

## Ungrading the Classroom:

Ungrading is a pedagogical practice that strives to decenter grades and their logics as the primary means of evaluation and student academic success. While still a largely minoritarian practice, ungrading is gaining momentum from educators who want to experiment with more student-centered learning practices. Research in fact shows that grades tend to play to extrinsic rather than intrinsic motivation. Drawing from numerous empirical studies, Jeffrey Schinske and Kimberly Tanner note in their article “Teaching More by Grading Less (Or Differently)” that grades “appear to play on students’ fears of punishment or shame, or their desires to outcompete their peers, as opposed to stimulating interest and enjoyment in learning tasks.” Rather than seeing low grades “as an opportunity to improve themselves,” students more often, upon receiving undesirable grades, “withdraw from class work” (Schinske and Tanner).

Part of why I practice ungrading as a teacher, and why we will be trying it out this semester, stems from my belief—backed up by research—that intrinsic motivators such as self-evaluation and reflection on one’s own learning process and goals—in a phrase, metacognitive learning—promote and encourage ownership over one’s education in ways that grades do not.

As a teacher, I am more interested in encouraging you to seize control of your learning process and determine for yourself what your goals, needs, and interests are than I am in assigning you a grade. Grades are abstract and impersonal. As Jesse Stommel, a prominent advocate for ungrading, says, “If, as teachers, we just ask students why, when and how they learn, what we can get back is way more valuable than any standardized assessment mechanism can reveal.” Unlike grading, ungrading promotes more genuine engagement and honest dialogue about learning, as well as accountability for me as a teacher. Rather than apply an abstract system of grading to your work—which assumes a universalizable criteria of evaluation—ungrading asks that I reflect *on my own* practices as a teacher and to be transparent about them as part of our ongoing dialogue.

Here are some useful links on ungrading which we will go over in class:

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4041495/>

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/04/02/professors-reflections-their-experiences-ungrading-spark-renewed-interest-student>

<https://www.jessestommel.com/how-to-ungrade/>

At this point, you may (quite reasonably) be asking yourself: *How does this possibly work? Doesn't Hunter College require grades? Don't I deserve to know how I'm doing?* CUNY is indeed a grade-giving institution and a course grade will be entered into the system for you. In fact, I agree that you deserve to know how you're doing, both in the middle and at the end of the

semester, and I recognize that not being concerned about grades can easily reflect a very privileged stance in academia.

Instead of receiving grades, students in this class will submit two self-evaluations for the semester: a midterm self-evaluation and an end-of-semester self-evaluation. Additionally, students will be asked to submit what I am calling a “Goal Prospectus”: a half-page to one-page statement of what your personal educational goals are for this semester. Your mid-term and final self-evaluations will then respond to your “Goal Prospectus” as well as providing some additional information. I will be giving you more information on all of these assignments in the coming weeks.

Since grades must be assigned for this course, you will be asked to assign yourself a tentative grade, both in your midterm and end-of-term self-evaluation. These grades will apply not to any individual assignments but to your overall course performance. In other words, you are assessing yourself holistically. In both cases, I do not have final say on these grades; rather, we both must come to an agreement about them. I aim to have minimal intervention in this process. I will only step in if I think you are grading yourself too harshly (which happens more often than you might think and is especially the case for women and students of color) or if I feel that your self-evaluation is significantly out of synch with the work I am seeing you put forward in the classroom and in your essays. Self-evaluations will be submitted simultaneously with your formal essay assignments. I will be offering feedback on both, but most of my feedback will be on your formal essays.

### **Prompt for Midterm Self-Evaluation**

Tell me a story about who you are as a student.

How does this class fit into that story?

Do you feel like you are achieving the goal you set out for yourself?

If so, why? If not, why?

Answer the above questions in an approximately 1-2 page narrative reflection. You can answer them in any way you wish and you should not feel pressured to divulge any information about yourself that you want to remain private. After reflecting on these questions and providing a narrative-form response, I am going to ask that you propose a tentative course grade for yourself. This grade stands for how you think you’ve done up to this point in the semester holistically. Thus, it is not in relation to any one assignment but reflects all assignments, including your midterm and your in-class participation. Remember: there are many ways to participate, and this class utilizes a lot of in-class group activities, so these count as participation just as much as talking in class.

## Midterm Self-Evaluation

I am majoring in Creative Writing. I have always had a thirst for knowledge. I loved reading, and writing even more. I am a first-generation college graduate in my family, in which I have no support from. I am second generation Puerto Rican born in New York, although I grew up half the time in the rural parts of Puerto Rico. I am also a single mother of two small daughters. In the beginning of my college career, my main focus was to get my Associates, which I did at Hostos Community College, and graduated with a 3.78 GPA in Criminal Justice. Excelling with high grades (mainly A's,) despite the lack of family support, the constant struggle to make ends meet on a limited income as the sole provider, not to mention the constant reaffirmation of poverty in my community, made me feel like I was doing ok. But it isn't enough, at least not for me. I am a student, but I am also someone can't do things half-assed. It'll show in my work, and what's worse, my own conscience won't let me be at peace. Even more so, as a mother, I am a prime example to my kids of what it means to keep pushing despite everything working against you. I've had a poem published in Hostos' academic journal in 2017, and I've continued to write some others periodically. I can't imagine my life without writing. Gilman was on to something about work! It is extremely frustrating for me when deadlines aren't met-I feel like the crazed white rabbit from Alice in Wonderland, constantly rushing to beat the clock. Despite it being difficult to get the reading done because of the responsibilities outside of class, in addition to interning as a staff writer at the Center of Puerto Rican Studies in Hunter, I find myself engaging with the text. I find the method in which the class is carried out, to be the most beneficial in the sense where the entire classroom is engaged in conversation, exchanging ideas, especially with literature. It not only helps clarify things in class, but also creates a space where everyone contributes and becomes more to ideas. I wish all of my classes followed this method. At this point in my academic career, my main focus is on the quality of my work, and what long lasting lessons I can take away from the class, as a student and writer, and contributing member of society. (Perhaps my work deserves a B.)

## Midterm Essay: Textual Encounter Narrative

[I read Charlotte Perkins Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper](#) in a prior class, but hadn't read any of her other works, or other pieces of literature that discussed issues revolving around women and their rights. I wrongly assumed because Herland was published in 1915, it would difficult to recognize the ways in which the various topics might be presented, due to the language used at the time the story was written and also differentiate the norms, culture and customs of that particular era. It is interesting to observe that even a century after the story's publication, male chauvinism, gender inequality, as well as racism, along with its hypocrisies, are still evidently apparent, no

matter how it is pleasantly downplayed. It is a firm reminder we as a society in certain parts of the world have grown (and others have yet to follow) but we have still much farther to overcome.

The narrator, Van, portrays himself as the most reasonable and sensible out of the group, which include Terry, and Jeff, and approaches the encounters with the women on Herland with scientific rationality, and objectivity, placing him somewhere in the middle on the spectrum of patriarchy. This aids him in his own experiences with them, although it doesn't exempt him from contributing to patriarchal attitudes towards women. His matter-of-fact-tone forfeits his subtle arrogance, and while Van is certainly not as crude as Terry, nor as patronizing as Jeff, he is still capable to acknowledge the detrimental effects on women and society. Terry is at one extreme end of the spectrum and is the perfect example of blatant mistreatment of women as sexual objects, his view of women as servants, in addition to his overarching capitalistic views, which intersect with his male dominance. Much of Terry's persona can still be observed today, especially given the Me-Too movement, with comments that paint women as prey to be hunted, and men as the predator. His behavior in how he interacts in relation to the women and his expectations of them are problematic, insomuch where it foreshadows violence against the women. Jeff, although not like Terry, is still a contributor to patriarchy. His demeanor towards women puts him on the opposite side of the spectrum, where he idolizes women, and treats them as fragile, incapable beings, which underhandedly infantilizes them. Jeff's stance on women is no less a strange sentiment today. Men often tell young girls, or women to act like a lady, or have an expectation to treat them with a different kind of respect as opposed to the kind of respect if they were men, which poses the question what is the difference, and furthermore, why can't both be held to the same standard?

As the men learn the ways of the women of the utopian society, Van is confronted with the double standards of capitalism, as well as the customs and norms that don't make much sense, and cause more harm than good. Multiple social and moral issues arise, such as the perfection of the society. The women have undergone stages of evolution where eugenics have played a key part to ensure the succession of their human race, as well as close monitoring of who is allowed to become a mother. If the women were indeed all equal, in the esteem where the basis of their progress is for the better of the community, then why revoke the person's right to become a mother, or test the person worthiness? Why the need to deter them first, before they exert their will against all efforts to prevent childrearing, if it is held as a sacrament? What unfavorable genes could warrant such acts? Such measures in itself are oppressive but in different form, which then concludes the idea of the country being a utopia is a farce.

Terry never seems to get it right with the women, and while his comments and views are outrageous, he brings up the point it being a sexless society. It is arguably due to eliminating the need to mate with men to procreate, however it calls for the counter argument of what about pleasure. Surely games, art, and other physical activities bring joy, fulfillment, and pleasure, but not in the same as the way the stroke of hand on one's back could, or an infant's preference to its mother's cradling arms than a blanket. The notion of pleasure takes on a different concept, perhaps one that exemplifies that of a higher, intellectual level that stimulates the mind, rather than just the body.

Education and progress are core values in this utopia, as it would be for most if not all. Learning and growth go hand in hand, and the opportunities to take advantage of such are presented all the time, and contribute to both the larger society as well as the individual. But if such happens in this paradise island, then we are forced to look at our educational system and society. If all there are able to true learn, and extract valuable information that will support their environment and future despite class status, how many students can walk away from educational institutions with

enough skills to do the same? Class and education collide, and often determine the kind of education the student will receive, which is only as good as what society tell them and how they should obtain it. To measure education based on quantitative results, rather than qualitative, robs the student's true education, diminishes their efforts, and enables all to behave like crabs in a barrel. It makes the idea of education, its principles and true meaning, appear unattainable, or only accessible to those who can afford the time and financial means to do so. It makes it appear as an unreachable idea.