

Standards-Based Grading in the Arts

By Erica Turrell



Introduction: Grading for Growth and Mastery

From 6th grade through high school and into college, my final grades in music classes felt like a complete mystery- a confusing blend of things like participation and concerts. But how were my music teachers determining my grade? It felt like as long as I behaved in rehearsal and showed up to the concerts, my teacher assumed I was doing well and gave me an A.

Years later, when I became a music teacher, I found that this “traditional” way of grading in the Arts was simply the norm—not something I felt pressured to do, but something that was an afterthought, a task teachers sat down to do after the concert was over. We might give a small group performance test to “fill a grade,” but there was no process where students had a chance to improve their mark.

As arts teachers, we're focused on the ‘art’ of what we do and on instilling intrinsic joy in our students. We're very good at giving formative, in-the-moment feedback, and while many students do grow their skills, grades often felt disconnected from that work. They were something we had to do, and the grade itself usually reflected our perception of a student’s participation and current skill level, with little emphasis on using the grading process as a tool for individual growth or specific learning goals.

This experience brought me face-to-face with a universal challenge for all arts educators: how do we effectively grade growth, artistry, and skill in such diverse, performance-based classrooms? Traditional methods often fall short, collapsing individual accountability into the success of the ensemble, thus measuring group performance instead of personal skill development. Standards-Based Grading (SBG) offers a clear path forward, but it requires a fresh perspective. We can't simply apply the same principles used in core academic subjects; in the arts, SBG must be tailored to honor the creative process while providing a clear roadmap for student improvement.

What is Standards-Based Grading (SBG)?

Standards-Based Grading measures how well students have **mastered specific skills or standards** separate from effort and behavior. It is an assessment philosophy that requires letting go of deeply ingrained traditional practices (e.g., a 90-100% equals an A, and a disproportionate 0-59% equals an F) and rethinking our fundamental approach to evaluation.

In SBG, a final grade is recorded based on a student's progress toward a specific standard, focusing solely on their **current skill level**. **Instead of a single letter grade or percentage, students receive a descriptive score for each skill they are building** (e.g., a 4-point proficiency scale, as outlined below in Table 1). Grading is used as a communication tool to clearly define and track student growth on specific learning goals. This requires that students are always clear on what their own learning targets/goals are. For example, instead of receiving an “85% in choir,” a student is evaluated individually on ensemble skills, posture, and vocal technique. For a high-impact illustration of SBG in practice, refer to the [Sight Singing Karate](#) case study.

Table 1:

4-Point Grading Scale (proportionate and works with letter grades)			
Point Value	Percentage Equivalent	Letter Grade	Sample Descriptor Words
3.20-4.0	80-100	A	Excelling, Well Skilled, Proficient Plus, Advanced Mastery
2.40-3.19	60-79.99	B	Proficient, Skilled, Mastery
1.60-2.39	40-59.99	C	Approaching, Developing, Partial Proficiency
.80-1.59	20-39.99	D	Emerging, Beginning, Novice
0-.79	0-19.99	F	Insufficient Evidence

Note: For a detailed breakdown with + and - letter grades, see the full conversion in section 8.

Why Does SBG Matters in the Arts?

So, why does Standards-Based Grading (SBG) matter so much in the Arts? The answer lies in the unique challenges of our classrooms.

First, our students arrive with vastly different skill levels. Some students may have been taking private lessons and/or coaching for years, while others are just beginning their artistic journey. It's also true that some students possess a natural propensity or talent for certain art forms. For example, a student might sing with a naturally beautiful tone, but that doesn't necessarily mean they are proficient at reading music, or that they understand and can perform specific dynamics and phrasing. Traditional grading often penalizes beginners and overlooks the gaps in skill mastery for naturally talented students. SBG shifts our focus entirely: it's not about prior experience or raw talent, but about a student's **individual growth in skill level from their own point A to their own point B** from the start to the end of the course.

Second, the traditional grades we use often end up measuring compliance rather than skill. A "participation" grade frequently rewards a student for being quiet, staying in their seat, and not talking—but that has nothing to do with their ability to perform or create. Similarly, a performance or exhibition grade often measures the quality of the group's final product, not the individual's learning. SBG helps us separate a student's effort, behavior, and raw artistry from their mastery of specific skills.

This brings us to a common question I hear from teachers. If we don't give students a grade for a final concert, how do we hold them accountable? The answer lies in shifting our mindset from a punitive system to one that creates a culture of accountability through skill demonstration. Instead of a grade for "showing up," the grade is tied to specific skills. For example, a student's final grade can reflect their proficiency at "performing with expression in front of an audience" or "demonstrating good concert etiquette." These skills can be assessed during the dress rehearsals leading up to the performance, giving students time for feedback and

improvement. The final performance, then, becomes the final opportunity for them to demonstrate their mastery of these specific skills.

By shifting our focus to standards, we can provide a system that is fair to every student, regardless of their starting point. SBG allows us to measure what truly matters: the growth and attainment of individual skills.

A Success Story: The AP Music Theory Challenge

My journey into changing the way I think about grading began when educator and author Cassandra Erkens was invited to my school district. A primary theme of her workshops was establishing assessment practices that build **hope, efficacy, and achievement** among students. She was the first person I heard talk about changing the traditional percentage breakdown to fit a four-point scale.

I was blown away. It challenged everything I had known my whole life as a student and educator. What do you mean we can think of percentages differently? An "A" is supposed to be 90% to 100%, and an "F" is 0% to 59%. Yet, Erkens challenged this notion: what if we were to proportionately spread out the percentages to the letter grades and numerical scale? See Table 1.

I took my first steps by implementing a basic 1 through 4 scale with descriptor words for all my assessment grading. Then, I jumped into the deep end when I was tasked with designing and building an online AP Music Theory course for my district. A colleague warned me the AP Music Theory test was notoriously difficult and that I would be lucky if even half of my students passed the College Board exam.

Guided by our district's belief that "all students can achieve at high levels" and everything I had learned, I embraced this challenge. I fully adopted the four-point system and its proportionate percentage scale. To make this work logistically, I adjusted the "final marks" on our grading platform (a critical step for making SBG work in a traditional system) so that the scores I entered (1, 2, 3, or 4) would be accurately reflected in their final letter grade.

For the AP Music Theory class, I created a detailed curriculum map tied directly to the standards, complete with student-friendly "I can" statements. I gave students target trackers where they kept a running tally of their skill level across rote knowledge, analyzing skills, listening/aural skills, composition, and sight singing. Students were allowed to turn in assignments late for full credit, as long as they were submitted before the end of the grading period. They were given **continual feedback** and **opportunities for improvement and reassessment**.

It was rigorous, and I was nervous, constantly asking, *was it working?* But I kept trusting the process: clear learning targets/goals, continual feedback, opportunities for retakes, and turning in late assignments for full credit (a policy students initially found hard to believe).

The result? 100% of my students passed the AP Music Theory exam. Furthermore, my students' average was higher than the state average, the national average, and the global average. This demonstrated definitively that focusing on growth, process, and clear standards—not punishing error or lateness—is the ultimate pathway to exceptional student achievement.

From Standards to Learning Targets in the Arts

So, we know SBG matters, but how do we make it actionable in the Arts? The first step is to translate the often-broad arts standards into clear, student-friendly learning targets.

ARTS standards can be dense and multi-faceted. A goal like "Perform with technical accuracy" is necessary, but it is too vague to be an effective learning target for a student. This must be broken down into concise and measurable "I can..." statements that students can easily understand, own and track. This is where the "less is more" principle applies: instead of trying to grade every skill, focus only on essential standards during each grading period. (Essential Standards—sometimes called priority standards or power standards in other districts—are the most critical skills and concepts that students must learn in order to show meaningful progress in the arts.)

Creating Actionable Learning Targets

Learning targets must be specific, measurable, and tied directly to the skill being developed:

- **Broad Standard (Music):** Perform with technical accuracy and appropriate expression.
 - **Actionable Target (Music):** "I can sight-read an 8-measure melody with accurate rhythm and pitch."
- **Broad Standard (Visual Art):** Use media, techniques, and processes to communicate ideas.
 - **Actionable Target (Visual Art):** "I can correctly mix and apply three secondary colors using only primary pigments (red, yellow, blue)."
- **Broad Standard (Drama):** Develop and communicate a character.
 - **Actionable Target (Drama):** "I can use proper vocal projection and articulation to be understood from any point in the space."



Learning targets in the arts generally fall into two categories

Short-Term Targets: These are skills assessed over a short timeframe, typically moving through the assessment cycle once (see Table 4). They may cover a two-to-four-week unit or a specific element within a piece, performance, or project (see below for an example of a short term target assessment).

Long-Term/Ongoing Targets: These are skills that are continuously developed and reassessed over the course of a grading period, promoting essential habit formation and accountability (see below for an example of a long term target assessment).

It is critical to note that both types of targets cycle through the same process. Students receive feedback, instruction is re-taught, and students are given multiple opportunities for growth and reassessment. Clear learning goals/targets are a foundational element of your SBG system. They shift the focus from a single final product—like a concert or exhibition—to the skills students develop along the way, providing a clear roadmap for improvement and giving students ownership of their learning.

Table 2: Useful in developing learning targets from essential standards for common assessments. (See section "Scales vs. Rubrics: Defining Proficiency" for more information.)

RUBRIC: Standards Based Grading in the Arts 
Artistic Process:
Standard:
Learning Target(s):
Instruction / Activity:
 Take #1 Assessment:



 Take #2 Reassessment:		
Time Length (short term or ongoing LT) :		
4	Descriptor Word	--- Enter Criteria Here --- (option: only enter criteria for a 4)
3	Descriptor Word	--- Enter Criteria Here ---
2	Descriptor Word	--- Enter Criteria Here ---
1	Descriptor Word	--- Enter Criteria Here ---

Table 3: Examples of Learning Targets in various Arts courses. (Note: these targets can be assessed as short or long term targets.)

Subject	Learning Targets Examples 
Vocal/Choral Music	I can blend my voice with my section, adjusting my volume to match the overall ensemble balance. I can sight sing an 8-measure melody with accurate rhythm and pitch using solfege syllables.
Instrumental Music	I can efficiently assemble my instrument and demonstrate correct posture and hand position at all times during rehearsal. I can produce a characteristic and consistent tone quality across all registers of my instrument.
Drama	I can use proper vocal projection and articulation to be understood from any point in the space. I can maintain consistent, believable character motivation and objective throughout a scene.
Dance	I can maintain the demonstrated body alignment and posture during all movement. I can safely and effectively warm up my body and demonstrate self-correction during technique exercises.
Visual Art	I can use three different values (light, medium, dark) to create a sense of form and dimension in my charcoal drawing). I can show good craftsmanship by taking care of my materials, tools, and equipment.

Example of a Short-Term Target Process: The 3-Part Round

An example of a short-term target in my 5th grade vocal music class was: *I can sing in a 3-part round with the correct notes and rhythm.*

For a week, students learned a song and practiced it in small groups. To assess them, I listened to each group and gave individual scores using a 1-4 scale: 4 = well skilled, 3 = proficient, etc. I then entered these scores into our grading platform, creating immediate communication and transparency for both students and parents.

The crucial next step was providing opportunities for growth. I explained to students that they would have a chance to improve their score by completing a "Take 2" re-assessment. This reinforces a clear growth mindset: "I want you to grow your skill, and I know you can achieve this learning target," instilling the belief that improvement is not just possible, but expected.

To keep students invested, I **shared the class data**, showing how many students received each score. This motivated them and established investment in the process. As the teacher, I used that data to inform re-teaching and address common mistakes. This learning cycle ensures students are clear on their learning target and have a path to proficiency.

Example of an Ongoing Target: Ensemble Etiquette

An example of an Ongoing Target is: *I can demonstrate good rehearsal and concert etiquette by showing good singing posture, following the conductor, and using good vowel shape.* While dense, these are essential skills for ensemble participation, practiced consistently in every rehearsal. Teachers may choose to separate these into individual learning targets, such as, "I can sing with rounded vowel shape" or "I can sing with expression."

I recorded this target as an "assignment" in the grading system and updated the score approximately every two weeks, reflecting the most recent, consistently demonstrated skill level. If a student improves, I **document the growth in the comments** (e.g., "improved from a 2"). If a student is consistently not showing improvement, their score may be lowered. **This continual assessment is vital in the arts because these skills promote habit formation.** If students are only assessed once, they may lack the motivation to continue utilizing the skill over time.

Beyond Rote Memorization: Assessing Application

In many arts classes (especially performing and visual arts), assessment must move past simple fill-in-the-blank or multiple-choice formats. We need to assess skills at an **application level**. For instance, instead of a student only identifying the definition of *staccato*, they must also *perform* a musical phrase using a staccato articulation. Since traditional written tests fail to capture artistry, SBG in the arts relies on two powerful tools: scales and rubrics.

Scales and Rubrics: Defining Proficiency

In SBG, we use scales and rubrics to describe the progression of a skill using a proficiency scale. This approach ensures students and parents understand what "mastery" looks like for a specific target.

The Scale (Communicating Proficiency): This is the foundation—the numeric and descriptor system (like the 4-point scale we discussed). It provides the final score that communicates a student's current proficiency level.

The Rubric (Defining Proficiency): This is the detailed explanation of what each point on the scale means for a specific target. For the arts, rubrics can be Performance Based or Point Based/Factual. (See Table 4 below.)

Teachers may use a couple of approaches depending on the assessment:

- **Simplified Rubric:** This version is often used for quick skill checks or long-term targets. It simply lists the "I can..." learning target statement alongside the number and descriptor word for each level. Teachers or students can quickly fill this in. (See Table 5 & 6 below.)
- **Detailed (Analytic) Rubric:** This provides a comprehensive explanation of what performance looks like at each level (e.g., a "4" is described with high-level detail, while a "1" shows emerging understanding). What you use depends on the subject, grade level, and the complexity of the learning target. For instance, a detailed rubric might be used in a high school drama class to define the nuances of character motivation, while a simplified rubric works better for a middle school visual art target on color mixing. (See Table 7 below.)

Table 4: This table shows the difference between what a Performance Test rubric might look like compared to a Point Based or Factual Test where you determine what constitutes a 4, 3, 2, and 1.

Performance Test		Point Based/Factual Test	
Rubric		Example - 10 Question Test	
4 - Excelling	Description	4 - Excelling	8-10 correct
3 - Proficient	Description	3 - Proficient	6-7 correct
2 - Approaching	Description	2 - Approaching	3-5 correct
1 - Beginning	Description	1 - Beginning	1-2 correct

Table 5: Example of a Simple Performance rubric that lists only the learning target(s) being assessed in student-friendly language that teachers and/or students can fill in.


Learning Targets 	4	3	2	1
	I did very well the entire time	I did well most of the time	I did well some of the time	I need more practice
I can perform with outstanding pitch accuracy . No more than one minor error, and stay in the same key from beginning to end.				
I can perform with outstanding rhythmic accuracy . No more than one minor error and a steady pulse throughout.				

Table 6: Example of a Simple Performance Rubric used in a middle school drama class.


Learning Targets 	4	3	2	1
	I did very well the entire time	I did well most of the time	I did well some of the time	I need more practice
I can “cheat out” my body towards the audience.				
I can project my voice so everyone understands what I am saying.				
I can stay in character .				
I can cooperate with my team in making creative choices.				

Table 7: Analytic Performance Rubric with a Scale with the same learning goals as Table 6.

I can perform with...	4 Advanced/Skilled	3 Proficient	2 Developing	1 Beginning
Pitch Accuracy	Outstanding- No more than one minor error. Students stay in the same key from beginning to end.	Infrequent errors. Two or more minor problems with pitch. Students may change the key by a half step, but then stay in the same key.	Lack of consistency in note accuracy. Difficulty staying in the same key throughout.	Numerous inaccurate notes and intervals. May be unable to stay in the same key for very long.
Rhythmic Accuracy	Outstanding- No more than one minor error. Steady pulse throughout.	Infrequent errors. Two or more minor rhythm problems. Students may have one stop and start. Pulse mostly consistent.	Lack of consistency in rhythmic accuracy. May have 2 stops and starts causing the pulse to be consistent.	Numerous errors and stops and starts in rhythm. May be unable to continue and steady pulse.

Target Trackers: Fostering Motivation and Ownership


The implementation of Standards-Based Grading (SBG) is not merely a change in calculation; it is a shift to a culture of motivation and student ownership. By clearly defining learning targets (learning goals) and tracking them visibly, we empower students to invest in their own process, focusing on their growth journey rather than peer comparison.

Target Trackers are a powerful strategy for achieving this culture. These are visual tools used to show class-wide and individual progress toward specific learning targets, celebrating success and providing inspiration. (See below for Target Tracker examples.)

It is important to remember that not every score recorded on a tracker needs to count toward a student's final grade. A target tracker can and should be used primarily as a visual feedback and practice tool. To prevent teacher burnout and maintain the integrity of your SBG system, always refer back to your essential standards and only select the most crucial, high-impact skills that you want your students to improve and demonstrate mastery of. If a skill is on the tracker but is not one of those essential few, use the score purely for diagnostic feedback or motivation toward a final product or performance.

As an option to further enhance ownership, these trackers can be adapted to incorporate Customized Learning Goals, empowering students to select and track their own goals based on a list of essential skills. This fosters a culture of support where every student is invested in reaching their personal best.

Table 8: TARGET TRACKER EXAMPLE #1: This is a great way for you and your students to track where they are in preparation for an upcoming performance or presentation. Display it regularly at the beginning and end of rehearsals. Color in each box to denote the class' current level. Note: all classes start at 1 and progress together toward 4 which means they are performance ready.

PERFORMANCE TARGET TRACKER 					
Musical Piece Title /Scene Title	4	3	2	1	Notes on progress
Title of piece...					
Title of piece...					

Title of piece...					
Title of piece...					

Table 9: TARGET TRACKER EXAMPLE #2: For a class and/or individual students. Project it on a screen or hang a hard copy. For formal assessment of individuals within large groups, you can write down scores on a seating chart or a class roster



 Learning Target Tracker			
I can...			
4 Well Skilled Optional: What does this look like?	3 Skilled Optional: What does this look like?	2 Developing Optional: What does this look like?	1 Beginning Optional: What does this look like?

Table 10: TARGET TRACKER EXAMPLE #3: For individual students to track their own progress through a unit of study. Reflection questions are optional.

Name _____		Date _____					
STUDENT TARGET TRACKER 							
4- I feel well qualified , 3- I feel qualified , 2- I feel somewhat qualified , 1- I need more practice							
Read the "I CAN" statements below. Do you feel you know how to do any of those learning targets? Explain:							
Learning Targets - Unit 1							
Learning Targets	Your Progress			Red	Orange	Yellow	Green
	Date & Score	Date & Score	Date & Score				
I can ...							
I can ...							
I can ...							
I can ...							
What was the biggest success? Explain -							
What is still a challenge? What do you still need assistance with and/or more practice with?							

Ultimately, using technology, such as grading platforms, to track these scores provides parents and students with ongoing feedback, ensuring that grades in the arts are transparent, equitable, and focused solely on skill mastery and growth.

Assessment Strategies for Arts Educators

Once learning targets are defined, the next step is creating assessments that truly capture artistic growth and skill application. In performance and product-based arts classes, the vast majority of instructional time is dedicated to the collective goal—perfecting the final concert, show, or exhibition. This necessary focus on the group often leaves teachers with limited time for **individual measurement and specific, private feedback**. Traditional assessment methods only compound this issue: they rely on a vague, product-focused sequence where the final performance serves as a large part of the grade. This is ineffective because it fails to clearly state to students *what individual skills* are being assessed. When the final product *is* the grade, students are left unsure which specific skill areas led to their mark.

Standards-Based Grading (SBG) resolves this by requiring clarity on individual, measurable skills *before* the assessment begins, allowing teachers to efficiently capture individual growth even while rehearsing the whole group.

The Growth Mindset: The Take 1 / Take 2 Model

A powerful tool for shifting culture in an SBG classroom is the **reassessment opportunity**, the "Take 1 / Take 2" model. This system embodies the core principle of SBG: learning is a continuous cycle, not a one-shot event.

When a student first attempts an assessment (*Take 1*), the score is less about grading and more about data collection. That data informs the teacher on what needs to be re-taught, and it motivates the student to identify areas for improvement. **The system requires differentiated support before retesting.** For students who haven't reached proficiency, this means providing personalized **in-the-moment feedback**, suggestions for further independent practice, and/or **targeted small-group instruction** *before* they are allowed to take the assessment again. The student is then given a guaranteed chance to improve their score (*Take 2*). This process provides:

1. **Hope:** It shows students you believe they are capable of achieving the learning target.
2. **Accountability:** It requires the student to put in the effort to practice and learn from their mistakes (and that mistakes are an important part of the process, especially in the arts.)

Table 11: Here is what the SBG Assessment Process might look like in the Arts.

The Take 1 / Take 2 Assessment Process Example

- **Present Learning Targets to Students**

- Ensure these are posted and accessible to all students.
- Remind them of their learning goal(s) often.

- **Teach Content**

- **Teach and Reinforce Good Habits:** Proactively model and consistently address the key habits required for artistic success. This includes the non-negotiable process skills—such as proper rehearsal etiquette, efficient practice strategies, and responsible studio maintenance—that lay the foundation for long-term skill mastery
- **Utilize Mistakes as Teaching Moments** Anticipate common technical or conceptual errors that students are likely to make. Either address these pitfalls during initial instruction or, more powerfully, strategically allow mistakes to happen. By identifying and correcting errors immediately, you reinforce the idea that **error is a vital and necessary part of the artistic learning process.**

- **Take #1 Summative Assessment (record scores on grading system)**

- Conduct the first measurement of the learning target. These scores are formally recorded on your grading platform, which clearly distinguishes them from informal, formative checks.
- **Visibility and Accountability:** By entering scores into the grading system, you provide students and parents with transparent, accessible information about the student's current proficiency level for that specific learning target.
- **Data Analysis and Student Motivation:** Share aggregated data with students. Highlight class-wide insights, such as common strengths and prevalent mistakes, and share the distribution of scores (e.g., how many students achieved a 4, a 3, etc.). This visible data is often fascinating to students and becomes a powerful intrinsic motivator, driving their desire to improve their skill before the Take 2 reassessment.

- **Teach Targeted Content and Reteaching**

- **Data-Driven Re-teaching:** Instruction immediately shifts to address the specific areas of need identified by the Take 1 results.
- **Differentiated Support:** Re-teaching can be delivered to the whole group (for common errors), in small groups, or to individual students requiring focused attention.
- **Condition for Retest:** Students who haven't reached proficiency must receive personalized in-the-moment feedback, suggestions for further independent practice, and/or targeted small-group instruction *before* they are allowed to take the assessment again. This requires effort from the student to earn the improved score.

- **Take #2 Summative Assessment**

- **Guaranteed Opportunity:** The student is given a guaranteed chance to demonstrate their improved skill.
- **Flexible Format:** The format of Take 2 can vary based on the skill being assessed:
 - The student can retake the **same exact assessment** as Take 1.
 - A **new, parallel assessment** can be given that covers the same exact target.
 - A highly **specific assessment** can be designed to focus only on the parts of the target the student previously missed.
- **Communication:** Use comments in your grading platform—for example, "Improved from a 3 to a 4"—to clearly communicate this growth to parents and students.

- **Continual Opportunities for Mastery** - For students who have not yet reached proficiency, the learning cycle continues. Provide them with in-the-moment feedback, suggestions for further independent practice, and/or targeted small-group instruction before they attempt the retest. This ensures the reassessment measures genuine improvement, not just another try.

Other Assessment Strategies Unique to the Arts

Because much of our content is performance-based, we must use alternative assessment methods that capture the process and the final product. Building on the Take 1/Take 2 model, here are some assessment strategies.

- **Video Recording for Review:** For large classes where real-time scoring is difficult, consider periodically taking short video recordings (e.g., during a difficult passage or a complex movement sequence). Reviewing this footage allows for accurate, focused scoring of each student. Showing these videos to students is a powerful, concrete tool for feedback and reassessment.
- **Skill Checks Embedded in Rehearsal:** Instead of one large test, use quick checks during rehearsal or class time (e.g., checking musical posture, projecting the theater voice, or mixing a specific color). This approach is especially effective for assessing **Long-Term/Ongoing Targets**. The teacher can simply use a seating chart to mark individual scores (1–4) in the moment, which are later recorded and updated periodically in the grading system.
- **Staggered Assessment Schedule (Formal Targets):** For more formal assessments (especially of short-term targets), spread the assessment window over two to three class periods. By using a testing

schedule and assessing a certain number of students per class, you reduce disruption to the rest of the group and dedicate more focused time to scoring each individual's demonstration of skill.

- **Portfolios and Process Journals:** Assess the creative process leading up to the final product. These journals/portfolios allow the student to **reflect and track their own growth** against the learning goals (targets), while allowing the teacher to evaluate ideation, sketching, rehearsal notes, reflection, and technique application over time.
- **Gamification:** This involves applying game design elements (such as points, levels, or visible progress tracking) to the learning process to drive motivation. This approach naturally meets students at their individual skill levels, fostering a sense of fun and visible accomplishment that encourages growth in any domain.
- **Mistakes as Mastery Pathways:** The teacher must **intentionally allow and integrate opportunities for error** into the curriculum plan. Mistakes are not failures but **vital data points**; by anticipating common errors, the teacher can use them as immediate teaching moments. This approach reinforces to students that **mistakes are a normal and necessary part of the artistic process** required for skill mastery.

Addressing the "Participation vs. Skill" Dilemma

Rethinking Participation and Performance

Two of the biggest hurdles for arts teachers transitioning to SBG are how to handle **participation** in class and how to grade the **final performance** or **exhibition**. In traditional systems, these are often lumped together, creating grades that are unfair and non-specific. SBG forces us to decouple behavior from skill and define exactly what we are measuring.

Participation Does Not Equal Skill: The most common mistake is using "participation" as a catch-all grade. A high participation score often rewards compliance—sitting quietly, not talking out of turn, and being present—but these behaviors do not prove skill mastery. SBG demands that we redefine rehearsal and studio behaviors not as *participation* but as **essential, observable skills** necessary for collaborative creation.

How to Redefine Behavior as Skill: Instead of grading on "participation," we assess clear, measurable, long-term learning targets based on observable skills. Examples include:

- **Ensemble Work:** "I can demonstrate good rehearsal technique, responding immediately to the conductor's cues or the director's notes."
- **Preparation:** "I can set up and maintain my workspace/instrument efficiently and responsibly."
- **Collaboration:** "I can offer constructive feedback to peers and integrate feedback received from the teacher."

By redefining participation as measurable skills, we provide clear targets. Students are held accountable for demonstrating the skills required to be an effective and contributing member of the group.

Performance Grades: Individual Mastery Over Group Product: For performing arts, the final concert or show is a collective group product, making it challenging to assign an individual grade based on its success. A high-quality group performance does not mean every student mastered their individual learning targets.

In an SBG classroom, the grade for the final performance must reflect **individual learning targets, not just how the group sounded or the final quality of the artwork**. The final performance should be viewed as the ultimate assessment opportunity for those individual long-term skills, such as:

- **Expressive Execution:** "I can perform with dynamic contrast and appropriate expression."
- **Technical Accuracy:** "I can perform my part/choreography with technical accuracy and clarity."
- **Professionalism:** "I can demonstrate professional concert etiquette and stage presence."

As we discussed in Section 3, these skills should be assessed multiple times *before* the final event (e.g., during dress rehearsals or staged run-throughs). This shifts the mindset from a punitive one-time grade to a transparent process where the final performance is simply the *last chance* for the student to demonstrate the highest level of their learned skills.

Practical Tips for Arts Teachers Transitioning to SBG

Transitioning your grading system requires careful planning and a conscious shift in mindset. Here are five practical tips for getting started:

1. Less is More! Start with the Essentials- It can be overwhelming to track every skill a student demonstrates. Instead, choose just **3–4 key, high-impact standards or skills** to grade first. This allows you to complete each SBG assessment cycle and provide meaningful feedback. It is better to have all students significantly improve fewer, high-impact skills than to try and assess multiple skills without the opportunity to ensure every student can learn and grow.

2. Communicate Clearly and Consistently- Standards-Based Grading represents a philosophical shift, and it requires clear communication with all stakeholders. Explain to students and parents that their grade **reflects skill mastery and growth, not effort or behavior**. When communicating, always refer back to the learning targets and the proficiency scale.

3. Embrace Simple Scales- Use a **simple 4-point proficiency scale with clear descriptor words** (e.g., Mastering, Proficient, Developing, Beginning). This makes scores easy to interpret for students, parents, and colleagues. While a detailed rubric is sometimes necessary, simpler scales provide instantaneous feedback that is easier to track throughout the semester. The conversion of these scores into traditional percentage-based grading platforms must be carefully planned to prevent grade distortion (e.g., ensuring a '1' is not recorded as a zero). (See the Full Conversion Grading Scale in Table 12).

4. Allow Reassessment—With Intent- Reassessment is critical because the arts are iterative—mastery requires practice, not luck. **Crucially, communicate that a retake is not simply a do-over; it must follow a period of targeted practice, re-teaching, or specific teacher intervention.** This ensures the higher score reflects genuine learning and sustained growth, not just a one-time high score. Furthermore, because many skills in the arts must be consistently demonstrated, limit the practice of recording only the highest score for ongoing learning targets. The final grade for *ongoing* learning targets should reflect the student's *most recent, consistent* demonstration of that skill.

5. Focus on the Individual in the Ensemble- In large-group settings, it is easy to default to group grades. SBG requires tracking individual growth within a group context. This can be done simply, such as by using your seating chart to quickly mark individual scores (e.g., 1–4) during rehearsal, which are later recorded in the grading system. This method ensures you are consistently gathering data on individual skill progress, even when your primary focus is on the whole group. Alternatively, for large classes where real-time scoring is difficult, consider periodically taking short video recordings (once or twice per grading period, especially before a performance). Reviewing this footage allows for accurate, focused scoring of each student. Showing these videos to students is also a powerful and concrete tool for feedback, growth, and providing a "Take 2" assessment opportunity. It ensures that regardless of the large-group context, the grade a student receives truly represents their personal learning journey.

Challenges & Considerations for Success

Standards-Based Grading is a streamlined, effective system, but it requires preparation and a willingness to let go of traditional practices. **The difficulties often revolve around managing teacher workload, clear communication with stakeholders, and ensuring that assessment doesn't diminish the intrinsic joy of artistic creation.** The issues below are not insurmountable challenges; rather, they are essential considerations that must be addressed to ensure a successful, smooth transition.

The Logistical Balancing Act: Workload and Data Entry

The most common concern from arts educators is the potential increase in workload, especially when juggling large class sizes. It's easy to feel overwhelmed by the thought of giving individualized feedback and tracking skills for large numbers of students, especially for arts teachers who travel to more than one school.

The key to managing this workload lies in the "Less is More" philosophy (Section 5) and strategic data entry. Not every skill needs a weekly entry in the gradebook. Instead, focus on a handful of high-impact learning targets and record scores only when you have a consistent observation or a formal skill check.

For instance, in a 4th and 5th-grade music class meeting twice a week for 40 minutes, my colleagues and I found that entering anywhere from three to four assessments per grading period was manageable. For middle and high school students, we might have five to six assessments per grading period.

Assessing Diverse Levels in Large Groups

When assessing a specific skill during a rehearsal or performance, teachers must decide how to handle a room full of students who are all at different skill levels. There are two primary SBG approaches for differentiated assessment:

The Uniform Target Approach: The teacher sets a specific learning target that is challenging yet achievable by all students (e.g., "I can sing my harmony line accurately through the first verse"). The expectation is that **every student could potentially achieve proficiency (a '3')** on this uniform target. Students who master it quickly are then provided opportunities to develop more complex skills within that same learning target or within another target.

The Individually Matched Target Approach: The teacher establishes a tiered sequence of targets (or levels within a target) and assesses each student based on the level they are currently ready to demonstrate. For example, in a music sight-reading assessment, one beginner student might be assessed on "Level 1: Reading quarter and half notes," while an advanced student is assessed on "Level 5: Reading more complex rhythms like syncopation." This approach maximizes focus on individual growth from their personal starting point. The subsequent *Case Study: Sight Singing Karate* is a perfect illustration of this highly differentiated approach.

Open-Enrollment vs. Advanced Level Classes

The arts often feature diverse class structures, creating a challenge for equity:

SBG is crucial in any level class (from beginning to advanced level classes) because it allows us to set fair, equitable expectations regardless of a student's prior experience. In open-enrollment classes, the focus must be on **growth from their personal point A to B** (Individually Matched Targets). In advanced (auditioned) ensembles, the expectation for foundational skills is higher, but the SBG system still requires measuring

mastery of *new* and *advanced* targets, not just resting on prior talent. The system is fair because the requirement for a '4' is always tied to mastering the current standard.

Balancing Joy with Discipline

Arts teachers are dedicated to fostering an **intrinsic sense of joy** and wonder in the artistic process. Some fear that breaking skills down into measurable standards could make the process feel sterile or overly clinical. However, SBG actually achieves the opposite. It provides students with the **self-discipline needed for growth**—a clear roadmap showing them *how* to improve. This intentional growth, fueled by specific feedback and clear goals, ultimately leads to greater confidence and a deeper, more sustainable love for the art form.

Reframing the Conversation with Parents

Finally, communication is paramount. Parent communication requires actively reframing what grades in the arts represent. Teachers must move the conversation away from traditional percentages and averages and toward proficiency:

- **The Grade is the Skill:** Explain that the grade reflects the student's current proficiency level (4=Mastery, 3=Proficient, etc.) on specific, essential standards, not an average of compliance or effort.
- **Data for Better Teaching:** Share how SBG provides you with the specific data needed to inform your instruction, leading to more **empathetic and effective teaching** because you know exactly what each student needs to improve on next. This shift from grading *students* to grading *evidence of learning* builds trust and clarity with all stakeholders.

Making SBG Work with Letter Grades and Percentages

Implementing the 1-4 proficiency scale within a school's existing percentage-based grading system requires a fundamental adjustment to the conversion formula. In a traditional system, a score of 2 out of 4 (50%) is automatically calculated as a failing grade (F).

To ensure the 1-4 scale accurately reflects student proficiency—where a '2' often represents a developing but passing grade—you must **recalibrate the percentage values that correspond to each letter grade**. By adjusting the minimum percentage required for a C, B, and A, you ensure that when you enter a 1, 2, 3, or 4 for an individual assessment, the grading system correctly converts it to a letter grade that is proportionate to the student's demonstrated proficiency. For example, in a proportionate system, a score of 2 out of 4 will equate to the letter grade of a C.

Table 12:

Full Grading Conversion Scale (Detailed breakdown with + and - letter grades)			
Letter Grade	4 Point System	Percentage Equivalent	Points / Letter Grade / Descriptors
A+	4.00-4+	100-100+	3.20-4 = A Excelling, Well Skilled, Proficient Plus or Advanced Mastery
A	3.40-3.99	85.00-100	
A-	3.20-3.39	80.00-84.99	

B+	3.00-3.19	75.00-79.99	2.4-3.19 = B Proficient, Skilled or Mastery
B	2.60-2.99	65.00-74.99	
B-	2.40-2.59	60.00-64.99	
C+	2.21-2.39	55.00-59.99	1.60-2.39 = C Approaching, Developing, or Partial Proficiency
C	1.80-2.20	45.00-54.99	
C-	1.60-1.79	40.00-44.99	
D+	1.40-1.59	35.00-39.99	.80-1.59 = D Emerging, Beginning or Novice
D	.80-1.39	20.00-34.99	
F	0-.79	0-19.99	0-.79 = F Insufficient Evidence

Conclusion: SBG as a Pathway to Authentic Arts Learning

For too long, grading in the arts has felt like a necessary evil—a bureaucratic afterthought that existed separately from the passion and growth happening in our studios and rehearsal halls. Traditional methods, reliant on attendance, participation percentages, and subjective opinion, failed to capture the truth of the artistic journey.

Standards-Based Grading resolves that fundamental disconnect. By moving away from confusing averages and punitive grading curves, we establish a system where **grades should, and must, reflect skills and growth, not just attendance or a teacher's subjective opinion.**

This shift preserves the sanctity of the creative process. SBG is not about breaking down artistry; it's about providing every student with a clear, measurable roadmap for improvement. It allows us to preserve the creativity and joy of the arts while equipping students with the self-discipline and skill mastery required to thrive.

A Culture of Growth, Not Comparison

The most profound result of an SBG system is the cultural change it creates. By embracing the principles of individually matched targets and measuring progress from "Point A to Point B," we build an inclusive environment where every single student can feel successful. Success is no longer defined by who is the most talented or who earns the highest overall percentage; it is defined by mastering the current standard. This fosters a culture of growth and hope, turning assessment data into a celebration of progress, just as we saw with *Sight Singing Karate*.

Start Small, Focus on What Matters

The transition to SBG is a philosophical choice to place growth at the center of your teaching. Start small: choose 3–4 essential standards, focus on clear learning targets, and use reassessment as a tool for hope. By making this shift, you ensure that grading becomes a powerful force that **enhances—not diminishes—the artistry of your teaching.**

About the Author

Erica Turrell has been teaching music for over 24 years in public schools across all grade levels, from kindergarten through 12th grade, in the Irvine Unified School District, at the Orange County High School of the Arts, and in the Saddleback Valley Unified School District. She also served as adjunct faculty for six years at Cypress Community College and for ten years at Soka University. In December 2025, she was named a semifinalist for the CMA Foundation's Teacher of Excellence Award, recognizing her impact as an educator and leader in music education. She holds a Bachelor of Music in Vocal Performance from the University of California, Irvine, a Master of Music from the University of Texas at Austin and a single subject teaching credential in music from California State University, Long Beach. She is the author of a series of music theory books titled Sing Theory and a vocal warm-up CD, Warm Up Your Voice.



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