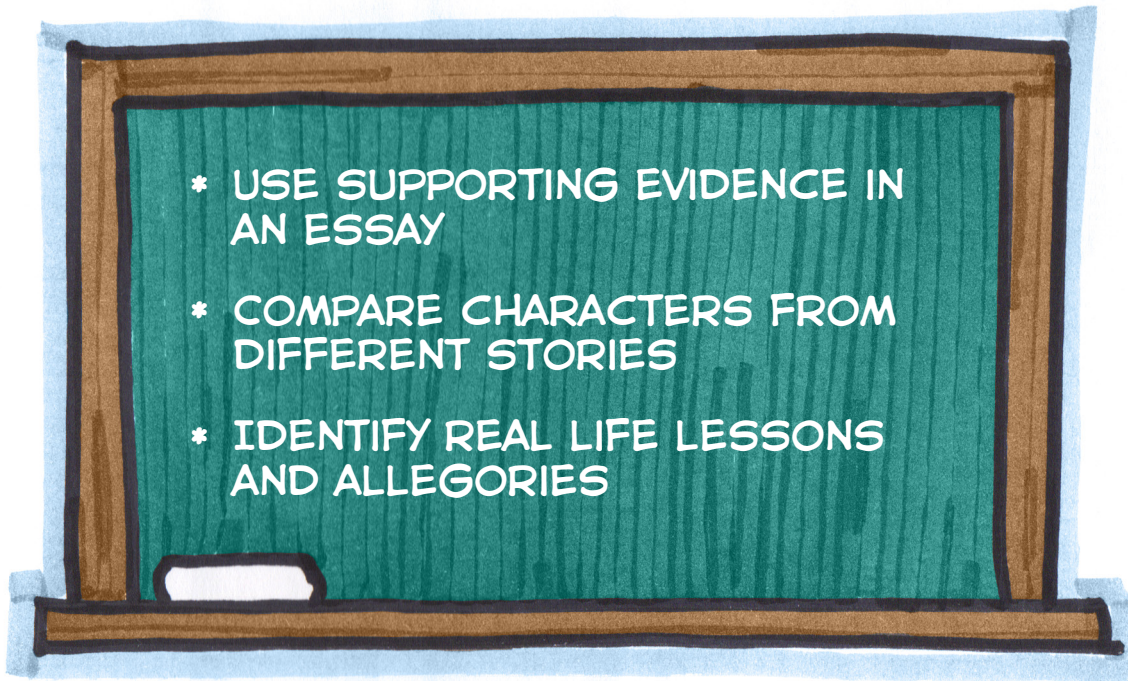# ActiveGrade™

10 Ways to Engage Students

1 Create Goals Together

2 Give Clear, Actionable Feedback

3 Let Students Self-Assess

4 Allow Reassessments

5 Assess the Same Skill by Multiple Methods

6 Cultivate a Peer Feedback Culture

7 Be Clear About Project Expectations

8 Create, Nurture, and Celebrate a Sense of Accomplishment

9 Let Grades Reflect Current Knowledge, Not Performance Over Time

10 Grade on Skills and Content, Not Tests and Assignments

ENGAGING STUDENTS IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT CHALLENGES FACED BY EDUCATORS TODAY. PLEASE SHARE THIS FREE RESOURCE WITH ANYONE, ANYTIME!

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http://activegrade.com

* USE SUPPORTING EVIDENCE IN AN ESSAY

* COMPARE CHARACTERS FROM DIFFERENT STORIES

* IDENTIFY REAL LIFE LESSONS AND ALLEGORIES

Create Goals Together

Typically, by the time a class starts, the curriculum and objectives of the class are long since determined. Students receive a syllabus and are told what they will learn. Whereas this is efficient from the teacher's standpoint, and necessary from the district and state standpoint, it is dismissive from the student standpoint.

But how can I work with students to create goals when my district dictates what I teach?

Granted, it's a challenge and there will be different amounts of freedom depending on your particular situation. No matter how much of your curriculum is dictated, use the first day of class to talk about the goals of the class. You can tell students what the overall purpose of the class is, and even what concepts they will need to learn. Students can create their own individual goals within that framework. Together as a class, you can create goals about the atmosphere of the class, about a big project you will do. You can take the specific standards you need to cover and work with the students to put them in their own words.

No matter your level of flexibility, find ways to draw students into the process of designing the class and feel ownership over it.

2

Give Clear, Actionable Feedback

When a student gets a test back with a "C" on the top of it, there aren't a lot of ways that student can respond. He can get mad, he can get discouraged, he can decide he is a mediocre student. Maybe, hopefully, he gets motivated by that "C" to try harder. But overall, that "C" doesn't provide him with a lot information and it certainly doesn't help him know how to improve.

Instead, if we give each student specific feedback about which concepts they've demonstrated mastery of and which they haven't, the student has information he can react to. Instead of saying, "you got a "C" on this test", you can say, "I can see you are struggling with multiplying 2 digit numbers. Try the practice questions on page 12 and practice with the manipulables during free work time."

WHAT NOW?

C

STUDENTS CAN TAKE MORE OWNERSHIP OF THEIR LEARNING WHEN GIVEN SMALL BITS OF CLEAR FEEDBACK INSTEAD OF A SUMMARIZING LETTER GRADE.

Let Students Self-Assess

When students are allowed to evaluate themselves, they learn to be more self-reflective and self-motivated. Traditional assessment methods put all the control and power in the teacher's hands. A test is given and graded. The teacher makes a pronouncement, in the form of a letter grade, about the student's ability, and that's where it stays. Sometimes students get mad about their grades and complain, or their parents complain, and then it becomes a power struggle; either the teacher gives in and changes the grade, or has to stand her ground.

The solution to that is to make assessments more collaborative and a part of an on-going conversation about what the student understands. Tell students that an assessment is a way to help both the teacher and the student know what is being understood and what needs more attention. Ask students to self assess. "After reading the book and participating in discussion today, how well do you think you understood what the reading was about?" "What types of questions were most difficult for you on this quiz?" "Tell me which aspects of paper writing you struggle with most and would like me to pay attention to when I'm giving you feedback on your rough draft."

Students know what's difficult for them and what's easy, so it makes sense to let them in on the conversation. When grading is a monologue and students know the only thing that matters is their final grade, then they will find ways to game the system. When assessment is a conversation and what matters is what the student has learned, students can focus on the content and the skills, not point accumulation.
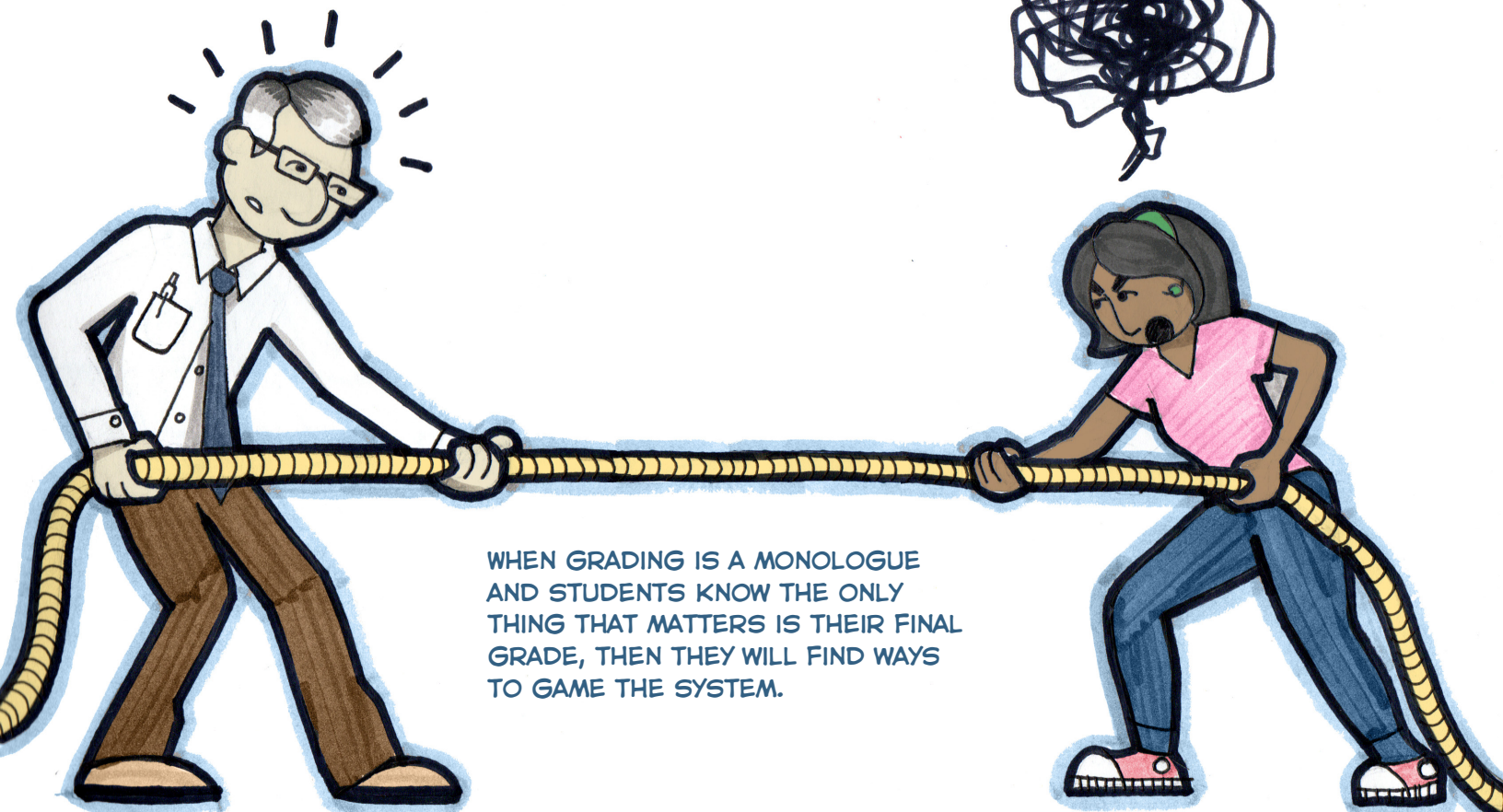
WHEN GRADING IS A MONOLOGUE AND STUDENTS KNOW THE ONLY THING THAT MATTERS IS THEIR FINAL GRADE, THEN THEY WILL FIND WAYS TO GAME THE SYSTEM.

4

Allow Reassessments

In order to have a clear idea of how well a student understands a concept, it's important to assess it many times. A poor showing on a single test might be caused by any number of outside factors. One possible reason is that the test itself isn't written very well. If you test students' knowledge of mythology and ask "Who was the head honcho of the Greek Gods," it's quite possible some students (especially students for whom English is not their first language) don't know the slang word honcho. In this case, you accidentally tested their knowledge of American slang instead of their knowledge of mythology.

By assessing students' understanding of a particular concept numerous times, you not only ensure a better representation of their mastery level, you also let them know that you don't pay too much attention to one test score. This invites them in and empowers them to change a score they are unhappy with by assessing again.


MONDAY TUESDAY WEDNESDAY

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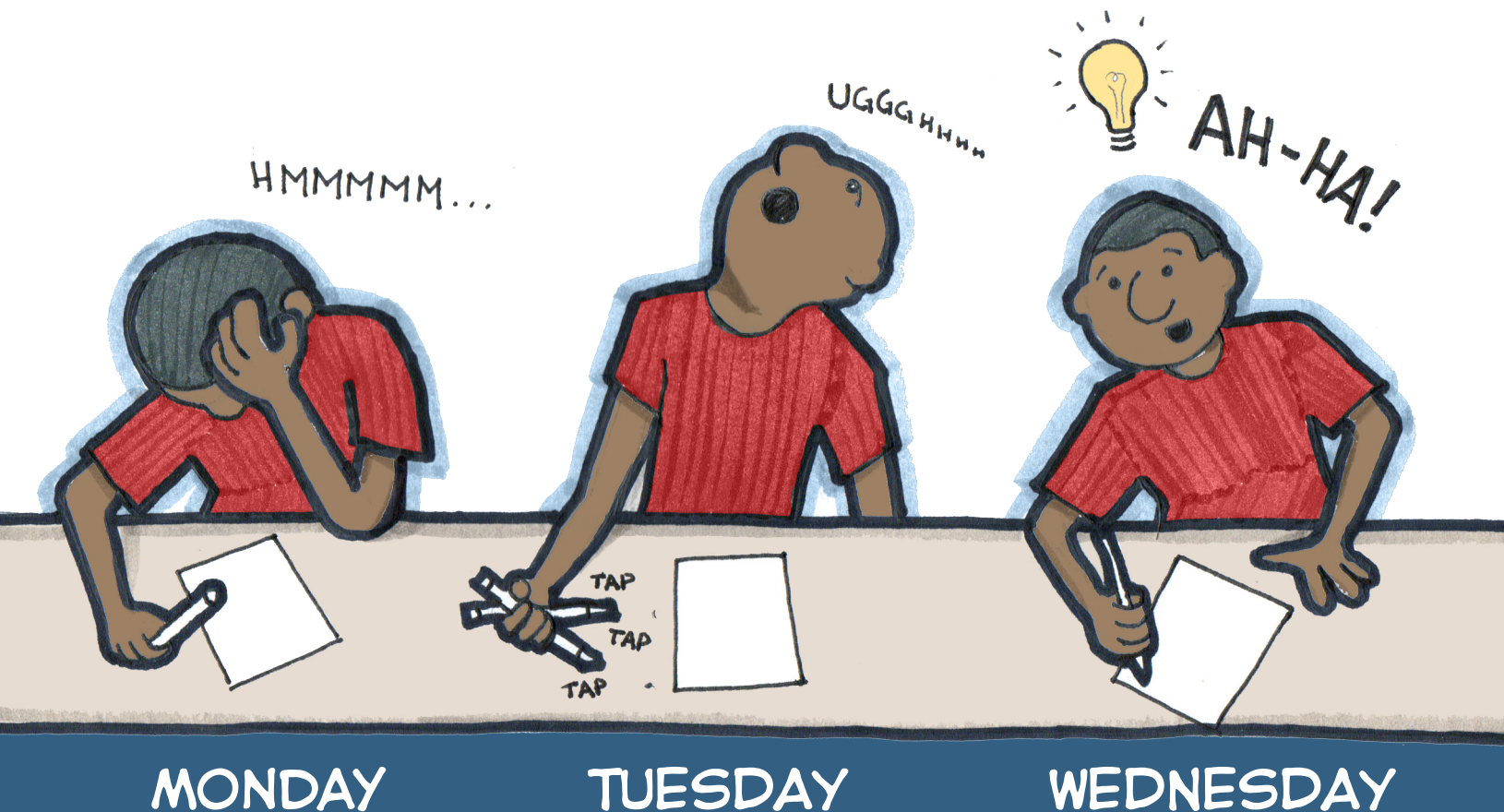
Assess the Same Skill by Multiple Methods

Just as in tip 4, it's important to remember that the test or quiz itself is not what's important; what's important is that the students are demonstrating understanding. With that in mind, it's clear that the format of the assessment isn't necessarily so important. If the goal is for the student to be able to add, who cares if he demonstrates that understanding on a paper quiz or with the 10s blocks?

Let's say one day, Sarina fails the addition quiz. You mark her down as not understanding the concept yet. The next day during work time, you walk around the room observing students and you see Sarina helping Jason with his addition problems. She wasn't taking a formal assessment, but what you saw was evidence of a higher level of understanding than you thought she had. That can enter your gradebook as evidence just as a traditional assessment can.

By using different types of evidence to act as proof of a student's level of mastery, you show students that there are different ways to learn and be proficient. You also mitigate the growing problem of test-anxiety. If their daily growth and learning can impact their grade, students won't be so afraid of the concept of assessment.
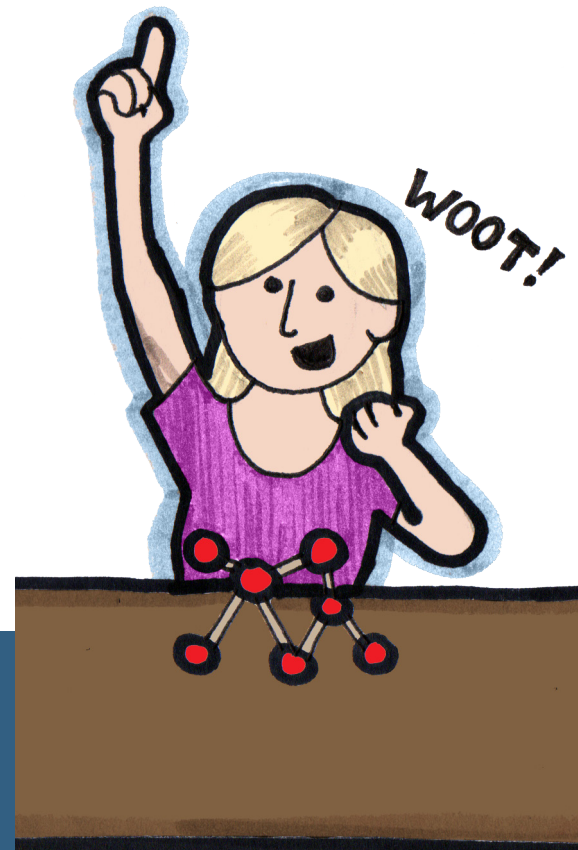
WOOT!

BY USING DIFFERENT TYPES OF EVIDENCE TO ACT AS PROOF OF A STUDENT'S LEVEL OF MASTERY, YOU SHOW STUDENTS THAT THERE ARE DIFFERENT WAYS TO LEARN AND BE PROFICIENT.

Cultivate a Peer Feedback Culture

Students have different levels of expertise and experience in different subjects. When the authority to assist and give feedback lies solely with the teacher, we miss out on opportunities for students to learn from each other. It is often said that you only truly learn something when you teach it. By inviting students to reflect on each other's work, we offer them more chances to learn. In fact, there are many benefits to a peer feedback culture:

- Students learn more deeply by teaching
- Students feel appreciated for their own success
- Students learn to give feedback respectfully
- Students learn to hear constructive criticism from peers not just adults
- Classrooms become more collaborative and caring - if I helped you understand something, I feel gratified by your success

Creating this culture is a very intentional process. Students aren't likely to intuit how to give good feedback. Students will default toward vague statements like "That was good" or "That sucked." Show them that specific feedback is more helpful. The question isn't "did you like it?" the question is "what did you like about it?" Talk early in the year about good ways to start a feedback sentence such as "I didn't understand what you meant by...." or "I loved that sentence because..." Discuss respectful ways to give criticism as well as helpful ways of giving praise. Empty praise, like "good job," doesn't help the student know how to repeat that success.

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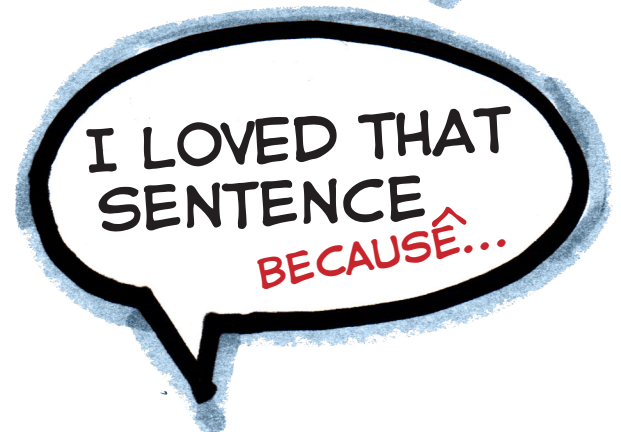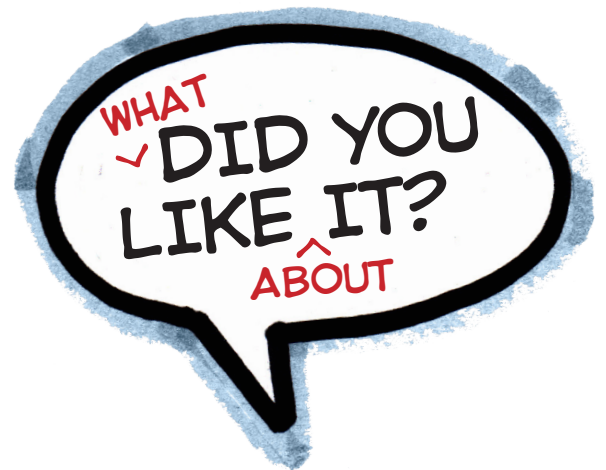
Be Clear About Project Expectations

Being open to student input about grading and assessment doesn't mean sitting back and leaving students solely in charge of their education. Structure is still helpful. When it is too loose, we tend toward chaos. When it is too strong, students become little automatons who only know how to do what they're told, or they feel trapped and rebel. When structure is accommodating, students find guidance but also freedom enough to learn problem solving, personal responsibility, and internal motivation.

In this light, it is important that a project or class have clear objectives. We can't expect students to excel if they don't know what they are working toward. At the same time, once the goal is clear, it often doesn't really matter how the student gets there. If a student wants to demonstrate his understanding of the structure of a cell by creating metaphors for each part and how it works rather than take a test on it, why not? If the expectation (that he learn how a cell works) is fulfilled either way, then giving him creative flexibility only increases his interest.

To make the goals clear, try creating a flow chart. Each goal can have a sub list of the assessments that will measure them. This way, students know exactly what the aim of the assignment is and have the opportunity to be creative in how they demonstrate their mastery.

Create, Nurture, and Celebrate a Sense of Accomplishment

8

This is a big one and it can be hard to do well. There are two important components of this: First, infuse assessments with meaning. Second, let students know when they have accomplished something significant.

Infuse Assessments with Meaning

Whereas daily activities can be used as low-stakes evidence of student mastery, it's still important to create projects that feel important, that have some purpose beyond getting a good grade, that students can get passionate about. Perhaps students can complete a service project, like putting in a school garden that also demonstrates their ability to design a physical space, measure and cut wood, choose plants that cohabitate nicely, and stay within a budget. This project has an impact far beyond whatever it might do for the student's grade.

One option is to give tests that feel like a community ritual rather than a solitary grind. For example, a couple weeks before the test, ask students to brainstorm in groups the key concepts they've learned and form questions about them. Remind them that the purpose of the test is for them to demonstrate their mastery of the material so the questions should be aimed at drawing out that knowledge. As a whole class discuss the questions and workshop them; combine similar questions and refine them. Instead of a written exam, make the test a group oral exam. Let students draw their questions at random and answer for everyone. This shared sense of responsibility and significance motivates students to be ready for the exam.

> WHEN WE CREATE SIGNIFICANT ASSESSMENTS AND CELEBRATE STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT WE ARE SAYING USING YOUR SKILLS CREATIVELY TO SOLVE PROBLEMS IS AWESOME.

Let Students Know When they Have Accomplished Something Significant

When students receive praise for filling out a worksheet correctly or getting a good grade, it sends a couple of messages: First, it says that you value earning points. Then, it says that you value menial tasks and effort.

On the other hand, when you create these very significant assessments and celebrate student achievement, you send different messages

- You are saying using your skills creatively to solve problems is awesome
- You are saying significant achievement calls for significant recognition.

Once you've designed these meaningful assessments and celebrate students' accomplishment of them, you reclaim grading from the "necessary evil" bin. You can make the completion of school activities something that feels personally meaningful to students. And when these assessments funnel, with integrity, into your grading systems, you can make sure that an "A" doesn't mean some vague combination of perfect attendance, homework completion, and test acing," but rather "hot dang! you have done something important!"
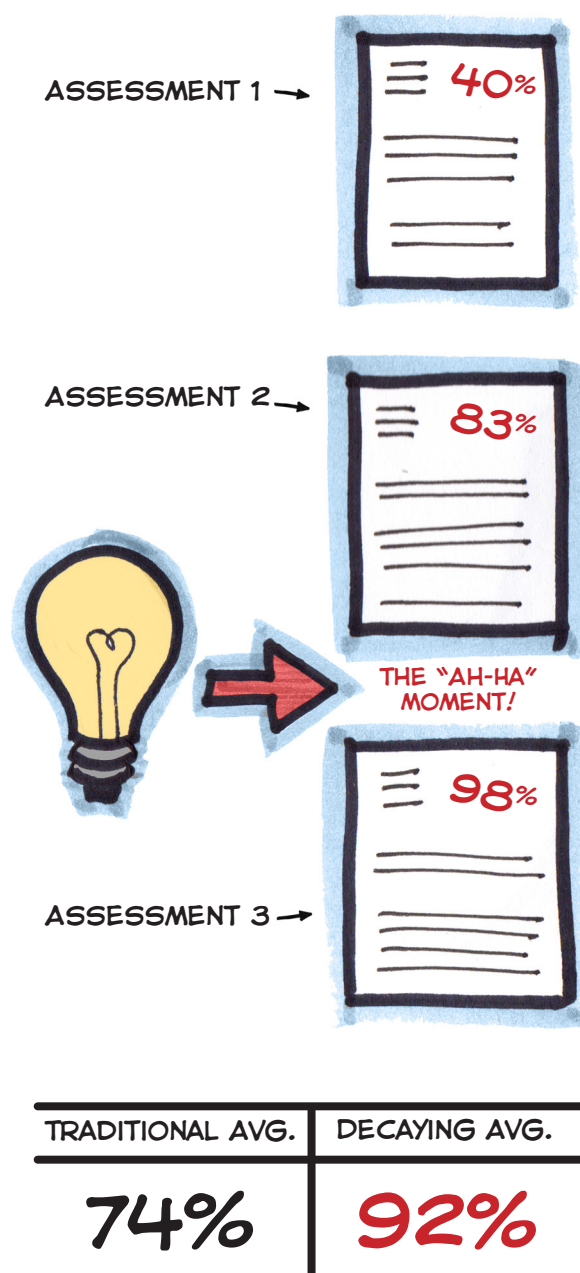
Let Grades Reflect Current Knowledge, Not Performance Over Time

Traditional grading formulas put focus on tests and assignments, weighting them differently depending on how many concepts are being assessed and whether they come at a crucial time in the semester timeline. However, it is not the overall test score that matters, but the level of understanding on each of the concepts assessed.

Let's say you weight the two biggest tests, the midterm and the final, the most heavily. These scores will be averaged together and be worth 40% of the students overall grade. Are you saying that if a student didn't understand some concepts halfway through the term, but does understand them now, that his grade should be brought down by his midterm mastery level?

Instead, think of assessments as little check-ins on a student's current level of understanding. Maybe a student did poorly on a test last week - perhaps he was having a bad day, perhaps he hasn't had his ah-ha moment yet. This week, he comes up to you and says "I get it now, I know how to multiply 2 numbers together!" Let him show you. Let his new level of understanding replace his old level of understanding. It doesn't matter when he got it, what matters is that he got it.

By allowing your gradebook records to shift in accordance with what the student's currently level of mastery is, you show students that their actions can impact their grade. They learn that a bad test score is not a final judgement etched in stone, but one that will change with their increased skills.

ASSESSMENT 1 → 40%

ASSESSMENT 2 → 83%

THE "AH-HA" MOMENT!

98%

ASSESSMENT 3 →

| TRADITIONAL AVG.	DECAYING AVG.
74%	92%

10

Grade on Skills And Content, Not Tests and Assignments

Once you've created clear course goals and are letting students reassess multiple times to demonstrate their mastery of those skills, it makes sense to orient your gradebook to this style of feedback. Traditional gradebooks organize information by what scores students have earned on each test or assignment. Instead, organize student scores by concepts. This not only helps you make informed decisions about what to focus on in class, but it also helps students and parents. When students can login to their student portal and see their current level of mastery on each course objective (as opposed to their latest test score), they know exactly what to focus on. What's more, they are now able to ask informed and specific questions. Instead of "how can I improve my grade," they are able to ask questions like "how can I write better conclusions in my lab reports?"

This method of recording scores is called Standards-Based Grading (SBG), Competency Based Grading (CBG) or Standards Based Assessment and Reporting (SBAR). If you'd like to learn more about getting started with SBG, visit the resources section on our website: **http://activegrade.com/resources**
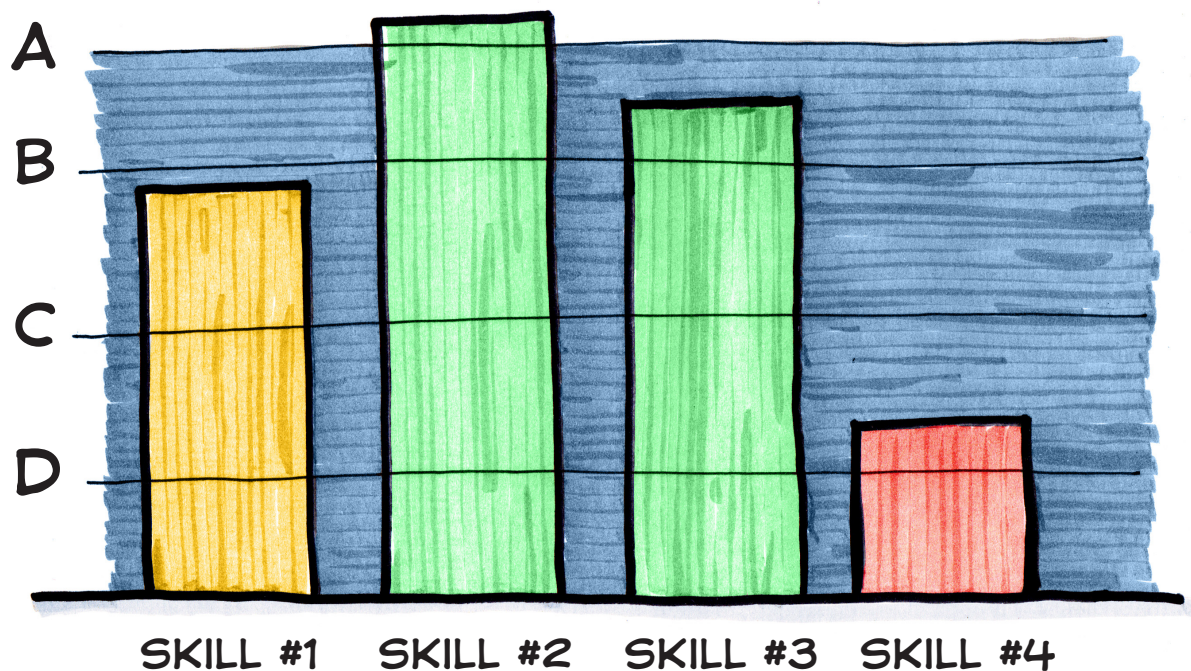
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