems like an ultimatum rather than a learning process." Another student in 10th grade wrote, "I can make mistakes and revise what was wrong, which is what a real writer does."

Want to Try It?

I have only tried revision-based assessment in high school English classes, so my experience is limited to that discipline. However, I have taught middle school ELA, high school humanities, and Spanish, and I suspect this type of assessment would easily transfer to those disciplines and ages as well. I can also see clear applications in elementary classrooms, where skills-based growth is paramount, and in the sciences with projects and labs.

While I am completely sold on this assessment method for my classes, there are some important considerations if you want to try it in your classes:

- You need to know the total number of assessments for the grading period up front, before the start of the year. This takes planning and organization.

- You need to leave yourself enough time to correct revisions before the end of the grading period. I learned this the hard way my first year when I set the final submission date for revisions a few days before the semester's end. Oops. That was a painful amount of grading in a short time! Now I set the final submission date for all revisions at least two weeks before final grades are due (for example, early December in the fall semester), allowing me time to correct revisions before exams and final grades are due.
- You need to remind students of their status regularly. My colleagues and I who use revision-based assessment in grades 10, 11, and 12 send official notes to students and their parents a few times each semester, reminding them of their current status on all assessments and what the grade will be if they choose not to revise further. There are a lot of moving parts in this system, and clear communication helps everyone understand the process and where they are in it.
- You need to let go of the small stuff (quizzes that test only recall, note checks, homework checks, etc.). We still do those things, but they are formative work, counted as zero percent of a student's grade. We report on them to students and parents, but we don't "count" them. This is so we can focus on the bigger skills in the summative work and revision process.

For years, I thought I was giving good feedback because I spent a lot of time writing out detailed comments on student work. I never stopped to consider how the assessment structure itself was impacting the feedback process, rendering it largely ineffective. Now, with the power of standards-based rubrics, targeted feedback, and a system that incentivizes learning over grades, my students seem to be thriving. And I feel excitement, not dread, when those revisions come in.

About the Author:

Alexis Wiggins is the founder and director of the Cohort of Educators for Essential Learning (CEEL), an organization that unites like-minded educators around the globe. She has worked as a high school and middle school English teacher in six different countries and as an instructional coach for all subject areas. She has consulted with schools around the world on curriculum design, Spider Web Discussion, and the Harkness method. Wiggins helped the International Baccalaureate design their approaches to teaching and learning for the diploma program initiative. She lives with her husband and two sons in the Woodlands, Tex., and teaches at the John Cooper School, where Wiggins also hosts Spider Web Discussion workshops and the CEEL Summer Symposium.