

# GRADE ABATEMENT TRIPTYCH CHECKLIST <!--ANNOTATIONS-->

Triptychs have a central panel that is larger than the other two. In our case, that's this list of skills and traits. The other two "panels" list the interstitial mechanisms for instruction and creation.

## ① Identify the GAP skills and traits that you will strengthen.

The verbs here are important. You might *use* every skill and trait in a particular task, but you probably can't actively strengthen all of them. You need a focus.

Note that the skills related to test-taking — timed multiple-choice work and timed essay writing — aren't part of this list. Considering how much time is spent, even in a grade-abated classroom, on test prep, that deserves explanation:

- (1) Test-driven skills are just mutations of other, more authentic skills. Close reading is twisted into a bastard form of *speed* reading; effective writing is twisted into a performative, truncated kind of writing; and so on.
- (2) High-stakes tests prevent collaboration, lack empathy, and damage amenability (as the scores are often black boxes).
- (3) When the goal is gamesmanship — get a higher score or else — it's a matter of critical thinking and organization.



### Collegiality ⇄ Empathy



This is the crux of the course and the stuff of your growth: the collaborative learning environment and experience. Productive collegiality depends on the skill of empathy, which you build through discussion, writing, and especially reading in the Humanities.

The image comes from the RSA Animate video for Ken Robinson's "Changing Education Paradigms," which you can watch [here](#). The idea of honing empathy as a skill comes from Chad Fowler's essay, "Your Most Important Skill: Empathy," which you can read [here](#). [This video](#) explains how literature builds empathy. Paul Graham's "Age of the Essay," available [here](#), points out that literary *analysis* (see the section on close reading below) is "three steps removed from real work."






### Integrity + Character



Here you focus on the *individual* learning environment and experience, especially the honesty and openness necessary to take risks. Value the learning *process* more than its products.

This icon was created by iconoci for the [Noun Project](#). Integrity is evolving into a counterpart to collegiality — a focus on how the individual is deconstructed and reconstructed in a learning environment. The three core skills and two core traits that are indented below are meant to contribute most to this integral self.

	<p><b>Close Reading ⇒ Internalization</b></p> <p>This encompasses the texts you analyze for emulative purposes, the memorization of universal languages and structures, and the literature you read for empathy.</p>
	<p><b>Critical Thinking ⇒ Metacognition</b></p> <p>These are the problems we are solving, the meaning you are making, and, most importantly, the thinking that drives every choice, every day.</p>
	<p><b>Effective Communication ⇒ Writing</b></p> <p>Bishop composition centralizes writing, especially essays, as essential to learning. Discussions and other communications support and scaffold that process.</p>

These icons were created for the [Noun Project](#) by Dan Vo, Ale Estrada, and Carol Costa, respectively. The symbolism is probably obvious, but just in case: The elephant never forgets; the owl is wise; and the octopus... actually, I'm not sure about the octopus. The metaphor we use for writing is a river — courtesy of [Paul Graham](#) — and octopi don't live in rivers. He looks a little like Cthulhu, which [pops up occasionally](#), so maybe that's it. The idea in this section is that you hone these skills by *creating* things. That's why the header is "external artifacts"; you need to generate hard evidence of growth here in order to make that growth permanent. Not everything happens externally, of course, so it's more about the root of the word "artifact": [a thing made with skill](#). You write to crystalize metacognition; you take notes to crystalize reading; you stitch it all together through essays that search out something meaningful.

Close reading is also about avoiding [low-information sepsis](#), which is one reason these skills come after the central traits of integrity and collegiality: You have to work together to internalize what you need to internalize. It's not just strength in numbers; it's that the course is built *for* groups. Not many folks can rebuild themselves as students — the makerspace goal of the class — without help.

That said, metacognition is the key skill in probably *all* of this. At all times, we need an awareness of why we do what we do. And writing is the most powerful way to get at truth with a capital-T, especially the Truth of ourselves. We shape our thoughts by shaping our writing, [as Orwell wrote](#), and we must reimagine essays as extensions of that process, not just the mechanical repetition of what is commonly available on Wikipedia or Sparknotes. Orwell's advice is more important than ever (emphasis mine):

*A scrupulous writer, in every sentence that he writes, will ask himself at least four questions, thus: What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What image or idiom will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect? And he will probably ask himself two more: Could I put it more shortly? Have I said anything that is avoidably ugly? But you are not obliged to go to all this trouble. **You can shirk it by simply throwing your mind open and letting the ready made phrases come crowding in. They will construct your sentences for you — even think your thoughts for you, to certain extent — and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even yourself.***



### Amenability ⇄ Self-Awareness



You must seek and accept criticism *and* praise about all aspects of grade abatement in order to improve those aspects. Focus on teacher commentary, proxy feedback, and crowd-sourced analysis of yourself.



### Assiduousness ⇄ Self-Efficacy



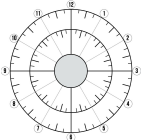
This is how to live like an academic tardigrade: Test your limits, adapt to challenges, and embrace failure as a key part of learning. Build the muscles necessary to beat down procrastination, impulsivity, and complacency.

The tardigrade is taken from “Chibi Tardigrade” by Daieny Schutz, which can be seen [here](#). The picture of Donkey Kong is by Joseph Le. The original is [here](#), and there’s a [GIF](#).

These are cartoony symbols for serious ideas. Water bears [have a history](#) in grade abatement, for instance; they symbolize toughness, especially when it comes to risk-taking and distress tolerance. Donkey Kong is more roundabout: The greatest threat to amenability is the Dunning-Kruger effect, and if we’re following Orwell’s other advice (“The sole aim of a metaphor is to call up a visual image”), we can imagine ourselves [dodging our way past](#) another DK, [Donkey Kong](#).

More seriously, on “internal artifacts” as the header: That idea doesn’t preclude external evidence, any more than the previous header precluded internal stuff. But the majority of what you shape with skill is going to happen *internally* here — through metacognition, reflection, and an epiphany or two. These are the traits that go into remaking yourself as a student, and they are as desultory as they are crucial.

Another thing: These traits go hand-in-hand (or paw-in-whatever-tardigrades-have). Your self-awareness builds self-efficacy, and you can only push yourself when you realize the *need* to push. Cockiness breeds complacency.



### Organization ⇒ Autodidacticism



The rest of the skills and traits depend on this one: Your systemic, systematic, and individualized approach to getting things done.

This image looks like a bullseye, which is fine; autodidacticism is about hitting targets, and the “ready, fire, aim” method of actionable plans is a good one. We never stray far from violent metaphors, either. But the image is actually a DoubleDex from [this site](#) — an adaptation by [Julie Sheranoshier](#) of another effective time-hacking tool, [the chronodex](#).

Organization is [the \(not-so\) secret skill that frames the rest](#). The goal is autodidacticism: teaching yourself under a grade-abated aegis, honing the skills and traits *you* need to hone, and constantly iterating on whatever blueprint works best. There *is* no bullseye, in fact, just incremental progress toward what Dan Pink describes in [this video](#): autonomy, mastery, and purpose.

## ② Engage the interstitial instruction and materials of the course.

The verb is again key: You need to *engage* this stuff, not just glance over it. These aren't handouts, and they aren't textbooks; they are the substructure that supports everything you will ever do in a course like this. These sites evolve, iterating and reiterating the ideas and machinery we're using to learn, and you need to work with just as much flexibility. You also need to read the verb "engage" as meaning "interact with," because each of these elements is highly responsive and almost completely transparent. Asking questions on the website can generate entirely new directions for assignments; responding to a Medium essay can deepen your understanding of a concept; comments on Google Classroom can lead to extensions and alternatives for some assignments; and Google+ makes it possible to work together, whether you're sharing your writing or discussing a text, at any point and from anywhere. In other words, if you embrace these elements, you'll find a truly interstitial learning environment. It won't matter if you're sick, tired, stressed, bored — any momentary inability to work can be navigated, because the classroom is just that flexible.



Sisyphian High: [www.sisyphianhigh.com/umwelt](http://www.sisyphianhigh.com/umwelt)



This is the hub: It contains all units and lessons, plus links to everything below. Use the comment section to ask questions directly of your teacher.



Medium



The @sisypheanhigh account has critical teacher essays that elucidate and explore the units, lessons, and teaching methods found on Sisyphian High.



Google+ Community



The instructional content here is *student*-generated. Monitor new notifications for interesting and relevant posts, especially proxy feedback.



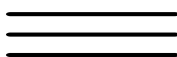
Google Classroom



Any formal assignments will be given deadlines and requirements here.

I think this set of four will stay in place for a while. A [course subreddit](#) and [Twitter account](#) are still there, but they've fallen out of regular use; Google+ replaces their functionality from a spot within GAFE, which makes it easier to use and monitor.

The reason these descriptions are so much briefer than the descriptions for the elements of grade abatement: Each of these sites runs *very* deep, and it takes serious exploration to develop the right habit of mind. Covering everything you'll find on Sisyphian High, for instance, would be impossible if it *wasn't* constantly evolving to meet the needs of the course, and the Google+ Community is still finding its legs.



### ③ Explore, create, learn.

And now we get nothing *but* verbs. Each of them is carefully chosen:

- (1) Explore not just the readings and lessons of the interstitial classroom, but the weird and ramiform stuff that comes out of them. Get yourself lost. Remember what it's like to be curious about learning.
- (2) Create things. You are primarily learning about and hacking yourself (through grade abatement) and writing (through bishop composition), but you should consider this course a Humanities makerspace — a place where you create the stuff that makes us human beings.
- (3) That last bit is pretty abstract, though, so the third verb is simpler: Learn from what you do. Develop the core skills that make you smarter and more thoughtful. Inculcate the traits you'll need in the future. Pick up new knowledge about random subjects. Learn something every day, if you can, about yourself and the world you inhabit.



#### Google+ Community



Start discussions. Ask questions. Post works-in-progress. This is the in-class learning community extended to include *every* student.



#### Google Drive



Use Docs to take notes, reflect and metacogitate, and collaborate on early drafts of essays. Organize GAP evidence in Drive. Experiment with other Google Apps.



#### Medium



Share final drafts of essays here. Then publish and publicize the best of your writing. Respond to other Medium essays, especially from peers.



#### Google Classroom



Submit any required work by the deadline.

These are the tools you'll use to explore, create, and learn. They help bring us back to the Skinner-box motivation of the classroom — the stuff we need to keep GAP work honest for all students — without sacrificing any authenticity or efficacy. This is also how you'll generate evidence for grade abatement without driving yourself (or your teacher) to the brink of exhaustion. Most importantly, this is an evolving mechanism. If we find tools that work better, we'll use them. This is where the hacker- or makerspace mentality shines: Your goal is to *create*, which is messy and difficult. It's also fun. That's why we lean on Piet Hein:

***Art is solving problems that cannot be formulated before they have been solved. The shaping of the question is part of the answer.***

Writing is an art. So is learning. And that makes you an artist. All you need is to figure out what problem you are in the midst of solving.