Executive Summary

This document is the first of two documents on assessment for remote instruction across the Social Sciences. It contains a series of suggestions for changing assessments to better measure and evaluate student learning outcomes. A second document, which will contain illustrative examples of assessments that have succeeded, is being prepared and will be distributed shortly.

Learning Outcomes. Instructors should clearly articulate the learning outcomes for their courses, in line with departmental learning goals. These should appear on the syllabus, so that students have a clear idea of what will be expected of them. This should then be followed by a decision about how much summative (graded) and formative (ungraded, but useful to instructors) assessment to use in the course.

Assessment Design. The best practice here is to tie all summative assessment to a specific set of learning outcomes, both overall and with specific assignments and questions. All assessments should be able to distinguish student acquisition of learning goals—and to demonstrate where student improvement can take place. There are a variety of ways that this can be done, whether through quizzes, problem sets, exams, reading responses, collaborative presentations, posters, etc. Each is discussed in this document.

Grading will almost certainly need to change, whether for equity or other issues. It is best to develop specific rubrics for each assignment, but even here there may be issues of precision. Consider your grading scale and whether or not the fine gradations that instructors typically make can be modified. Consider whether to use holistic or asset-based grading, if appropriate.

Workload and Tools.
Always be sensitive to the GSI maximum of 340 hours across the semester.
You might therefore consider using “grading for completion” or random grading of short assignments (e.g. read two of every five submissions) as a way to ensure continuous student engagement while ensuring GSIs do not work more than they are allowed. Also consider whether using the features available in bCourses, Gradescope, Piazza, and others can help with assessment.
I. Introduction

Though unrequested and largely undesired, the current educational environment, with its heavy emphasis on remote instruction, provides an opportunity for the Social Sciences Division and its faculties to rethink the kind of assessment that is used in its classes, whether undergraduate or graduate. The challenges are at once ubiquitous and unique. Responding to them in some meaningful and systematic way has therefore become unavoidable. This document provides some guidance into how to change assessment practices, while maintaining established instructional goals across the wide variety of courses that the Division offers. It is meant to be read, shared, and discussed widely. Rather than being prescriptive, it offers (best-practice) suggestions about some specific ways that instructors can modify course assessments in the context of what is possible within the pandemic’s constraints on instructional resources. As with nearly everything in life, there is no single right answer; rather there are a range of possibilities that ought to be considered within each specific course. In this case, one-size will not fit all—but each instructor could profitably engage with the ideas presented here to arrive at decisions that would work best for their particular course(s). We will also shortly distribute a second document containing sample assessments.

Finally, the information here does have some overlap with the gargantuan Fall 2020 Task Force report that the Academic Senate has already produced on the subject. If you have not had a chance to review this document, please do so at your convenience. You will find that many questions have already been thoughtfully addressed. This document is meant to build upon that one by providing some more specific resources for instructors.¹

¹ The Academic Senate document is located here: https://academic-senate.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/final_report_from_the_task_force_on_instructional_planning_and_policy_6.30.20.pdf
II. Review and/or Establish Learning Goals

Every Department should have learning goals on file, likely published on its website. This would be an excellent place to begin thinking about the nature of assessment. If there are no learning goals available, as is possible, the Center for Teaching and Learning provides instructions on how to create them on its website. Review these learning goals, but more importantly review your own syllabi, whether graduate or undergraduate, and make sure that you have clearly articulated learning goals for your courses. These should appear on the syllabus, in some form, which will increase the size of the syllabus but—at the same time—provide you and your students a road map to the course, and what will be assessed in it.

If articulating learning goals in this fashion is new to you, there are some available resources that are worthwhile. For example, Bloom’s Taxonomy, which contains a hierarchical ranking of task verbs (and the skills associated with each one), is worth reviewing. So too is the updated taxonomy of critical thinking skills. Once you have had a chance to review these skills, and their hierarchies, then set the learning goals for your course. Berkeley’s Center for Teaching and Learning has clearly articulated the process for doing this.

After you have clearly identified the goals that you intend to use in your courses and have determined that they are appropriate to the content you will provide, you can begin to think about assessment in a systematic way. More often than not, the default in such situations has been to administer a midterm and a final exam, which require a mix of skills. Though they might require higher order thinking, in many cases students stick to the lower level skills of remembering and applying. (This then allows faculty to differentiate students from each other more easily, as presumably students doing higher level thinking fare better on such assessments. If it can be googled, it probably doesn’t belong in an assessment.) These kinds of examinations are much more problematic in an online and hybrid environment, where the examination environment is not the same for every student, where students cannot be

2 For examples, see that of Economics here: https://www.econ.berkeley.edu/undergrad/home/learning-goals
For another example, see Sociology’s here: https://sociology.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/documents/student_services/undergrads/Undergraduate%20Learning%20Goals%20in%20Sociology.pdf

3 The link can be found here: https://teaching.berkeley.edu/resources/assessment-and-evaluation/state-learning-goals

4 For ease of use, you might review the old Bloom’s taxonomy, along with its updated version, here: https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/blooms-taxonomy/
You might also look at Barbara Gross Davis’s Tools for Teaching, available free and online through the library: https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.libproxy.berkeley.edu/lib/berkeley-ebooks/reader.action?docID=448877

5 https://teaching.berkeley.edu/resources/design/course-level-learning-goalsoutcomes
proctored and where the temptation to cheat increases. It is therefore preferable, if possible, to reconsider, revise, and replace such examinations with other kinds of assessments—which can be better measures of whether or not students are achieving the course’s learning goals.

### III. Summative vs Formative Assessments

Most instructors think about assessments as *summative* only, despite regularly engaging in *formative* assessments. To be clear, summative assessments tell us the degree to which students have acquired the desired learning goals at specific points, most often at a midterm or a final, or through a semester’s task, such as a research paper. (There are other kinds of summative assessments that some departments might use; the examples here are illustrative only.)

Formative assessments are often just “tossed off” in a class, as we ask students to write to a brief prompt or respond to a query. Formative assessments are generally not graded and are rather used to provide information to both teacher and student about where further teaching and learning needs to take place. We do this all the time when we lecture, by asking our students a question designed to see if they understood what they just heard. Depending on the answer, we might press on with new content or we might circle back and present a misunderstood concept or idea a second or third time. Our GSIs are regularly engaged in formative assessments as well, as they ask questions designed to promote student learning goals—and check on student comprehension of assigned readings.

Given the remote nature of instruction, and the challenges that it will pose to face-to-face formative assessments, it might do well to turn some of these formative assessments into summative assessments, where they are graded, but with relatively low stakes. For example, rather than asking students what the elements are for, say, “civilization,” in an ungraded essay, you could ask them to create a bullet point list of elements of civilization, which would be worth a few points towards the overall course grade. In this way, you will be tracking and measuring student learning. (This could be done individually, or collaboratively in groups. Such collaborative work is addressed later in this document.)

The main argument in this section then is to *tie summative assessments to specific learning goals and to consider turning smaller formative assessments into summative assessments that directly connect to the larger summative assessments of the course*. The more that assignments are connected to each other—especially in this diffuse learning environment—the better. At first glance, this will seem counterintuitive to most instructors, but the students are very clear that they see this as a way to keep them connected to the course material and engaged in the class itself, whether in person or remote. Data from the Social Science student survey

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6 There are a variety of ways to make this happen, either in bCourses (graded or not graded, quiz function), or through a google doc or google slide that students produce in a group or individually. There are also other software solutions that the campus is not currently supporting.
administered in the spring term 2020 strongly suggests that students prefer multiple shorter assignments both as a way to prevent cheating and, as importantly, for students to stay on top of their workload. I will say more about other findings from this data later in this document.  

IV. **Design New Summative Assessments**

Begin with learning goals and consider the best way to assess student progress towards meeting them. Always bear in mind that the best assessments are those that are able to distinguish the quality (or quantity) of student acquisition of learning goals from each other; this can be done with various levels of gradation, from thick to fine. For the purposes of this section, consider quizzes, exams, and papers—each of which comes with its own set of challenges. Surrounding this section is taking care to preserve academic integrity. It became clear that simply relying on students to support the honor code was insufficient, across both campus and the Division. Students complained that other students were cheating, and a number of campus instructors reported widespread cheating in their classes, whether on exams or papers.

There are, as well, a variety of proctoring software programs available. The campus is not supporting those, so faculty who choose this route will have to do so at their own risk. The campus is allowing instructors to use Zoom proctoring during the fall semester, but with reluctance. There is no one-size fits all solution here; in many ways, the easiest path to defend academic integrity is to increase the frequency of assignments, lower the stakes, make them collaborative, and use peer evaluation as part of the final grade.

A. **Quizzes**

There are a variety of tools for quizzing that are available using bCourses. There are also a variety of ways that those on campus have already addressed the issue. If you are using quizzes, especially in bCourses, try to ensure that every question is tied to a specific learning goal, and that the questions are randomized as they are presented to students. If you are using questions that come from a textbook, please review them to make sure that there is only a single correct answer. (Of course, this is true of your own

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7 The qualitative responses from the student survey were sent to the chairs of the Social Science Departments, cut up by department, along with the full set of responses. Faculty wishing to review these responses should consult their Chairs or, if unavailable, Alan Karras, who can send the Departmental responses. Thanks to Martha Olney for breaking up the data and sending to the Division’s chairs.

questions as well.) It is relatively easy to tie questions to specific learning goals because the task verbs can be used to indicate clearly what goal is being assessed.  

Current best practice in high-stakes national exams (such as the AP exams, and others administered by the College Board) is to avoid multiple choice questions that have as distractors the following: (a) none of the above or (b) all of the above. Incorrect answers should be wrong for a specific and identifiable reason, which can be explained in a sentence or two. Moreover, these exams are now striking questions that are presented in the negative, as in: “All of the following are true EXCEPT...” Students get these questions wrong more than others, and they have proven to be unreliable indicators of overall performance and achievement of the learning goals.

If you are going to use quizzes that tackle problem sets, and that have a single right answer, you might consider awarding fewer points for getting the right answer. You would then award more points for the work process. This would require students to upload their work, perhaps through Gradescope, in order for faculty or GSIs to check the work. Consider allowing these kinds of questions to be done collaboratively.

If you are more qualitatively focused, you could consider having students work on a document together—say a Google Doc, where you ask a question or two, and have students answer it, live, on a document that you control—and can see precisely who contributed what to each part of the question. Once again, questions should be tied to a specific learning goal for the course.

Quizzes can be either formative or summative, and it is important to keep the purpose clear, both to yourself and to your students. Student feedback indicates that they prefer shorter and more frequent assignments, so consider making more quizzes summative, if relatively low-value. Repetition of skills, in other words, leads to better retention of those skills than, say, cramming for an exam. Remember DSP accommodations are required (if summative) and also consider open-book/notes.

B. Exams

High-stakes exams are part of education and all of us use them as a way of assessing knowledge acquisition and critical thinking skills. They are also, and frequently, subject

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9 The task (or action) verbs can be found here: https://teaching.berkeley.edu/resources/design/course-level-learning-goalsoutcomes

10 There are many educational apps that allow students to upload their work, or present it in some form that is not simply the right answer. You might start with this list to see if any would work for you, and if so, what campus support might be available to you. https://www.nwea.org/blog/2019/75-digital-tools-apps-teachers-use-to-support-classroom-formative-assessment/
to academic dishonesty. Whenever possible, given our remote/hybrid learning environment, we should strongly consider moving away from this model. It causes stress in this pandemic age, and technological failures, whether predictable or not, can impede the assessment process, even rendering it almost meaningless. Moreover there are issues of disability, which require more time, and additional labor to ensure that exams are both compliant with the ADA and university policy.

To avoid these problems, you might consider moving all exams to an open-book, or take-home format. This would mean asking questions that cannot be directly answered by a student’s assigned readings or widely available material on the internet. The nature of the questions would have to change, in other words, while hewing closely to the articulated learning goals.

Such exams would typically require students downloading the assignment from bCourses and uploading their responses a prescribed number of hours later. (It’s hard to say how many hours, as we would need to know what other courses a student is taking and whether those classes are asynchronous or synchronous. It might be possible to allow only a couple of hours, assuming all asynchronous instruction. Or allowing every student a set number of hours, extended by DSP requirements, within a prescribed 24-/36-/48-hour period. Posting the exam at bCourses will allow you to see when a student downloads the file and uploads it. You can even have bCourses mark an assignment late. Students could explain any late submissions, and penalties could be imposed or not, depending on stated policy and/or extenuating circumstances.

If you are concerned about academic dishonesty, then you might consider having multiple exams, based on different groups of students. Ordinarily, in many qualitatively organized courses, students are given a choice of essays to write, so this is in keeping with that practice, though you would assign students a specific question rather than affording them a choice of questions.

You can also ask students to collaborate on an exam. Doing this, however, may lead to unequal workloads—and students might complain. To address that problem, you could ask each student to rate their own performance, as well as those of each of their peers. This would be done on a simple rubric, provided specifically for that purpose. That rating then would become part of each individual’s grade for the exam. It is important that students take this seriously—in my experience, most (but not all) will. If they do not do so, this could result in a grade distortion.

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11 You might have followed problems with this year’s AP exams. If not, you can do so here: https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2020/05/18/students-complain-they-cannot-submit-ap-tests

12 An example of such a simple rubric is attached to this document; it is provided for guidance only.
C. **Connect Midterm to Final Assessments**

Consider connecting these exams, again through the learning goals. The midterm exam should naturally lead to the final exam, *with a steadily increasing skill dexterity*, or using more advanced Bloom’s task verbs. At the same time, it is worth considering redistributing the weight of these exams, especially in light of difficulty with high-stakes exams in a remote environment. It might be better to ask fewer questions, or to change the nature of the questions. Or to give more credit for thought processes rather than “correct” answers. Every instructor and every course will be different. The idea should be one of progressive skill and content acquisition. In an ideal world, students would master one skill before learning the next one in complexity. But this is not an ideal world. Even so, instructors can take care to provide assessments that become progressively more difficult, with the presumption that student learning over the course of the semester is advancing along the skill acquisition continuum.

There are, however, some things that we need to assume will be different about our students, and we are going to have to grapple with these: issues of technology (such as faulty internet), issues of privacy (trying to set an exam in a busy household), issues of equity (resulting from the first two issues, along with other factors), and Disability (as documented through DSP). The more that we can spread out assessments in such an environment, and the lower the stakes, the greater the likelihood that students will achieve the course’s learning goals.

D. **Papers**

Many courses across the Division require research (or “term”) papers, which are usually excellent ways of measuring student learning. But papers are in many ways the most challenging issue to deal with in remote environment, when library access will be minimal or nonexistent.

There are a variety of databases that have PDF formatted readings available, and students can get access to those. Subject librarians have contacted instructors about obtaining books for course reserves and have indicated a willingness to obtain electronic versions of such documents. And of course, students logged in to the Library via VPN get access to many journal articles, in PDF form, relatively easily. Even so, these tools will almost certainly be inadequate for many research paper assignments. As a result, if research papers are essential to your course’s learning goals (and they are for many) consider the following: (1) provide students with the research materials that they will need to complete an assignment and (2) stage the assignment, so that students are getting credit for specific tasks, tied to the assignment’s learning goals.

For example, you might provide students with a set of documents, and sets of questions to answer through those documents—and others. You could ask the student to turn in a
thesis paragraph, or an answer to a research question—or a properly footnoted paragraph, each of which would count towards the final grade. You could, as well, ask the student to find an additional document — requiring them to do some online research. *The idea is to break up the task of writing a paper,* while recognizing that students have limited opportunities to interact with libraries. In many ways, research papers are key to college success, so anything that can be done to assess the *skills* that the research paper requires is desirable. The final product becomes a final summative assessment. (And, if you break up the assignment into component parts, then you might consider the project to be the equivalent of a final exam. Chairs have the authority to substitute final exams that are required on a one-time basis. Please check with your Chair if you wish to do this.)

V. **Design New Formative Assessments (or convert them to summative)**

Formative assessments are easier to do, in many ways, but require some planning. There are also a variety of apps that can be helpful. There are three basic areas where student work can be seen, and assessed, so that faculty can adjust their instruction. These areas include videos, posters, and threaded discussions. In this area, as well, K-12 instruction is sometimes ahead of that at the University. There are apps in which students can record videos of themselves or do drawings that demonstrate knowledge of a specific learning goal.

There are a variety of tools that can help with threaded discussions as formative assessments. There is one, for example, in bCourses, but other faculty prefer piazza. Doing so allows you to see students interact and for you to moderate or intervene in a particular discussion. This is useful information for how you might want to adopt your course—and it can also be used in some small stakes assessment, by encouraging students to post, and giving credit for posting (and perhaps more credit for a post that engages other students, for example.) Every case will be unique.

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13 These are typically referred to as milestone assignments, and each of these milestone assignments should be weighted and included in the grade for the final paper. For example, the final paper might be worth 50%, 5% of which is for the thesis, 15% for an annotated bibliography, etc.

14 You might begin with this article, for example, which outlines a variety of quick tasks that can be introduced into the classroom: [https://www.teachthought.com/pedagogy/10-assessments-you-can-perform-in-90-seconds/](https://www.teachthought.com/pedagogy/10-assessments-you-can-perform-in-90-seconds/).

15 In this case, we have been told that the campus is trying to finalize a contract with Piazza to make it more widely available. For information on how it works, please go here: [https://piazza.com](https://piazza.com)

Some instructors have tried to use slack in a similar way ([https://slack.com/](https://slack.com)) but with much more mixed success. The idea is really to get students talking directly to each other. There are many other tools available in this vein, but these are the ones that Berkeley faculty have attempted.
Consider, as well, using a Google Doc with breakout groups. Give students specific tasks, tied to learning goals, and have them work on creating a document that can be shared with the rest of the class or collected and evaluated by either you or your GSIs. Some instructors have reported good success with having students working on Google Slides. The idea is the same: provide students an opportunity to collaborate while building something that serves your purposes as a formative assessment.

Finally, there are some apps that can be used to help students either prepare individually, or collectively, posters to demonstrate their content knowledge. There are some Departments and programs where this might work extremely well—especially those that use visuals, or that require students to show their work as they proceed. None of these apps would typically be supported by the campus, but most are available directly to instructors. It is, as well, worth checking with the Social Science Dean’s office as well as the Center for Teaching and Learning, if there is a particular app that you think might be of some utility to your particular classes. It is also worth repeating here that collaborative formative assessments might be good ways to keep students engaged during the semester. The Social Science student data indicated for most departments that students preferred collaborative assignments.

VI. **Specific Issues: Problem-Based Assessment, typically quantitative**

This issue came up time after time in some departmental meetings over the summer, especially among those who teach quantitative skills and reasoning processes. Faculty in these Departments are very used to asking students to solve problems, whether in summative or formative assessments. There is a premium, therefore, placed on the right answer. The question is how to give students credit for working on a problem, even if they come up with the “wrong” answer—they might have miscalculated something or applied a formula incompletely or simply forgot a step. Under normal circumstances in many cases, they would not earn points for an incorrect answer.

In the remote environment, we ought to consider changing that—by asking students to submit both their work and their answers. These might need to go to different places. Students could upload PDF files of their work to bCourses, or through Gradescope; they could also make a video of themselves explaining their thought processes and upload that for review. Review of the thought processes used, even if they resulted in an incorrect answer, would need to take precedence. For example, in a 10 point problem (whether on a quiz, an exam, or a formative assessment), instructors might want to give only 1-2 points for the correct answer and then develop a rubric where the rest of the work is awarded points for various tasks—which are both

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If you are interested in using visuals with your students, you might look at Concertboard, Dotstorming, Flipgrid, Loom, Lucidpress, Miro, and Peardeck. The list is not exhaustive.
clearly identified and not dependent on a correct calculation. This would allow students to receive partial credit and, at least theoretically, learn from their mistakes. The points would need to correlate to the assessment’s learning goals. See the discussion in the next section on asset vs. holistic grading.

VII. **Specific Issues: Essay-based assessment, typically qualitative (or asset vs holistic grading)**

Student data from the Social Science survey completed last spring indicates a general satisfaction with this method of assessment, though a number of students were cautious about other students who had cheated. As a result, the same principle applies here as above: find ways to give students “points” for specific tasks, identified on a rubric, and without regard to the final product. Typically, faculty and GSIs read an essay and assign it a score, whether numerical or letter. This model is known, generally, as holistic grading.

There is another model for grading, known as asset-based: this requires graders to review an essay and award points based on specific criteria. (Many of the AP exams for the College Board are graded using this model, which has its own set of issues and failings; that said, it is an alternative way to assess student knowledge, and it can be used easily to grade specific parts of an assignment, in order to make sure that all of the identified tasks are being assessed fairly.)

Instructors could identify factors—as simple, perhaps, as “is there an argument?”, “if so, does the argument address the prompt?“, and (3) “does it do so well?” Each factor would be worth a specific amount of points, and every student’s work would be evaluated according to the same scale, across all sections of the course. There is very little leeway in most of this—you could, of course, assign some qualitative points, but you’d want to keep this relatively minimal, in order to avoid the temptation to reward (or have your GSIs award points to students who you know to be “trying”). Once again, the idea here is to break up assignments into smaller components, in order to avoid putting excessive burden on students who will all be working remotely in conditions that they have not chosen. The goal would be to tie the specific points to identifiable component parts of the learning goal being assessed.

Faculty should consider making the criteria for any grading rubric available to the students. There are pros to this. For example, students will know exactly what they are being evaluated on and this could lead to better assignments. But there are also cons to this in that students might produce only the minimum required to earn the rubric point, and not produce a particularly good final product.

Another idea would be to have students evaluate the work of their peers, using a rubric that you provide. This would familiarize them with what is expected of them and allow them to see how their classmates approach a particular assignment.
VIII. **Specific Issues: Proctoring vs Open-Book, Open Notes**

The online environment is just not properly set up to manage traditionally proctored exams; widespread cheating has been reported, even with lockdown browsers. While there is certainly some utility in some classes in having a proctored exam that is worth a large amount of the grade, consider moving to an alternative model, such as (but not limited to) the take-home exams that are discussed earlier in this document. If you decide to stick with a proctored exam, or an “in-class” exam, be prepared for many issues (such as extended-time) with DSP as well as exam-day fails, when the internet goes out or when students are ill. **There will be equity issues with any live exam; be prepared with solutions or, better still, move away from proctoring whenever possible.** You might be able to lockdown a browser, and monitor eye movements, but that does not mean you can lock down a phone or tablet computer, or Apple watch. This is one of the biggest issues that must be overcome, especially in large classes. In a time when students are already stressed, this has the potential to increase stress-levels considerably. The best advice is to consider alternatives.

The easiest alternative is to establish a policy that allows open-book/open-notes. There will be regular using of notes and books, regardless of what the policy is. One way to check that students are actually using their own notes, and not someone else’s, is to have students upload photocopies of their notes with the rest of their assignments. This might be overkill, but it does send a message that the instructor cares about the thought process (and thinking skills) that their students use. Allowing for open-book and open-notes short circuits, at least, this avenue of potential cheating.

IX. **Grading and Equity**

There is a lot of discussion across various venues, both inside and outside our campus, about grading issues and fairness. The College of Engineering has sponsored a workshop on “Grading for Equity.” In its second iteration, it has opened it to various groups and individuals across the campus. Further information on this enterprise can be found here: [www.gradingforequity.org](http://www.gradingforequity.org).

The associated book ([https://www.amazon.com/Grading-Equity-Matters-Transform-Classrooms/dp/1506391575/](https://www.amazon.com/Grading-Equity-Matters-Transform-Classrooms/dp/1506391575/)) is worth review as well, especially if you were not able to participate in the workshops. The idea here is that most students, even more than in a regular semester, will be facing some sort of individual circumstances that require notice, if not accommodation. The typical grading scale that we use, based out of 100 points, organized into deciles, typically has six deciles of failing work (0-59). With that being said, questions about alternative grading scales can then be introduced. There is a suggestion below about minimizing +/- grades. That might be one place to start—rather than assigning points, which leads to fudging and rounding at the end of the semester, perhaps it would be better to begin with five buckets and assign letter grades to each assignment and then use the GPA scale, from 0-4. A number of faculty already do this, and the presenters make a persuasive case that this is ultimately fairer, and spares everyone trying to decide if a Failing Grade is a 0, or 42, or 59.
There might, as well, be a side benefit to this, in that students could be less likely to obsess over a point or two, as they typically do when the scale is more finely measured.

The issue of biases needs also to be part of this conversation; it ought to be apparent that we should avoid biases whenever possible, so as not to favor one student’s work over that of another’s based on information that we have (the student regularly came to office hours; the student had a family emergency, or spent all of their time going to parties, forgetting to turn in the work). Keeping grading scales as simple as possible will lead to greater fairness—and prevent student obsession with “earning” points.

There are a variety of other practices that ought to be addressed here: extra-credit (we’d advise against it, since if everyone is not doing it, it is not fair to the whole), dropping the lowest-scored assignment (which might provide permission for some students to slack off, while others do not), and rewarding effort.

Within our disciplines, each of us knows what ought to be valued, and we should set up our assessments to determine whether or not students are actually achieving these goals. It is fine to weight assignments, especially if you want to reward improvement, but you need to say this at the outset. It is fine for you to provide rubrics to students, showing them exactly what their evaluation will consist of. It is generally not OK to make special deals with students, as this introduces inequity into the grading process.

Finally, we should consider the purpose of grading. It is important for us not just as a measure of student learning (and thus something that indicates to us what changes we might need to make in terms of our own teaching), but also as a way for us to have a conversation with our students. Very often, students complete a task, tick the box, move on to another task, and then forget what they have just done. It is nearly universally true that when student work is handed back, the students flip to the grade, look at it, and put it away. It is not at all clear that they read comments (if any are even present), and digest what they are being told. Grading therefore might be best considered a conversation between instructors and students. We can start by writing more than cursory comments (perhaps we should each mandate a minimum of five sentences) and telling our GSIs to do the same—and then making sure that they actually do that. We can ask students who want their grades reviewed that they must wait a certain number of hours after receiving graded work back, and then clearly write why they believe that their grading was in error. We can, in short, use a variety of tools to get students to value learning, and see their assessments as part of a conversation with them about how to improve their learning in any particular course. This seems especially important in an environment where all interactions are virtual.

A. +/- Grades. A number of faculty clearly articulated the view that they don’t anticipate having trouble sorting students into three or four broad groups (with one achieving mastery, one completely botching everything or not showing up, and one or two in the middle who are good at some things and not good at others). These faculty have mused
aloud about doing away with +/- grades in their particular courses this semester. (Any formal variance would almost certainly have to be approved by the Senate.)

This idea has come up before in other campus conversations, as a way to get students to focus more on learning than on grades. Faculty might want to consider whether or not there could be some utility in assigning grades in this fashion and, if so, perhaps the faculty, department, or Division could approach the Senate about how to implement this policy in current circumstances. (There is precedent, of course, as many faculty do not ever award the grade of A+ already.) Gradations that are too fine, in other words, may be working directly against the imperative need for changed assessments in the pandemic learning environment.

X. Thoughts on Assessment, broadly conceived

A. Curves. There have been a variety of concerns raised across the campus that even with modifications to assessment models there will still be uncertainty about student learning outcomes. Campus has advised us to move away from curved classes, which seems to be an excellent idea. These courses produce anxiety and encourage competition at times and in places where student energy is best directed elsewhere.  

B. Collaboration. In short, it might be wise to allow this whenever possible. If the assessments are tied to the learning goals and a group of students comes up with a response that works with the learning goals, then we can safely say that learning has been achieved, though not necessarily evenly across the group. If this is problematic to you, and you want to make greater distinctions between individuals in your class, consider asking students to peer-review, formally, their collaborators. You can and should provide a rubric for such evaluations. These should be useful to you, and easy for the students to fill out.

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17 The Academic Senate, in its task force report, indicates that resources ought to be provided on how to avoid grading on a Curve: [https://academic-senate.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/final_report_from_the_task_force_on_instructional_planning_and_policy_6.30.20.pdf](https://academic-senate.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/final_report_from_the_task_force_on_instructional_planning_and_policy_6.30.20.pdf).

18 You might want to start here for a discussion of creating a peer-review rubric. [https://peerceptiv.com/resources/5-questions-for-creating-a-peer-review-rubric/](https://peerceptiv.com/resources/5-questions-for-creating-a-peer-review-rubric/)

There are some additional resources for peer-review rubrics here: [https://teachingblog.mcgill.ca/2015/06/05/peer-review-with-500-students/](https://teachingblog.mcgill.ca/2015/06/05/peer-review-with-500-students/) and here: [https://www.mcgill.ca/tls/instructors/assessment/peer](https://www.mcgill.ca/tls/instructors/assessment/peer)
C. **Modules.** The idea of modules has come up repeatedly; these are precisely defined sets of lectures, readings, discussions, and assessments. Each module has a particular learning goal, and a specific assessment for that learning goal. The course generally will progress through the modules along a defined path and will contain a variety of activities in each specific module. For those whose course are already conceptualized into sections, this might be an easy way to develop a progressively more challenging plan for assessment of the course’s learning goals. Each module might contain, for example, a formative assessment, two small summative assessments (which are peer-assessed), and a larger summative assessment.

D. **GSI workload.** It is a fair comment that many of the changes discussed here, especially increased frequency and smaller assessments, could lead to increased GSI workload. Bear in mind that a 50%-time GSI (which is the standard) can only work a maximum of 340 hours over the course of the semester, and these are generally limited to 20 hours per week, except in those weeks where there might be heavier grading. It is important not to “dump” work on the GSIs, who after all are pursuing their own studies. Whenever grading can be made easier, it ought to be. If peer-assessments become part of the grade, then the GSI would be entering those grades into a spreadsheet, without evaluating the assessments very much. Or if collaborative assignments are made, then the GSI would be reading fewer assignments overall. Mitigation to GSI workload must accompany any changes to assignments. *This cannot be stressed enough. Please make sure that your workload agreements for all GSI work have been updated to take into account remote/hybrid instruction.*

E. **Available campus resources.** These are plentiful, and instructors could spend hours working through the various proposals, recommendations, and suggestions. The main repository for these documents is: [https://teaching.berkeley.edu/resources/remote-best-practices](https://teaching.berkeley.edu/resources/remote-best-practices)

From that site, one could navigate here: [https://academic-senate.berkeley.edu/issues/coronavirus/best-practices-remote-examinations](https://academic-senate.berkeley.edu/issues/coronavirus/best-practices-remote-examinations)

This site has a variety of suggestions and anticipates many of the problems that instructors will face with examinations. The current document, however, suggests that examinations might not be the best tools for summative assessment. The above-linked document has a variety of ideas to generate additional types of assessment and suggests how they might work.

You might also want to review this document, from an April task force report: [https://academic-](https://academic-)

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19 bCourses has a feature that can automate peer assessment, by assigning students to review or provide feedback. This can be done through the Assignments feature.
senate.berkeley.edu/sites/default/files/guidance_and_recommendations_from_the_working_group_on_exams_and_proctoring.pdf
Appendix 1—Sample Rubric, scalable, for self-assessment of research papers/theses.
The categories can be further split apart; there is also a faculty version of this form.

IASAP Honors: Final Self-evaluation of thesis

Student’s name _____________________________________________
Date ______________
Thesis Title __________________________________________________
Research Supervisor _____________________________________________

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ANALYSIS AND ARGUMENT</th>
<th>The thesis is too incoherent to assess</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Does the thesis make a compelling argument for the significance of your research within the context of current knowledge and literature?</td>
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<td>2. Is the literature review (and/or discussion of the literature) thorough?</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Is the data analysis appropriate and accurate? Does it take into consideration possible conflicting or competing interpretations of the same or similar data?</td>
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<td>4. Does the thesis skillfully capture the results of your research?</td>
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<td>5. Is there a compelling discussion of the implications and significance of your findings?</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Please comment on the analysis and argument in this thesis here:</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESEARCH, SOURCES, AND EVIDENCE</th>
<th>The research is too incoherent to assess</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Somewhat</th>
<th>Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Question</td>
<td>Rating Options</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Does the thesis represent your original research?</td>
<td>Yes, Somewhat, No, The writing is too incoherent to assess</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Are your methods appropriate and complete?</td>
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<tr>
<td>9. Are the primary sources that you used appropriate and adequate?</td>
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<tr>
<td>9a. Is there a clear relationship demonstrated between the sources, the evaluative or interpretive method, and the argument?</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Please comment on the research, sources, and evidence used in this thesis here:</td>
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</table>

**WRITING AND ORGANIZATION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Rating Options</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>11. Is the writing appropriate for the target audience?</td>
<td>Yes, Somewhat, No, The writing is too incoherent to assess</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Does the thesis clearly articulate your research goals?</td>
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<tr>
<td>13. Is the thesis clearly organized?</td>
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<tr>
<td>14. Is the thesis free of writing errors?</td>
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<tr>
<td>15. Are the citations presented consistently and professionally throughout the text and in the list of works cited? Are they free from error?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>16. Are the tables and figures clear, effective, and informative?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Please comment on the writing and organization of the thesis here:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Please indicate a suggested grade for your thesis________. (Make sure to consider your effort, as well as the final output.)

Additional Comments:
Appendix 2: Sample checklists, which can be turned into rubrics, for peer or self-review.

The General Checklist

Adapted from Appendix B in *Writing for Sociology (2nd Edition).* You should check for all of the following before turning in any paper:

- ___ The introduction accurately reflects the argument and structure of the paper.
- ___ Each sentence contributes to the paper. You have removed anything that is redundant or tangential.
- ___ You have used simple language instead of jargon. If you have used specialized terms you have defined them in clear, straightforward terms.
- ___ If you have discussed other authors, you have accurately represented their work. This means that you have double checked the context of all quotes to make sure that you have not taken anything out of context or misconstrued any points.
- ___ Each paragraph is organized around a single main point, and includes a topic sentence that states this clearly.
- ___ You have checked to make sure that each point you have made has been adequately defended, either with an example, a reference to the text, or a few explanatory sentences.
- ___ You have checked for inconsistencies, gaps, and flaws in your arguments. As part of this, you have considered counterarguments for each of your points.
- ___ The conclusion sums up the main points of the paper.
- ___ The paper is formatted with a commonly used font like Time New Roman 12. It is doubled-spaced, with normal margins.
- ___ You have checked to make sure that you have cited when necessary.
- ___ The reference list is complete.
- ___ The paper is proofread. You have checked for correct grammar and spelling.

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Thesis Statement Checklist

Adapted from Appendix B in Writing for Sociology (2nd Edition)¹

If you can answer “yes” to each of these questions, then you have an excellent thesis!

- ___ Does my thesis sentence attempt to answer (or at least to explore) a challenging intellectual question?
- ___ Is the point I'm making one that would generate discussion and argument, or is it one that would leave people asking, “So what?”
- ___ Is my thesis too vague? Too general? Should I focus on some more specific aspect of my topic?
- ___ Does my thesis deal directly with the topic at hand, or is it a declaration of my personal feelings?
- ___ Does my thesis indicate the direction of my argument? Does it suggest a structure for my paper?
- ___ Does my introductory paragraph define terms important to my thesis? If I am writing a research paper, does my introduction place my thesis within the larger, ongoing scholarly discussion about my topic?
- ___ Is the language in my thesis vivid and clear? Have I structured my sentence so that the important information is in the main clause? Have I used subordinate clauses to house less important information? Have I used parallelism to show the relationship between parts of my thesis? In short, is this thesis the very best sentence that it can be?

¹ Excerpted from Dartmouth College's Materials for Students: Developing Your Thesis, by Karen Gocsik, who is now the director of the Writing Program at UCSD. Please see this site for further information on peer review and assignment construction: https://writing-speech.dartmouth.edu/sites/writing-speech.dartmouth.edu/files/ways_of_reading.pdf