The first time I saw it was 'way back in the sixties. CSU had hired a particularly "free" spirit, and when he was fired (to the surprise of no one), it was discovered that he had given an "A" to every single student. The explanation in his grade book was that "A = Adequate" and to this clown, EVERYONE was cool, man.

I began using word grades when I invented the Microtheme. But I used it on compositions, literature essays and in creative writing as well. I hated making decisions between a "B" and a "C", found myself fudging a "D" when an "F" was probably called for, and no sooner would I assign an "A" to a paper when—wouldn’t you know it—a far superior paper came along. I saved myself some of the mental anguish by switching to words. Instead of a letter, at the top of the student’s work I would write a simple, sincere, honest, defensible word. Like this:

**IMPRESSIVE** = "I really mean it. The essay made me sit back and think. I was impressed, and it has that certain 'spark' which makes it unique and memorable."

**GOOD** = "Good essay. It is above average. It makes its point, fully supports it, and is clear and concise. To be honest, it’s better than I expected from the average students."

**OK** = "Simply that. This essay is what I assigned, it does the job, it’s fully and wholly adequate. It’s just what I expected."

**NG** = "No Grade. Tell you what: I'll give you two weeks to revise this and hand it in again. My margin notes should be helpful, but if not, you know my office hours."

Students were given a one-page explanation of what my words meant.

In the grade book I wrote down "A" for "Impressive", "B' for "Good", "C" for "Okay", and "NG" for "No Grade". Sometimes I added plus or minus signs. You’ll notice I explained word grades in totally positive terms. I tried to avoid saying negative things. I circled misspellings. I ticked wrong grammar. On phrases that left me shaking my head in bewilderment I used the famous "Awk!" (never an endangered species, the Essay Awk).

Above all and primarily, using real words to express genuine reactions made my grading easier. I believe most students appreciated it. They seemed more willing to accept an "Okay" than a "C". As for "Impressive"—I often saw students who had received "Impressive" leaning over to show other students. One student labored mightily to impress me, but her first four microthemes came in as "Good". Then one day while I was collecting microthemes, she handed me #5. "So," I said, "is this one impressive?"

"Damn right!" she said, looking me straight in the eye.

And it was.
About the Institute for Learning and Teaching and the Master Teacher Initiative: The Institute for Learning and Teaching (TILT) was established in 2006 to enhance teaching and learning at Colorado State University. We offer professional development programs and activities provide funding and support for research on learning and teaching, offer colloquia on the scholarship of teaching and learning, and promote collaboration within and across disciplines. Visit us on the Web at http://tilt.colostate.edu, or contact us at (970) 491-3132 or TILT@ColoState.edu.

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