

Developed by Gina Lynn

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Period: \_\_\_\_\_

Academic Oath:

In-Class Synthesis Essay: School Grading Practices

**Suggested reading and writing time---55 minutes**

**It is suggested that you spend 15 minutes reading the question, analyzing and evaluating the sources, and 40 minutes writing your response.**

**Note: You may begin writing your response before the reading period is over.**

American students hear a great deal about grades, particularly how their grades in high school will affect their chances for success in college and beyond. The number of teenagers who report feeling stressed about or getting their self-worth from their report cards has risen steadily over the past two decades.

Carefully read the following seven sources, including the introductory information for each source.

Write an essay that synthesizes material from at least three of the sources and develops your position on whether or not grades are good for students.

Your argument should be the focus of your essay. Use the sources to develop your argument and explain the reasoning for it. Avoid merely summarizing the sources. Indicate clearly which sources you are drawing from, whether through direct quotation, paraphrase, or summary. You may cite the sources as Source A, Source B, etc., or by using the descriptions in parentheses.

Source A (Barnes)

Source B (Kohn)

Source C (Gray)

Source D (graph)

Source E (Sackstein)

Source F (Mims)

Source G (cartoon)

### Source A

Barnes, Mark. "No, Students Don't Need Grades." Ten Big Ideas in Education. *Education Week*, January 10, 2018.

*Mark Barnes is the founder and CEO of Times 10 Publications. Based in Cleveland, he is the creator and publisher of the popular Hack Learning book series, as well as a middle school language arts teacher.*

If you're interested in disrupting education far more than the 3-D printer or smartphone ever could, consider schools and colleges where there are no grades. Imagine classrooms where teachers never place numbers, letters, percentages, or other labels on students' work; where report cards don't exist; and where the GPA has gone the way of the dinosaur.

In a gradeless classroom, the perpetual lies that numbers and letters tell about learning would cease to exist. Honor and merit rolls would disappear. There would be no school valedictorian. Clubs that celebrate high performers would disband. Many colleges and universities would change how they admit incoming freshmen, and academic scholarships would need a makeover.

Moreover, teachers would learn how to effectively assess academic performance, and students would become independent learners, driven by curiosity and inspiration rather than by the empty promise of a "good" grade or the threat of a "bad" one.

Now, this may sound like only a big, perhaps even unrealistic, idea. But the gradeless classroom already exists in schools worldwide. While I don't claim to be the creator of no-grades learning environments, I and thousands of my colleagues across the United States and around the world have turned it into a movement that is helping educators reimagine how they assess learning.

## Source B

Kohn, Alfie. "From Degrading to De-Grading." *High School Magazine*, March 1999.

*Alfie Kohn writes and speaks widely on human behavior, education, and parenting. The author of fourteen books and scores of articles, he lectures at education conferences and universities as well as to parent groups and corporations.*

### Three Main Effects of Grading

Researchers have found three consistent effects of using – and especially, emphasizing the importance of – letter or number grades:

1. *Grades tend to reduce students' interest in the learning itself.* One of the most well-researched findings in the field of motivational psychology is that the more people are rewarded for doing something, the more they tend to lose interest in whatever they had to do to get the reward (Kohn, 1993). Thus, it shouldn't be surprising that when students are told they'll need to know something for a test – or, more generally, that something they're about to do will count for a grade – they are likely to come to view that task (or book or idea) as a chore.

While it's not impossible for a student to be concerned about getting high marks and also to like what he or she is doing, the practical reality is that these two ways of thinking generally pull in opposite directions. Some research has explicitly demonstrated that a "grade orientation" and a "learning orientation" are inversely related (Beck et al., 1991; Milton et al., 1986). More strikingly, study after study has found that students — from elementary school to graduate school, and across cultures – demonstrate less interest in learning as a result of being graded (Benware and Deci, 1984; Butler, 1987; Butler and Nisan, 1986; Grolnick and Ryan, 1987; Harter and Guzman, 1986; Hughes et al., 1985; Kage, 1991; Salili et al., 1976). Thus, anyone who wants to see students get hooked on words and numbers and ideas already has reason to look for other ways of assessing and describing their achievement.

2. *Grades tend to reduce students' preference for challenging tasks.* Students of all ages who have been led to concentrate on getting a good grade are likely to pick the easiest possible assignment if given a choice (Harter, 1978; Harter and Guzman, 1986; Kage, 1991; Milton et al., 1986). The more pressure to get an A, the less inclination to truly challenge oneself. Thus, students who cut corners may not be lazy so much as rational; they are adapting to an environment where good grades, not intellectual exploration, are what count. They might well say to us, "Hey, you told me the point here is to bring up my GPA, to get on the honor roll. Well, I'm not stupid: the easier the assignment, the more likely that I can give you what you want. So don't blame me when I try to find the easiest thing to do and end up not learning anything."

3. *Grades tend to reduce the quality of students' thinking.* Given that students may lose interest in what they're learning as a result of grades, it makes sense that they're also apt to think less deeply. One series of studies, for example, found that students given numerical grades were significantly less creative than those who received qualitative feedback but no grades. The more the task required creative thinking, in fact, the worse the performance of students who knew they were going to be graded. Providing students with comments in addition to a grade didn't help: the highest achievement occurred only when comments were given instead of numerical scores (Butler, 1987; Butler, 1988; Butler and Nisan, 1986).

In another experiment, students told they would be graded on how well they learned a social studies lesson had more trouble understanding the main point of the text than did students who were told that no grades would be involved. Even on a measure of rote recall, the graded group remembered fewer facts a week later (Grolnick and Ryan, 1987). A brand-new study discovered that students who tended to think about current events in terms of what they'd need to know for a grade were less knowledgeable than their peers, even after taking other variables into account (Anderman and Johnston, 1998).

### Source C

Gray, Peter. "Inverse Relationship between GPA and Innovative Orientation." *Psychology Today*, April 30, 2016.

*Peter Gray, Ph.D., research professor at Boston College, is author of Free to Learn (Basic Books, 2013) and Psychology (Worth Publishers, a college textbook now in its 7th edition). He has conducted and published research in comparative, evolutionary, developmental, and educational psychology.*

#### Why Google Doesn't Ask for Transcripts or Test Scores

Here is what Laszlo Bock, senior vice president of people operations at Google, had to say in an interview about Google's hiring practices and experiences: "One of the things we've seen from all our data crunching is that GPA's [grade point averages] are worthless as a criteria for hiring, and test scores are worthless.... Google famously used to ask everyone for a transcript and GPA's and test scores, but we don't anymore, unless you're just a few years out of school. We found that they don't predict anything."

Bock went on to explain, "I think academic environments are artificial environments. People who succeed there are sort of finely trained, they're conditioned to succeed in that environment. One of my own frustrations when I was in college and grad school is that you knew the professor was looking for a specific answer. You could figure that out, but it's much more interesting to solve problems where there isn't an obvious answer. You want people who like figuring out stuff where there is no obvious answer." Bock went on to point out that the more experience Google has with hiring, the more inclined they are to hire people with no college at all. At present, he said, they have teams where 14 percent of the members have never gone to college.

#### Research Showing a Negative Correlation Between Grades and Innovative Orientation

Increasingly, controlled research studies are also showing no correlation, or even an inverse correlation, between college GPA and innovative orientation or ability. One major study, which has recently come to the attention of the popular press, was conducted by Matthew Mayhew and his colleagues at NYU. These researchers surveyed thousands of college seniors, at five different institutions of higher education, with a battery of psychological tests and questionnaires. One of their major findings was an inverse relationship between students' reported GPA and their orientation toward creative or innovative work. The higher the grade point average, the lower was the students' interest in innovation.

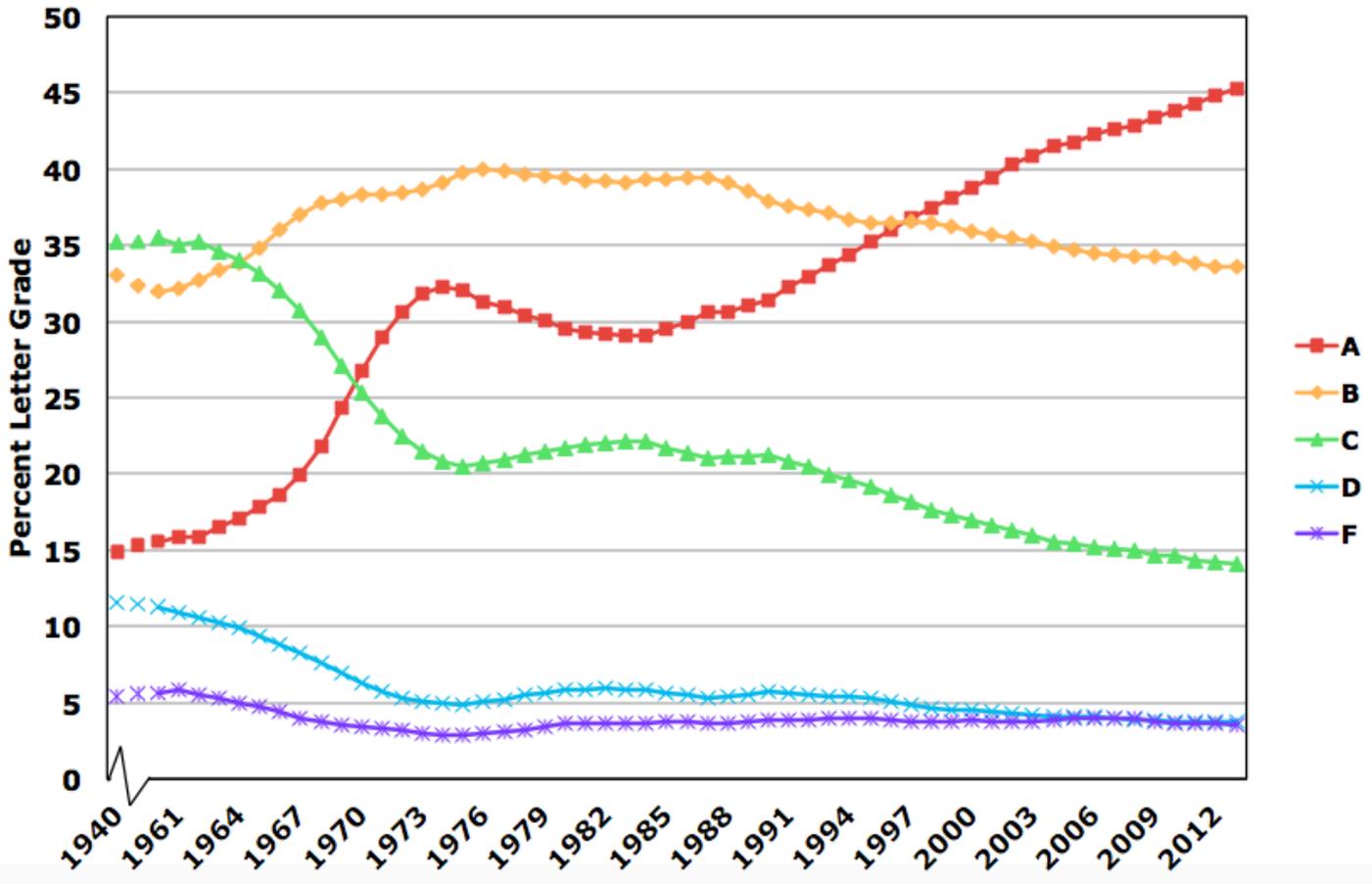
As possible explanation for this inverse relationship, the researchers speculated as follows: "Perhaps students with propensities toward innovation are less concerned with grading systems that rely on memorization by way of assessment than students with higher grade point averages. Alternatively, college-going students with innovation intentions may be more likely to approach their education as a means to discover new ideas, wanting more out of the experience than a series of external valuations in the form of grade point averages."

Source D

Rojstaczer, Stuart. "Changes in 4-Year College Grade Distributions Nationwide." *GradeInflation.com*.

In 2003, professor Stuart Rojstaczer wrote an op-ed for the Washington Post on the phenomenon of grade inflation over time. In 2008, he partnered with Chris Healy and began producing the data analysis of grading trends from more than 400 schools comprising over four million undergraduate students that lives at GradeInflation.com.

### Changes in 4-Year College Grade Distributions Nationwide



### Source E

Sackstein, Starr. "Still Not Convinced Grades Are Bad?" Work in Progress Blog. *Education Week*, March 31, 2015.

*Starr Sackstein is a secondary educator and school leader in New York. She is the author of several books on education.*

For too long we've allowed the system to stay as it is just because that's the way someone decided it should be.

But what if that decision, made so many years ago, just doesn't apply to learners in today's paradigm?

Then educators have an obligation to amend it to suit our kids better.

Over and over again, the concerns heard have more to do with systemic challenges and parental beliefs than they do with sound pedagogical practices. Teachers, as experts in our field must speak louder than the dissenters to help them understand why this is a better way.

We can all agree on the necessity of communicating learning with our students and parents and even school stakeholders for the sake of data, but what we don't agree on is what that communication should look like. Traditionally, we've used a grading system that works out of 100, adding or taking away points for a variety of reasons that have little to do with achievement. Or using arbitrary letters, uncalibrated, allowing deficient life skills to detract from demonstration of growth.

Because obviously if a student doesn't come to class he or she can't be learning or if no work is turned in, then no aptitude achieved.

No longer can we allow students to play school and each of us a cog in the wheel to make that work. If we work together, agree that feedback is a better way than putting a grade on something, then we start there.

Consensus.

Too often, the students who don't play school well, are quite bright but their natural inclinations are squashed so early they learn to hate the institution of school instead of develop a passion for anything that drives them individually.

The reason why standardized testing exists and even functions in this society is because every school environment is different and standards are challenging to universally endorse. So big data companies out there capitalize on our human error, all the while minimizing student talent and innovation.

To truly be 21st century ready, the skill sets we need to instill in students aren't about compliance, they are about creativity. Fostering a culture of productive failure that produces growth and encourages later success. Every great inventor or thinker knows the value of breaking rules to go farther and now is our time in education.

We each must stand up and admit that the traditional grading system lies to students. Testing students in only one diminishes their natural capacity for growth and miscommunicates what they know and can do. It's time to listen to kids and adjust our practices so the learning never ends. If we don't place a letter or number grade on learning, we can embrace the skills and continue to practice them until mastery is achieved.

Mastery must be the goal, not an A or a 100. We all know that if any student gets those the instant gratification is fast and then their memory of the learning begins to dissipate. The focus of grades takes the focus off of the learning.

Let's take learning back.

## Source F

Mims, Christopher. "The Surprising Importance of Grades." *Kellogg Insight*. The Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University. April 5, 2010.

*Kellogg Insight is the research and ideas magazine of Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University.*

Since the 1970s, economic theorists have wrestled with the problem of education. Aside from learning and self-improvement, their models led them to conclude that the primary reason we go to school is to prove to potential employers that we would be good employees, mostly by getting as much education as possible.

Their models said nothing about other types of information, such as grades, letters of recommendation, and other measures of "reputation." This led economists to predict that students of varying abilities would tend to end their education at different points in the journey from high school to a Ph.D., and that the more capable students would pursue more education to differentiate themselves from less capable students.

In reality, there are many factors that influence how many degrees people tack on to their résumés. Brett Green, an assistant professor of finance at the Kellogg School of Management, and Brendan Daley, an assistant professor at Duke University, have extended this model of signaling to include something economists typically ignore: the implications of grades.

### **Sending Signals**

The traditional notion of signaling in economic theory is that, when I have information that you do not, such as knowledge about my likely value as an employee, I have to engage in costly activities to prove my value to you. Those efforts could include the pursuit of more education, extracurricular activities, or any other endeavors that cost me time and energy. The idea is that, if I am smart and capable, these things are easier for me to attain than if I am dull and incompetent—thus, they are credible signals about my abilities.

From this premise, economists who have studied signaling have concluded that, when signaling their quality to potential employers, high-quality candidates will pile on as many degrees, volunteer hours, and positions in student government as needed to distinguish themselves from the less-capable. But that is not what happens in the real world.

In the real world, grades matter, or at least they do to the extent that they accurately measure of a student's ability. Previous research has suggested that information conveyed by grades is irrelevant, because if capable and less-capable students were perfectly sorting themselves out by the level of costly education they were able to attain, any additional "noisy" information can be safely discarded.

When grades are incorporated into the old models, their predictions change...when grades are added to the information an employer has about a potential employee, both high- and low-quality potential employees tend to pool in the middle of the achievement field. In other words, because employers have an additional assessment of a candidate's value (grades), the high-quality students do not have to spend as much time and energy earning graduate degrees or participating in extracurricular activities to distinguish themselves from low-quality students, they can partially rely on their superior grades to demonstrate their abilities.

### **The Upside of Grades**

Green and Daley's finding that...many more of both high and low capability will stop at a bachelor's or master's degree than would have been expected absent the information contained in grades—stands in sharp contrast to results derived from older models, in which the only things that were considered were costly signals like time spent in school. One implication of this finding is that when grades are absent from the information a potential employer has, students must get more education or participate in more extracurricular activities in order to signal their value to employers.

"One policy implication for schools with grade non-disclosure policies is that you'll see people expending more resources to signal their ability than would be the case if you had grades," says Green. Such behavior reduces students' welfare, leads to overall inefficiency, and in general suggests that grades are a good thing because they enhance transparency in a market, he adds.

Source G

Dec, Drew. "Grade Inflation." *Toothpaste for Dinner*. [www.toothpastefordinner.com](http://www.toothpastefordinner.com).

*Toothpaste for Dinner is a webcomic hosted on Tumblr.*

## GRADE INFLATION

1970	2000	2030
A	A <sup>+</sup>	A <sup>+++</sup> sponsored by McGraw Hill
B	A	A <sup>++</sup> Pretty Good By Trapper Keeper
C	A <sup>-</sup>	A <sup>+</sup> Not Bad! Sponsored by IBM
D	B	A is for Acceptable by National Football League
F	B <sup>-</sup>	A <sup>-</sup> Keep Trying! by McDonalds
I	C <sup>+</sup>	A <sup>--</sup> sponsored by Siffy Lube
W	C	B <sup>+</sup> "Be Positive!" This message brought to you by the United States Postal Service.