



# University Writing Program

## UNIVERSITY OF DENVER

To the UWP Review & Promotion Committee:

I am writing this letter to wholeheartedly and enthusiastically recommend my colleague Jesse Stommel for promotion to the rank of Teaching Associate Professor. It has been an honor to work alongside him for the last two years, and I sincerely look forward to learning from and working with him for many years to come.

One of the ways that Jesse has positively influenced me as both a teacher and a scholar is through his innovative work on “ungrading”—an approach to assessment that invites students and teachers to actively interrogate the (frequently outdated and oppressive) systems underwriting grade-based models. In his most recent book on the subject (2023), Jesse describes ungrading as “a systemic critique, a series of conversations we have about grades, ideally drawing students into those conversations with the goal of engaging them as full agents in their own education.” In other words, ungrading is not a refusal to grade; rather, it is an ongoing process that holds our accountability standards to account, ensuring that our evaluative practices fulfill our educational promises.

When Jesse joined the University Writing Program in 2021, I immediately dove into his scholarship on ungrading. At the time, I was renovating my writing courses in order to better align my pedagogies with emerging anti-racist practices in writing studies. Many of these practices foreground the importance of ensuring that students from diverse backgrounds can exercise full agency as both learners and creators, and research shows that conventional grading systems frequently undermine this agency by holding marginalized students to standards originally made to exclude them. To recalibrate my teaching, I needed a new language of assessment—and Jesse provided it.

Inspired by Jesse’s work, I designed a new grading contract premised on (1) the maintenance of trust and (2) the exercise of collaborative assessment. Today, I grade students by conferencing with them one-on-one after each major assignment; during that time, I converse with the student about their goals, and we collaboratively pitch a writing challenge tailored to their unique educational journeys. If and when I penalize a student’s grade, I do it on the basis of *breaching* trust rather than on the basis of *earning* it. Through this process, I am able to adapt my evaluative expectations to each student rather than holding them to a supremacist standard that inevitably creates margins.

I have been using this grading contract for a year now, and my students have repeatedly commented on the positive impact it has had on their learning and sense of belonging at DU. I thank Jesse for this.

I also thank Jesse for the impact he has had on my professional development outside of the classroom. As a co-owner of PlayForge, a game store in Littleton, Jesse had been an invaluable resource bolstering my scholarship on the history and rhetoric of tabletop games. In particular, my current project on the exercise of vulnerability in games (co-written with my colleague Matt Hill) would not exist without Jesse’s generosity and resourcefulness. What’s more, through the Littleton Learning Lab affiliated with PlayForge, Jesse has provided me with multiple opportunities to develop career skills as a professional Game Master—a kind of storyteller who helps players and communities connect with each other through interactive narrative. Crafting such stories with middle schoolers at the Littleton Learning Lab has

expanded my horizons—not only as a teacher of writing and scholar of games, but also as a Denver community member.

Finally, I would be remiss not to mention Jesse’s ongoing success as an instructor. When Jesse joined our program in 2021, he brought with him a long history of exemplary teaching, and he has maintained that excellence to this day. Speaking as the director of the University Writing Program’s Fall Showcase, an annual ceremony honoring our student awardees, I was proud (but not surprised) to honor one of Jesse’s former DU students, Jay Lewis, at our ceremony this past September. Jesse nominated Lewis in the Spring of 2023 for a multimodal writing award, and an expert committee of faculty and grad students (including myself) agreed that Lewis’s work deserved special distinction. Lewis’s award was a testament to Jesse’s commitment to student success at DU.

I cannot recommend Jesse Stommel highly enough. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at [david.riche@du.edu](mailto:david.riche@du.edu). Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

David Riche, Ph.D.  
Teaching Associate Professor  
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