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The Elephants Evaluate: Some Notes on the Problem of Grades in Graduate Creative Writing Programs¹

Rachel Peckham

This article takes up the “special strangeness” of grading practices in the graduate creative writing workshop, based on the author’s research, personal experience, and interviews with the faculty of her doctoral creative writing program. Using a structure of notes, the author attempts to make sense of the way grades are understood by both teacher and student at the post-secondary level. First, she considers why the formal evaluation of creative writing continues to be defined by a system of grades, despite the perceived failure of grades to represent the value of such work, and despite educators’ historic and ongoing attempts at reforming the system. And secondly, she explores the many resulting disconnects: between the neat collapse of meaning in a grade and the very pluralistic, collaborative arrival at meaning in a graduate workshop; between the creative writing teacher’s tendency for grade inflation and the literary market’s stark one-percent publication rate; and between the mentor’s fraught roles as both a critic/evaluator and “friend” to the creative writing graduate student.

“It has been ambitious and plucky of me to attempt to describe what is indescribable, and I have failed, as I knew I would.”

—E.B. White, “The Ring of Time”

After nearly a decade of pining for that stamp par excellence—you know the one; the only grade that matters to a graduate student—I still find myself wondering how this article would fare in the eyes of my mentor, Michael.² On the first day of my orientation at State University (one of the few universities that offers a PhD in Creative Writing), I was visibly anxious, already overwhelmed by the pressure to prioritize my teaching duties above the most rigorous workload of my life, when Michael pulled me aside during a ten-minute break. He removed a Marlboro pack from the pocket of his black jeans and sighed. “You are here,” he said, tapping the pack lightly, “to become a scholar of the form.” Then he cocked his head and smiled, *Understand?*

The “form” in question is the personal essay: an attempt or experiment, by definition. A *plucky* stunt, in the words of E.B. White. But stunts don’t usually bode well for any performance, academic or otherwise. Often my insecurity over a grade collided head on with my need to push the limits, test boundaries. Often I second-guessed my instincts in favor of a safer route,

especially in a seminar unconcerned, ironically, with the student's creative license. Such license was only celebrated, it seemed, in the texts we read for assignment. And the double standard frustrated me to no end.

The fact is, I'm no longer enrolled in a graduate program, but the problem of grades in a creative writing workshop remains an interest to me, perhaps more than ever now that I find myself at the head of the workshop—the one doling out the grades and, yes, evaluating the success of my students' creative license, their own plucky attempts at writing personal essays.

Maybe I feel compelled, then, to extend my neck on this very subject—to be vulnerable again this way. Maybe I need to remember how it feels devouring Michael's feedback, his chicken-scratched note on the back of the page, his head cocked to the side (*understand?*) after another one of my attempts flopped in workshop. Maybe I should've stuck to the form I know best—the epistolary essay—but, for once, I'm forsaking the letter for some notes. To note is to number, to organize. And to observe.

1.

"I don't understand the way she grades."

"I don't think *she* understands the way she grades."

I overhear them, two coeds, as I make my way to the library in search of the book—ironically enough—*Making Sense of College Grades*. I glance casually over my shoulder to get a glimpse of the disgruntled students and to see if they're, well, any of mine. They're not, thank God, but the murmuring still hits a nerve. Lately, I can't seem to escape hearing about grades; calculating grades; contemplating grades. Even Lad Tobin, composition theorist and author of *Writing Relationships: What Really Happens in the Composition Classroom* admits that he, too, is "almost always aware that grades are present; they are the elephants³ I am trying unsuccessfully not to think about" (60).

Despite the hyper-focus on *A*, *B*, *C*, *D* and that foul *F*, there are few sources that speak directly to the problem of how to grade a work of creative writing. Browsing through the stacks in my institution's library, I come across Wendy Bishop's remarks in *Released into Language*: "Little research considers the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of teacher response to 'creative' writing. . . . No one has really analyzed type, focus, or effectiveness of the responses made by creative writing teachers" (*Released into Language* 158). And I wonder, is this lack of research a residual sign of creative writing's past dismissal as a *discipline*?

Shirley Geok-lin Lim poses similar curiosities in her article "The Strangeness of Creative Writing: An Institutional Query":

How does the modern research university incorporate or contain creative writing? Does creative writing possess a disciplinary base from which certain methodological notions and practices can be drawn, and if so, how should we begin to talk about such a discipline? (151)

Geok-lin Lim first reviews the history of creative writing's role in the research university before considering its current treatment in graduate-level programs. And this is what she finds: While English majors are decreasing, the number of creative writing *emphases* within those majors are increasing.

Creative writing is more popular than ever. Masters of Fine Arts (MFA) programs are sprouting up all over the country—a growth that's been met with both applause and attack—and the highly attended Associated Writing Programs (AWP) and Modern Language Association (MLA) annual conferences do more than generate discourse; they work toward the promotion of jobs, books, and a *community* actively producing scholarship on the practice and teaching of the art form. All proof that creative writing has, indeed, won disciplinary status.

Still, there are discrepancies between the graduate programs' missions and what they actually deliver, Geok-lin Lim points out. She echoes David Radavich's claim "that 'there is no profession for which an MFA or PhD in creative writing provides direct training'" (Geok-lin Lim 164). Moreover, many MFA graduates expect to find jobs and find, instead, that what's supposed to be a "terminal" degree won't cut it in the job market without a book (from the right press, mind you) to back it up.

Nowhere in any job description that I've seen is there mention of a desirable degree of honor or minimum GPA. Such criteria would seem out of place and amateur-like; after all, this is *academe* we're talking about. It's assumed that a job candidate would not have made it to this point—would not be "qualified," as we say—without good grades in the rearview mirror.

It's not that grades no longer matter at this point; they're just taken for granted. None of my interviewers seemed to notice or care that I graduated *summa cum laude*. In fact, eight months into my first tenure-track position, I received a voice message from my university's Office of Academic Affairs informing me that my undergraduate transcript was never received. It took them over a year after I was hired to realize they had no record of my first four years' performance in higher education.

Still, my legs went tight over this news, tense with premonition. *Am I in trouble?* Incidentally, while I was on hold with the registrar's office, I received an email (marked *urgent!*) reminding faculty to turn in our final grades by the deadline.

2.

Long before my students and others, there was another group that cared very much about grades. Quakers. As the authors of *Making Sense of College Grades* explain,

Grades came into being in this country at Yale in 1783 and took the form of four descriptive adjectives: Optime, Second Optime, Inferiores, and Pejores. These categories were modifications of a much earlier English

system of Rigorisi, Transibiles, and Gratosi (or Honor Men, Pass Men, and Charity Passes). (Milton et al. 3)

Grades signified a kind of virtue, or lack thereof, in colonial America. Is it our collective memory of this origin—this marriage of grades to morality—that makes both professor and student uncomfortable and caught up in the meaning of a set of marks?

According to my colleague-friend Nathan Shepley, a scholar of Composition history, we have the Quaker minister named Lindley Murray to thank. In 1795, just two years after grades came on the American scene, Murray published *English Grammar* for his Quaker school for girls (Shepley). In it, he laced his grammar rules with the same moral instruction he delivered in his preaching, and the book was a huge success (Connors 8). Students were expected to memorize these (two-fold) rules, a mastery on which their grade depended. This was the Post-Enlightenment period, after all: a time of “morality, civic responsibility, and learnedness” (Shepley). I wonder if these principles are responsible, then, for the idea that learning can be *judged*. Perhaps this is the faith on which a monolith of grades was built.

3.

When I return from the library, I sit down to check my email and groan at seeing Kat’s name in my mailbox. Kat is a very anxious student. She cries every time I introduce a new assignment. She is easily overwhelmed, and because I sympathize, I invite her to meet with me often, or at the very least, to write me. And she does—too much. A dependency I’ve enabled. In this last message, she writes,

I got a 95% on my last paper . . . I have the urge to fix a couple things for a point or two more so that I know I’m safe going into my Multi-Genre paper. I know this sounds ridiculous because who cares that much about grades? I really don’t want a B this quarter so I’m willing to do whatever it takes to avoid it.

Who cares that much about grades? I’m a hypocrite because I do—or did, anyway—yet I tell Kat to put any thoughts of *A* or *B* out of her mind for the moment and to just write. To be emotionally invested in the work “for the sake of the writing and not the judgment of it.”

It bothers me a great deal that I can’t practice my own advice. But I do believe in it. Maybe the best thing, then, for both myself and Kat is to explore the disconnect—the reasons why we don’t “believe” in grades yet can’t get out from under them, even in graduate creative writing workshops, considered more of a *studio* than a classroom, where works are created, not graded.⁴ Has the elephant followed us here, too?

Well into the first year of my MFA studies, my best friend and roommate sighed, “Everyone knows that in grad school, *A* equals *good* and *B* equals *bad*. Anything below a *B* is just absurd.” We were talking about a particular

peer who had received yet a second C in a literature seminar, and who was in danger of being kicked out of the curriculum. (Graduate students were allowed two strikes—well, really only *one*; the second C sealed expulsion from the program.) None of us had ever heard of anyone getting kicked out of the MFA program. The MA program, on the other hand, had a well-noted history of drop-outs, forced or otherwise. But that was different somehow, we felt; this was *creative writing*. Who gets kicked out for a bad grade?

The question stuck with me from the Master's to the doctoral level, so I asked it directly of the graduate faculty at State University. Their answers reveal glimpses of their biases, of what "good" writing is, of whether it can be taught or not, and what effect this has on the student-teacher relationship.

The program's professor of poetry, Phil—who's authored several books of poetry—had this to say on the subject:

"Special strangeness" is an apt phrase, indeed [for grades in creative writing]. I have decided, during my ten years here, that it's almost always useless or worse than useless to try to discriminate among grad students via grades in workshop. I almost always give everyone an A—unless there has been egregious non-attendance or really flagrant nonparticipation. I used to sometimes give A-minuses, but this seemed to do no good and only produce a bit of bad feeling.

Phil has since resigned to giving out A's, though he seems frustrated with this end. For one, this high mark doesn't represent much of the "mediocre" work he sees. Though to give them A-minuses, he argues, would only strain his relationship with those students "and lead to the complaint that *Phil has a very narrow aesthetic*, which [he's] heard too often."

In this case, the problem of grades reaches far beyond the workshop. It spills from the classroom into graduate students' offices and into the hallways, as I've witnessed, and damages not only the rapport between professor and said students, but risks implanting impressions—warranted or not—in the minds of other students. I want to be careful not to take sides here, but to acknowledge the tenuous relationship between teacher and student in the face of a grading system that fails to help students' aesthetics to grow—in that it doesn't inspire them to work harder, as Phil notes—and allegedly narrows perceptions of instructors' "aesthetics" on the basis of those grades.

4.

I should point out that while this article's purpose is to explore grade anxiety in the graduate creative writing workshop, there are certainly those teachers and students who don't share this anxiety and who would not list "grading" at the top of their concerns in the workshop. They might not consider it a problem at all, having either usurped what Tobin calls the "tremendous psychic power" of grades (60)—possibly, by giving all A's or implementing a pass/fail system—or by finding an evaluative method that actually works relatively well.⁵

I imagine Patrick Bizarro, a poet and teacher of poetry, might fall in the latter camp, after reading his articles, "Interaction and Assessment: Some Applications of Reader-Response Criticism to the Evaluation of Student Writing in a Poetry Writing Class," and "Evaluating Student Poetry Writing: A Primary Trait Scoring Model." In both pieces, Bizarro advocates a student-based system of evaluation. His research includes the heuristic approach of using "interactive journals," in which he has students offer weekly answers to the question, "What kinds of things would you take into consideration in evaluating a poem?" ("Interaction" 259) Bizarro is not only interested in their answers (though he does respond to them, and pushes them to consider his ideas); he hopes to determine a direct relationship "between what students express as their current understanding of what constitutes poetry and what they ultimately write" (260). Bizarro's purpose is also to apply the students' individual evaluative criteria to their own poems, so that students might be evaluated according to their own biases and not the teacher's.

I would argue, however, that because Bizarro is guiding their journal responses, his bias is always informing their own. To this, Bizarro says, "In fact, I was able to influence the views of [his students], but that, after all, is my responsibility as a teacher who has read more than they have and as a reader who is an active agent in the making of meaning in their poems" (265). Indeed, he's struck an interesting balance—something of a shared agency—in the evaluation of his students' work. By empowering his students to decide their own "rubric" via the interactive journal, he acknowledges that poems are to be true to their individual projects. Still, he feels a "responsibility" in helping his poet-students to find and develop those projects.

Although Bizarro's pedagogy is undergraduate-based, I wonder how it might contribute to the graduate creative writing workshop. I think back to a time in my doctoral program when Elizabeth, a writer and scholar of creative nonfiction, handed back a stack of personal essays and at the top of mine was an A-. Sure enough, I felt the same "bad feeling" Phil noticed in his poetry workshops. Rationally, I knew an A- is a decent grade, but what I want to note is the simple surprise I felt at seeing a grade *at all*. And not just any grade, but one followed by a big subtraction sign. A negative.

That's all I saw.

And I was not alone; one by one around the table, my workshop peers asked Elizabeth how they might interpret her marks and, more urgently, how much "weight" they carried in the calculation of our final grades. Here we were doctoral students and emerging writers struggling to work the percentages in our heads; I could see it across all our faces. And as flummoxed we were, Elizabeth was even more so. Her eyes darted from one side of the table to the other. "I thought you guys wanted me to give you grades. Some of you specifically asked me to *estimate* where you stood."

She was right. All of my experience and primary research tells me that graduate creative writing students want that estimation—to be told where we stand—but only if that estimation is in the region of an A. Anything less,

it seems, evokes anxiety, insecurity, sometimes resentment—all of which provokes me to wonder why graduate students feel *entitled* to the highest of grades? Here's what I've come up with:

- A) The graduate student-writer feels s/he has reached a level at which a grade isn't really appropriate anymore. Rather, it's the feedback that matters.
- B) Creative writing is art, and art can't be graded; therefore, an A best represents this argument more than it does the quality of student-art.
- C) Traditionally, the creative writing teacher acts as a mentor to the graduate student-writer; anything lower than an A only serves to strain an already complex relationship.
- D) Creative writing courses are treated as easy, and easy translates to an A.⁶

Looking over this list, there are some arguments I would emphasize over others (you can probably tell this from their ranking), but collectively they all contribute to grade entitlement. Complicating the problem even further is the fact that

grades are unidimensional symbols into which complex and multidimensional judgments are compressed and no one, *least of all the college professor*, appears willing to unpack the assumptions underlying the seemingly innocent letters running from A through F" (Milton et al. xiii, emphasis added).

Why might college professors be "unwilling" to explain what the letter grades mean to them, individually? Do they assume that college students should know by now?

I think of my student, Kat, and of the attack two students muttered on the way to the library: *I don't understand the way she grades*. And it's true; students *don't* know how to interpret grades. The explanations we instructors list on our syllabi are sometimes circular or vague, as in, "An A is reserved for excellent work." But what does *excellent* mean? And is one professor's idea of excellence consistent with another's?

5.

Dylan, who teaches fiction at State University, aligns excellence with publication, thus deferring to the broader writing market's standards. He explains, "At the PhD level I look for work that is publishable, and I can't really tell you how that translates into a grade."⁷ It is interesting to me that of all the faculty members I polled, only one mentioned this standard of publication, reinforcing the idea that graduate-level creative writing students are being groomed to be *professionals* and that the evaluation of their performance should be defined by this aim.

To adopt this approach, however, is to assume that the study of creative writing is not an end unto itself, as Myers suggests in the introduction to *The Elephants Teach*. Myers reluctantly discloses that he has “written this book out of an allegiance to the old discredited liberal principle that knowledge is its own end, distinct from its practical effects” (4). I am not surprised to learn this of Myers; his “allegiance” to the liberal arts has its own historical footing, as critic Terry Eagleton notes: “The whole point of ‘creative’ writing [in the Romantic period] was that it was gloriously useless, an ‘end in itself’ loftily removed from any sordid social purpose” (qtd. in Geok-lin Lim 154). If *knowledge is its own end*, I wonder how the evaluation of knowledge about creative writing differs from the very real “end” that transcends any workshop: the literary market.

Because the market is “practice-oriented,” as Gerald Graff finds (qtd. in Myers, *Elephants* 4), predicated on the production and commodification of texts, it seems more congruous with the way *academe* evaluates its creative writing job candidates: first and foremost, by their publications. Does it not make sense, then, to introduce this standard early into the creative writing curriculum to better prepare students for their presumable literary careers?

But, like Myers, there is a bit of the liberal arts Romantic in me who is suspicious of the potential for “practice-oriented” pedagogy to contribute to the current attitude I’ve noticed among students toward the university—that it’s a diploma factory. More than ever, higher education is treated as a means to getting a job, not as an end unto itself, and no core requirements are more resented and resisted than those housed in the Humanities. To be fair, students tell me they can’t *afford* to approach education any other way, in our present culture and economy. It’s a shadowy truth that’s loomed for decades over every English, Philosophy, History, and Classical Languages Department, cast by the trends of a science- and business-driven financial system.

So the question is, how do we position our aspiring writers to be successful in the market without privileging the pursuit of jobs over the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake (i.e. *intellectual curiosity*)—the latter of which I’ve always understood to be at the heart of “good” writing? When did these two ends drift so far apart?

Myers locates the birth of the professional writer alongside the emergence of Journalism and the onslaught of publishing houses. “As the [19th] century wound down,” he explains, “New York emerged as the center of American publishing; and as it did so writing faded out as an avocation for gentlemen and began to be professionalized—the ‘commercial motive’. . . replaced the ‘internal impulse,’ the purely aesthetic motive” (*Elephants* 57). This trend brought with it more attention to the way the writing student was being trained—or not.

The Southern journalist Walter Hines Page (1855-1918) took a particular interest in college writing instruction, declaring that “writers were incompetently prepared for their careers” and that this was “dangerous” consider-

ing that “the intellectual life of the American people was largely shaped by current writing” (*Elephants* 73). In many ways, Page helped spearhead the workshop model that is still in place today. His vision of the graduate writing program was as politically-minded as it was professionally:

A school of writers, by promoting the study of literature not as a closed chapter of the human experience but as a vital part of actual human lives, will help reverse the decline of learning as a cultural force in American life by restoring the balance in universities between the acquisition and expression of knowledge. And it will do so by teaching literature not merely as something to be investigated but as something also to be *practiced*. (*Elephants* 74)

Page believed in the democratic approach to teaching—that knowledge shouldn’t remain hoarded by academics—and, in this spirit, he also believed in “helpful criticism,” in constructive feedback not only from the writing teacher, but from the students. “The time to criticize writing,” he said, “is before it is published; and the only criticism that helps a man to write better is his own criticism and that of fellow workmen while still writing” (qtd. in *Elephants* 74).

Reading Page’s ideas, I am reminded of the first line of Bishop’s *Released Into Language*: “Professional writers are notoriously opinionated, but most would agree with a simple observation: writers are people who write” (1). Page strikes me as one of those “opinionated” folks, but he would agree, I think, with this leveling. *Writers write*. This simple charge challenges the Romantic elitism that has enshrouded writers for centuries—especially those writers who teach and practice in academic institutions—and in doing so, assumes the position that writing can indeed be taught; that writers aren’t *born*, they just write.

Even so, it does not answer the question of what “good” writing is, and how it should be evaluated.

6.

My first graduate assistantship required that I work as a tutor in the university’s writing center—an experience that taught me more about the teaching of writing than any teaching position has, so far. I remember the director repeatedly stressing the importance of “finding something good to say [on the student’s paper] first.” Historically, this approach finds its roots in the 1920s, when teachers sought evaluation that was concerned with more than grading scales. “Various kinds of advice were advanced: raise the standards as the course advances; don’t be too severe; always include a bit of praise; don’t point out every error” (Connors 158). The creative writing workshop embraces much the same spirit—that of “helpful criticism” (*Elephants* 74). Within this criticism will always be “mixed reception,” writes Myers (*Elephants* 75). The workshop model’s allowance for oppositional readings of a work, coupled with the teacher’s tendency to give *suggestions*,

not instruction, does not lend itself well to the rigid and “unidimensional” structure of a A-F grading system.

Some professors of creative writing, then, avoid grading altogether. As Anne, a professor of fiction at State University, explains, “Graduate work is ungraded but the comments usually key a student in on how s/he is doing.” I wonder, though, if no grade is sometimes regarded as no *work*? Funny, since a workshop is predicated on work (hence the name) and without it, there’d be nothing to “shop.” In short, it’s all about the work.

Yet, I think part of us believed that infuriating argument that studying literature is harder work, though my MFA peers and I didn’t dare admit it. Or, maybe we had just heard the attack so much that it had become internalized, morphed into a kind of self-loathing that was, in turn, projected onto any creative writer who should get a C in his Southern Lit seminar, reinforcing the foregone conclusion that it’s more strenuous to be a scholar of literature than a creator of it.

And while we know that writing and thinking are inextricably bound (as are artists and critics; writers and readers), the embittered complaint still echoes through the ranks of creative writing students: *Why must we do scholarship, too?* Even if we agreed with this double objective, as I recall, we still took issue with the double standard that our literature peers did not have to take as many creative writing courses as we did literature.

I noticed yet another double standard: While the students in my MFA program were troubled if one of us received a bad grade in a lit seminar, we were *disgusted* at creative work that fell short in a workshop. Disgusted because we staked the reputation and quality of the program on each other’s work, and probably, we measured our own by it, too. That is, if Johnny got into the program despite all evidence of being a lousy writer, we all wondered, secretly or out loud, what this low standard said about the quality of our own work. (When perhaps all it says is the simple truth that schools are businesses that need consumers—all talent and ability aside—to generate tuition.) Altogether, the delivery of a range of final grades in workshop did less to assure us that a fair and unbiased system of evaluation was at play, and more to complicate our sense of where we stood overall in relationship to each other.

Our anxiety was born of insecurity, certainly, but it wasn’t entirely irrational—I realize this, especially, as a professor now—for it points to much deeper-seated problems regarding an evaluation system that we just can’t seem to reform, despite our best efforts. We have dragged the elephants with us, even ridden them at times, from Philology to Current-traditional pedagogy to a Process to a Post-process age. First came the handbook as a way to transfer England’s educational expertise from across the ocean. The rote memorization of handbooks eventually gave way to the practice of writing short *themes* on a given topic (though the writing was still judged by its grammatical and mechanical soundness). Then the GI Bill and a general education core curriculum that saw the exponential growth of English courses, which

led to the pedagogical movement Expressivism and its radical validation of “personal” writing, which led to the Creative Writing boom—and, finally, to a writing portfolio system that prescribes holistic grading. We’ve come a long way historically, but at the heart of this problem is still the question of “whether a school for writers [should] be run along practical and professional or literary and artistic lines” (*Elephants* 75). I wonder why the two can’t be reconciled. But perhaps they already are, in the hiring of creative writers to teach, marrying the artistic to the professional.

Then again, it could be argued that this is not a reconciliation as much as it is an academic cul de sac, as Allen Tate describes: “The academically certified Creative Writer goes out to teach Creative Writing, and produces other Creative Writers who are not writers, but who produce still other Creative Writers who are not writers” (qtd. in *Elephants* 146-147). Tate’s critique hits a nerve. It is not far removed from the attack that *those who can, do. Those who can’t, teach*. It’s no secret that it’s nearly impossible for a writer to live off the fruits of one’s writing (unless, say, his/her book happens to be picked by Oprah’s Book Club: the writer’s equivalent to winning the lottery). Even Myers acknowledges that “the professional success rate for graduates in creative writing [is] about one percent (as compared with 90 percent for graduates of medical school)” (*Elephants* 2). It’s also no secret that literary journals only publish on average one percent of all the submissions they receive—a pool that’s grown even bigger with the advent of online submission managers.

What do these numbers mean for Dylan’s grading system, which rewards “work that is publishable”? Is a work truly publishable if the odds suggest otherwise? Granted, publish-able leaves a lot more room for evaluation than that one percent that is actually published, but it still points to a stark disconnect between the tendency to give all A’s in the creative writing workshop and the rate of rejection in the writing market, a disheartening reality for creative writing students whose A’s don’t typically translate into publications. All of this is to say, grades will continue to pose a problem for the creative writing workshop as long as there is a disparity between the evaluative practices of academia versus those of the market.

7.

“Here is a rough guideline for grades,” writes Elizabeth in a reply to my polling the entire creative writing faculty about their grading practices. She is the only one to elucidate on what each letter grade means to her. It’s a rather long rubric, but worth mentioning in its entirety for its relevance to this inquiry:

F= work not turned in or work that does not fulfill the assignment (for example, I ask for an interview and you turn in a long description of a thermometer. It might be the best piece I’ve ever seen about thermometers, but it doesn’t complete the assignment). C=work that is below aver-

age. This might mean that the ideas are murky, or the structure confusing (without being deliberately so), or you only partially fulfill the assignment. Often *C* work is sloppy work. *B* is for average writing, writing that offers some interesting ideas or situations or characters that are fairly well developed. A *B*-paper might also work with language in fresh, engaging, or innovative ways or in a way that is not new, but rather an accomplished example of a standard form. But a *B* or even a *B+* paper doesn't have all of these attributes working at once: ideas, image, language, structure, and completion of the assignment all working at a level of excellence. An *A* usually means you could work more on one of these areas.

What I notice, in particular, is her equation of "average work" to a *B*—a standard that's usually relegated to a *C*. But a *C* in grad school is considered the real "bottom line"—the lowest standard; the mark that will send the graduate student to the graduate director's office. When some of my peers remind Elizabeth of this business about a *C*, she says she *had no idea*. She thought—*just like with undergraduate grading*—that she had the full range of grades to employ.

I bring this up only to point out the many assumptions that arise in the treatment of grades in the graduate workshop. As Tobin speculates, these assumptions are "heavily shaped by complex interpersonal relationships that simply are not completely understandable, objective or fair. Don't our grades necessarily reflect something of our own training, temperament, politics, and values?" he asks (64). When we evaluate our students' work, he argues, we are not only reading what's on the page; we are also reading what we think of them personally (though we don't always admit this); what *they* might think of us; and, along those same lines, if we are attracted to them; if we think they are attracted to *us*; if we agree with their ideas; if we don't agree with their ideas; if we think they might be upset with a particular grade; if we think they don't care about grades nor about the assignment; how our colleagues might grade the same work, and the list goes on (65).

These tensions will always exist, Tobin says, no matter how firmly we uphold the pretense that grading is "understandable, objective or fair." The key, he concludes, is to find a "grading system [that] will keep the students *and* us working at the right level of tension, one that is not so caught up with grades . . . but one that does not ignore their powerful influence . . ." (66). This tension, to me, resembles a system of checks and balances that I try maintaining through the grading *not* of students' creative work but of their *critical feedback to others' work*. After all, practicing artists and writers face constant evaluation of their work. If we're lucky, that evaluation doesn't come solely from those doling out grades or dangling the publication carrot, but from a niche of readers who "get" us—who value our work and push us along. I directly state in my syllabus that I don't believe in grading talent (though I'm sure I probably privilege it in other ways, like in the amount of time I spend with students conferencing), but that I believe it's

quite possible and necessary to measure the quality of investment in each other's work. Therefore,

Hastily-written, sparse, or superficial responses to your peers' work will receive a poor grade. *Note:* That does *not* mean you need to write a flattering review of your peers' work in order to perform well in this course. Rather, you are to think as critically and carefully about each other's work as you do any other assigned reading.

And, from there, I lay out a detailed chart in which every "level" of feedback is defined along a grading scale of ten points⁸:

A-level response (9-10 pts.)	B-level response (8 pts.)	C-level response (7 pts.)	D-level response (6 pts.)
Reads with depth, at least a page in length, and references specific passages in the text in order to qualify its points. It seeks to understand the text's "project" or purpose, rather than impose one's own agenda onto the text. Considers very closely the writer's use of techniques and their significance in relation to the subject.	Meets a page in length, but does not offer many examples to illustrate its points. There's mention of technique (e.g. pattern, structure, syntax, etc.), but not a very rigorous consideration of the technique's <i>significance</i> . The observations are solid, in general—nails all of the important "moves" on the page—but lacks depth in analyzing them.	Might be too praise-laden or filled with baseless critical remarks. Or, takes too much possession of the work, imposing the reader's individual tastes, style, and interests onto the text. Hardly any discussion of technique, let alone its significance in relation to the subject matter. Overall, ignores the concerns of the text and its "project."	Does not give evidence that the reader has spent <u>any</u> time carefully reading this work. Gives only the most general of responses to the work (<i>I like it—or, This doesn't work</i>) and fails to discuss a single technique on the page, or quote a specific passage or example from the text. Falls well below the one-page bench mark.

Additionally, I include a respective sampling of real student criticism (used anonymously, but with permission), just so there's no question, no ambiguity or vagueness, about how I am evaluating what is essentially *their* evaluations of each other. Here's an abridged example of an A-response to a personal essay that tries to reconcile the writer's fundamentalist faith with the heavy metal music that indescribably "moves" him:

Dear B.,

Your essay explores an unexpected religious experience you had at a hardcore show in the back of a church. The show is described as a freeing experience, suggesting that the hardcore scene embraced the strong and uncontrolled emotions of your youth, emotions that the structured reli-

gion discouraged you from experiencing, leading you to feel a connection with this fast-paced music that you had not been able to feel through mainstream religion.

[. . .] In the end, I had difficulty determining your feelings toward your experience. For example, the religious life you lead was imprisoning, yet it “made you who you are today.” While your feelings against fundamentalism are strong in the beginning, they seem benign in the end, and the experiences you describe don’t really account for such a transition.

As I show students these examples, inevitably the discussion turns into a critique of the critiques—they each seem to think they could’ve written a better letter—which I encourage. There is not one “right” interpretation of the work, I stress, and I am not judging whether or not they *like* the work in question but on how fairly and critically they consider its craft (what the rubric calls “technique”) in relation to its content (“project” or purpose). Only after they’ve made this connection can they move toward a prescription or suggestion for revision.

8.

For the most part, the system works. Not only is the written feedback taken more seriously and, therefore, of a higher quality, but so are the workshop discussions. Furthermore, grading students’ reading performance feels considerably less subjective than grading their creative writing performance. We can tell fairly easily how carefully students have read an assigned text; it shows in the depth and sophistication of their written and verbal discussions. Even if we don’t agree with students’ interpretations of a text—*meaning is plural*, after all—we’re apt to reward their readings if they’ve done the hard work of supplying enough textual support and demonstrated critical thinking. Why does it have to be any different with creative writing pedagogy?

By formally grading students’ readings of each other, I put the onus of evaluation back on the students—where it belongs in a workshop—and not on their ability to write *creatively*, which is never spared from scrutiny, anyway. In fact, the critiques are often more rigorous and intense, not surprisingly, beneath the weight of a grade. My hope, in all of this, is not to create an infallible or perfect grading system—thus perpetuating yet another myth—but to mitigate some of the anxieties I’ve identified so far, from across both sides of the desk. It’s simply been my observation that students are less likely to feel anxious about a graded *response* they’ve written as they are over a grade on their poems, short stories, personal essays, etc. As I already noted, the quality of the feedback is better for it—and so is the student’s investment in revising and strengthening the piece in question, with all that feedback in hand.

Judith Rowe Michaels observes this same result in *Risking Intensity: Reading and Writing Poetry in High School Students*. When *Risking Intensity* was published in 1999, the widespread popularity of the portfolio grading system marked a major revolution—“Portfolios have been in the air recently,”

Michaels notes (130)—in the way creative writing was not only graded, but *approached* at both the secondary and post-secondary level: holistically and collaboratively, valuing revision as the ultimate evidence of a process that can only be graded as such.

In 1999, I was that student scattering my final drafts across a table in the library. Agonizing over their order. Printing and then finding a typo, or tweaking a line break, and re-printing the same page three or four times. I remember the tiny white paper circles that fell from my three-hole punch and stuck to my sweater. And most of all, I remember that satisfying click when the binder snapped shut and I could hold this *body of work* in my hands. (A weight that now pales only in comparison to the process and ritual of promotion and tenure. I've known "P & T portfolios" to exceed the five-hundred page mark, which strikes me as an abuse of the portfolio system, when the holistic value begins to feel more hegemonic in function.)

For Michaels' students, the writing process itself is an integral part of the portfolio. Prefacing the creative work is a short self-reflexive narrative in which they must assess their drafts and reflect on their experience writing them. Students are then paired up with a "reader," a fellow peer assigned by Michaels, charged with the task of writing "a two to three-page critique addressed to the author, commenting on specific strengths and weaknesses she saw in the poems and in the revising . . ." (132). Just as my own students are evaluated on the basis of *their* evaluations, Michaels shifts the authority from the letter grade to the collective feedback—and even she is surprised at how powerful a force the latter is to motivate the group, even the most apathetic among them: "Cam has suddenly started taking himself seriously as a writer, as he realizes that a partner will be reading and writing about his portfolio, and he doesn't want to 'look dumb.' Forget the fact that I'm putting a grade on the thing that will count for half his term mark in English" (130). Michael's sarcasm is hard to miss; indeed, Cam's "forgetting" about his term grade marks a small victory in her eyes. And in mine, too, for she recognizes that what's really at stake here isn't the grade—and not even the pressure of a peer's scrutiny. It's about *self*-assessment:

. . . As I thought about using [portfolios] with my students, I realized how much I always gain from having to go through my poems to make groupings for competitions, applications to artist colonies and grant committees, etc. On those occasions I'm forced to survey my work, to revise, to consider patterns I haven't noticed before—and to assess whether I'm growing as a writer. And I have to think about which of my poems have the best chance of communicating with new readers. Are some of them too private? Too explanatory, too bullying? [. . .] Although strangers will ultimately pass judgment, I'm being forced to make my own assessment. (Michaels 130)

We serve creative writing students best when we teach them *how to read like professional writers*. To understand the aesthetic criteria by which cre-

ative writing is judged in the professional world. To make the connection between what's going on around the workshop table and what's happening to their work as it's being considered at the editorial staff meeting of a journal.

Of course, as Michaels points out, we can never know for sure what happens to our work in the hands of an editor—which, I suspect, isn't much, the majority of the time. I remind students that even a "successful" writer experiences the challenge of getting noticed in a slush pile that's read, more often than not, by graduate students like themselves whose time and resources are strapped, who are juggling the rigors of a graduate curriculum and may or may not be reading beyond the cover letter. (Remember that 1% publication rate?) The point is not to synchronize the processes of magazine editing and grading but to make the prejudices, the problems and, most of all, the *power* of evaluation as transparent as possible so that students might better position themselves after graduation not as A-writers but as more informed readers of their own work.

9.

Under my own system of evaluation, several students have expressed to me, whether in person or in my course evaluations, that they received "a lot more help" with their creative writing. To further assess the system's efficacy—in comparison to my previous practice of figuring the workshop response as part of the students' over-arching "participation grade"—I polled a small sampling of repeat-graduate students who could speak (anonymously, if they preferred) to both approaches. Not surprisingly, every single one of them acknowledged, in one way or another, that they "put a little more into [the response], knowing it would be graded." What I didn't expect, however, was the occasional doubt they felt toward the sincerity of each other's positive feedback, given the grade motivation: *Does John really like my personal essay, or did he write this much for a grade?*

My response to their suspicion is this: Does it matter? As long as the lengthy feedback is of good quality—meaning, it performs a close-reading of the work, supports its praise with textual passages, and offers up suggestions for improvement that are in line with the work's project or purpose—the motivation, the grade that prompted that feedback, is beside the point.

At least, in theory it is.

But grades always matter, especially to our most serious students whose academic success was born in and out of grades. We must figure out a way, then, to make grades work *for* workshop, and not the other way around. Grades that provoke a more serious reading, even of shoddy work that fails to live up to workshop standards. Grades that work to confront, through open and honest discourse, how—and, in the process, *why*—we take great pains to evaluate art.

Among those "pains," my students complain most often about the unfairness of commenting at length on work that's insufficiently short, or illegible,

or offensive, consciously or not. (*Welcome to teaching*, I want to say.) Ellen, one of the quieter workshop participants but whose written feedback reveals a sharp, sardonic wit, admits that when she was troubled to respond to such work, she merely focused on meeting *course expectations*: “I wrote (and sometimes agonized to come up with) as much constructive criticism and positive feedback as I could, and I handed it over, knowing that my comments would probably not be considered by the recipients, but at least I would get my 10 points out of 10. I know that’s awful,” she concludes, “but it’s true.”

I’m sure it is true, not just for Ellen but for them all. Again, I would argue that her intention is beside the point. If the response receives ten points (that is, an A), it’s because Ellen met the standards required of a constructive, helpful response. Her peer—the one who turned in that agony-inducing piece of writing—benefits from Ellen’s A-level feedback, and probably needs it more than Ellen needs her ten points.

Ultimately, all of the students I surveyed insist that no matter the approach, graded feedback or not, they notice a direct relationship between the quality of a peer’s creative writing and the quality of that same peer’s feedback. “Typically, the best essay writers also provided the best, most thoughtful responses,” observes Ellen. “And those who wrote their essays halfheartedly produced lackluster and, often, unhelpful responses.” Further proof, in my mind, that grading their workshop responses safely takes the place of grading their workshop submissions, given this one-to-one correlation.

If I agonize, it’s in keeping up with a workflow my students also admit to feeling drowned by, at times. Kelly, who’s working on her *Masters of Arts in Teaching* (MAT) certification, admits in her survey response to having overheard a few mumbled frustrations after one workshop session—“things like *no one will ever read my writing that closely; I don’t need to make all those changes, while others*,” she confesses, “felt like our group was pretty representative of a ‘real’ readership, and took all views seriously.” Later on she notes, “While sometimes the comments conflicted and I had to make decisions as to which comment to listen to—or whether to follow a piece advice at all—I never suffered from a lack of input, and instead had numerous ideas to work with when re-approaching my own work.” What Kelly recognizes is that she must discern for herself which readings challenge and strengthen her *own* vision for the work, rather than write to satisfy a single evaluator. Creative Writing has long championed the workshop model for the same reason.

Turns out, it’s not about the work, after all. It’s about the *reading* of the work.

Why, then, has it taken me so long to realize that the grade, the literal value, should reflect this same spirit? Perhaps for the same reason that my students bemoan the time and energy (not to mention, reams of paper) it takes to respond that carefully to what totaled twenty-four workshop submissions in all, some of which spilled over twenty pages of prose alone. Even my husband, a fellow creative writing teacher, cringes at the stacks upon stacks

of “Author Responses” that crowd the floor space around my desk (*You’ll be swallowed, if you keep this up*), a trailing archipelago of paper that points to a truth I’ve been slow to admit for the sake of my students and myself.

It seems my solution for grading is like chemotherapy. It’s working, but it’s killing us in the process.

10.

“Special strangeness” is an apt phrase, indeed. Not only for creative writing’s position in the English Department, and not only for the way creative writing is graded, but also as a way of describing the relationship between the creative writing teacher and student, as I’ve already mentioned. It is expected, in my experience, that the creative writing instructor will adopt the role of the *mentor*—and more often than not, the friend. This relationship, though wonderful in many ways, creates tension when it comes time for the mentor to assign a grade to the student’s work. It’s one reason, I believe, the problem of grading is particularly complex in the graduate, versus undergraduate, creative writing program.

Bishop finds fault with the mentor model, as well. She locates “three problems in the mentor system when it is imported wholesale from the graduate to the undergraduate level: it is elitist, often sexist, and falsely collaborative” (“Teaching” 87-88). It is hard to dismiss these charges when I, too, can recount times when I felt patronized (Michael, the mentor mentioned at the beginning of this article, still calls me *kiddo*); objectified (a later mentor ritually commented on my appearance in the hallway and in class); and worse, propositioned (I’ll let you fill in the blanks here) by those figures whose opinions and approval I craved most, and they knew it. I don’t want to play the victim here, but to point out that the dynamic between mentor and mentee is charged—a truth I confront now more than ever, on the other side of the desk. I am uncomfortable with this power, with how easily it can be manipulated, even to an unconscious degree. When a handful of students recently pressured me to share some of my own work—adding they would find it, anyway, online—I reluctantly agreed to photocopy some of my more recent prose poems for them. Not long after, I collected these same students’ final portfolios and found that many of them took a stab at writing their own prose poems. I felt both proud and perturbed, for many of their poems resembled mine in shape and tone just a little too closely for comfort. Yet I have to admit, their patterning flattered me.

Certainly there are success stories surrounding the mentorship method. D.G. Myers writes of his own in “Between Stories,” an essay that centers on his former mentor, “Ray” Carver. Like in *Elephants Teach*, Myers begins the essay with that age-old problem of teaching “another [how] to write,” adding, “I should know. I did the book on the subject” (457). Right away Myers’ casual charm strikes a rapport with the reader that is mimetic, I believe, to the relationship Myers held with his mentor, Raymond Carver.

And mimesis is exactly what “Ray’s” teaching was about. He did not teach technique “but rather embodied the practice of writing in his own life,” reflects Myers. “This notion that teachers might be living examples of what they teach was mocked by the linguist Roman Jakobson when Nabokov’s name was put forward for a post at Harvard (‘What’s next? Shall we appoint elephants to teach zoology?’)” (457).

And so the personal and the historical converge in that passage to offer, perhaps, a broader contextual basis for Carver’s teaching practices—which, no doubt, had a profound impact on Myers. What’s more, Myers admits to feeling like he had failed his mentor—arguably the worst possible outcome of the mentorship model. “He was famous and I was a failure; I was ashamed to face him,” Myers writes at the end of the essay (467). But his last line is one of both resolve and resilience: “He taught me to accept where I am and what I have become since,” and that is as a writer “fully committed to nothing else” (467). And there you have it. A return to the self-conviction that *writers write*—that what defines a writer is the unwitting desire to keep climbing a grade so steep and slick, we keep tripping over ourselves.

Not an hour after my response, I receive another email from Kat. This one is even more panicked:

I’m really starting to freak out. I know I shouldn’t but this is half of my grade. I know that you’ve been telling me (along with my mother and everyone else I talk to) to not worry about my grades and to worry about the writing, but when I’m writing something that is worth 50% of my grade and I can’t think of anything more to write, I’m going to freak out.

The self-censuring starts all over again—this time, not over my writing but over my inability to teach writing. *Of course she’s freaking out. I haven’t prepared her. I made the multi-genre paper too weighty.* Admittedly, I worry over what Kat might write in her evaluation of me tomorrow, when I pass around those forms with criteria that reads, “Graded my work fairly and accurately.” What will Kat write? How can I get back in her good graces so she will evaluate me positively?

I begin composing a long reply. And just as impulsively, I erase it, settling instead on the simple offer to meet with her before class, for both our sakes. An image of Michael crosses my mind and I can almost smell the close breath of smoke, a material sigh filling the space between us. I’m not sure I’ll ever *understand* what he wanted out of me and my work, or why he brought me to the program, or why he left it, to my secret relief. It’s all bound up in the special strangeness, the nervous nostalgia I feel toward that great and terrible performance.

“Now,” I write in closing, as much to myself as to Kat. “Get up from the desk and go for a long walk. Go get a smoothie. Put in some Marley because *everything’s gonna be all right.*” The elephant in the room will still be there tomorrow.

Notes

1. My title is borrowed from D.G. Myers' *The Elephants Teach: Creative Writing Since 1880*, whose own title, in turn, is borrowed from Roman Jakobson's analogy that writers teaching writing is like elephants teaching zoology (Myers 116).
2. Names have been changed in this article out of respect for others' privacy.
3. That word "elephants" again. Of course, Tobin is implying that grades are impossible to ignore—the old "elephant-in-the-room" line—but in this context, the metaphor takes on even further meaning; grades are both the elephants that can't be ignored *and* the cages that creative writing teachers—as in Myers' elephants—can't escape in teaching creative writing.
4. The Creative Writing graduate courses at State University combine the workshop model with a strong focus on scholarship in the respective teaching of poetry, fiction, and creative nonfiction. Unfortunately, the scope of this article is already too large to go into the "special strangeness" specific to the grading practices in each genre.
5. That is, they might *resolve* to give all "A's" as opposed to resigning, as Phil admits he has. The resignation to give all A's here seems more firmly rooted in disappointment—possibly even disillusionment—than it is an argument against the grading system's efficacy. Perhaps what I am pointing out is the power of (especially negative) experience to result in the *abandonment* of grades, as opposed to the adoption of a revised grading system.
6. Bishop posits this attitude in the "creative writing instructor who adopts a myth-informed, romantic stance to justify abdicating. Because this instructor believes creative writing can't be taught, he or she creates 'easy' classes," she argues in "Teaching Undergraduate Creative Writing: Myths, Mentors and Metaphors" (85). I would add, too, that the subjective nature of evaluating writing, especially *creative* writing, results more often in soft rather than harsh grading practices, perhaps because the creative writing instructor also seeks an "easy" way out—to avoid continually defending one's subjectivity to students, parents, even administrators.
7. I find this deferral problematic, considering that within this market are thousands of journals and other publications that all subscribe to multiple aesthetics and sometimes radically different ideas of what "good" writing is. While I appreciate this variety for my own submission practices, I find it difficult to collapse these variables into a flat, one-dimensional playing field in which it is possible to identify a kind of "publishable" writing, when, in fact, there are many forms, depending on the journal.
8. I drop the lowest score and average the rest to arrive at a final grade for this assignment.

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