20 Ways to Cut Your Grading Time in Half

By Jennifer Gonzalez

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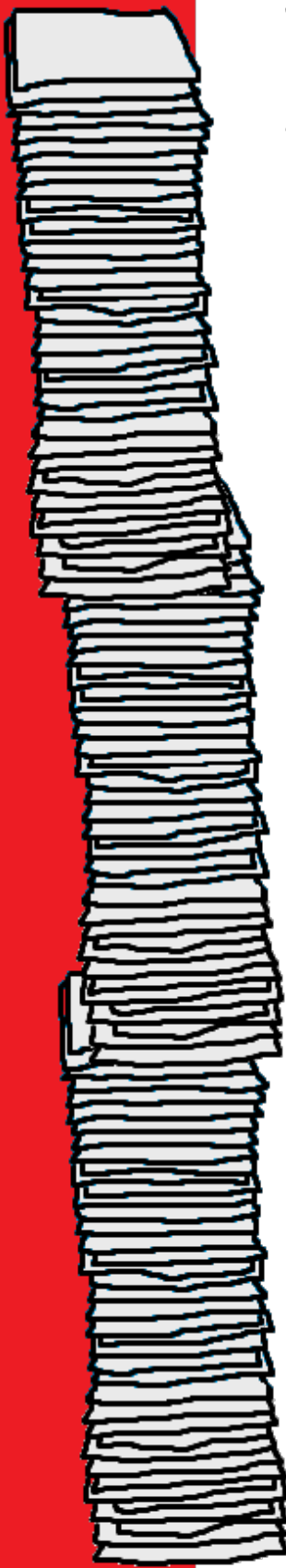By Jennifer Gonzalez

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I have always been too embarrassed to tell this story. It was my third year of teaching and I was behind on grading. Five folders bulging with quizzes, make-up work, essays...I was looking at a solid weekend of nothing but grading.

At my dining room table that Saturday morning, I sorted the papers into piles. I picked up a stack of worksheets from first period and prepared a column in my grade book to record the scores. I uncapped my pen, sighed, and stared at the first worksheet. Then I thought, *Wait. These are just worksheets. From three weeks ago. No one has asked for them. I bet they don't even remember these. What if I just...*

I stood, gathered that pile of worksheets and the ones from my four other class periods, walked over to the recycling bin, and dropped them in. One hundred and twenty papers, gone in an instant. Yes, I still graded the other stuff: the quizzes, the essays...but those worksheets were no longer my problem. I felt kind of guilty. But mostly I felt *free*.

Chances are, you've been where I was that day. Maybe you didn't solve the problem the way I did, but I'll bet you considered it. Well there's a better way. **Lots** of better ways, actually. In the following pages you'll find **20** really smart ideas you can mix and match to cut back on the time you spend grading and get those piles of paper – even digital "paper" – under control.

Enjoy!

~Jenn

Don't grade everything.

While throwing student work away is not recommended, it's a good idea to limit what you actually assign a grade. It's important for students to get lots of practice, and to get credit for their effort, but not *everything* needs careful grading. Here are some ways to grade more selectively:

▶ **Pick Just One**
Have students do several similar assignments in a row (journal entries, short constructed responses, geometry proofs, bell-ringers) keeping them in a folder that's stored in class. Then have the student choose the **one** that best represents their ability to turn in for a grade (or they can circle it, highlight it, or mark it with a post-it).

▶ **Spot Check Items**
Let students know ahead of time that for some assignments, you will look over the whole thing for completion, but will choose only a few items to look at carefully and grade for correctness. So for a page of twenty math exercises, you could decide ahead of time that number 3, 7, 15, and 19 are representative of the skills you're looking for, so you only mark those on every paper. Of course, you will not *tell* students ahead of time which items you'll choose; they will find out later, and their "score" will be whatever percentage of those four items is correct.

▶ **Spot Check Students**
Collect everyone's assignments and scan them all for completion, but each time, pull a small number (4-5) of student papers to grade closely. Keep track of the students who get this close inspection, and do it for a different group of students each time until you've gotten to everyone.
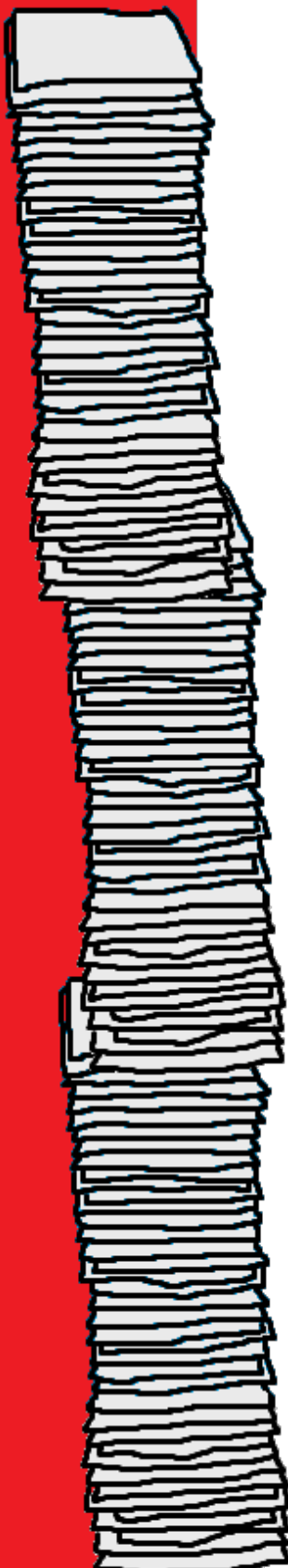
Start Saying "Practice" and "Feedback"

Maybe a change in vocabulary is all you need. Instead of calling every task an *assignment*, start calling more of them *practice*, where the focus is on getting better. Likewise, instead of promising to give every task a *grade* or *score*, give some of them *feedback*, telling students what they are doing well and where they need improvement, rather than always providing a score. When a gymnast is learning a new move, she doesn't go back to her coach after every attempt for a *score* – there's a learning period, a trial-and-error stage that's just about practice and feedback. If that's not already built into your instructional routine, give it a try.

Batch Scoring with Holistic Homework Rubrics

Instead of grading every single assignment one at a time, put student work into larger batches and grade each student's work holistically, giving one broad score for accuracy, completeness, punctuality, and neatness over a one- or two-week period. This allows you to stop nitpicking and evaluate work habits as a whole. Although it's still important to assess student understanding of concepts right away, much of this can be done during class time or by informally scanning work as it comes in. When it's time to actually mark papers and record scores, batch scoring can save a ton of time. Check out my FREE holistic homework rubrics to get started:
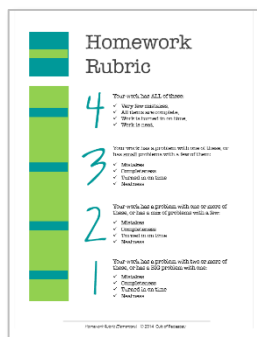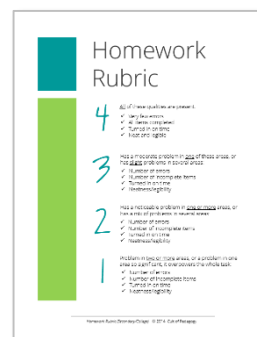
Elementary (K-6)   Secondary/College (6-12+)

Get students involved.

Your expertise is necessary to make the tough decisions about whether students' work is being done well, but sometimes, students can score their own work. Not only does this save you time, it helps them become more independent learners.

▶ **Grade Papers as a Class**
This one's a classic, but it's worth mentioning: When students finish a task, especially one with cut-and-dried answers, it's fine to go over the answers as a class and have students mark their own papers. It provides instant feedback and allows students to ask questions. To add individual accountability, circulate around the room, informally checking student papers for accuracy.

▶ **Give Away the Answers**
For class work, consider simply providing students with an answer key, holding them accountable for doing the work *before* checking the answers. This obviously requires a shift away from traditional classroom practices: Instead of trying to guess the right answer just to get the right answer, the goal becomes figuring out if you can reach it, and being able to explain how you got there.

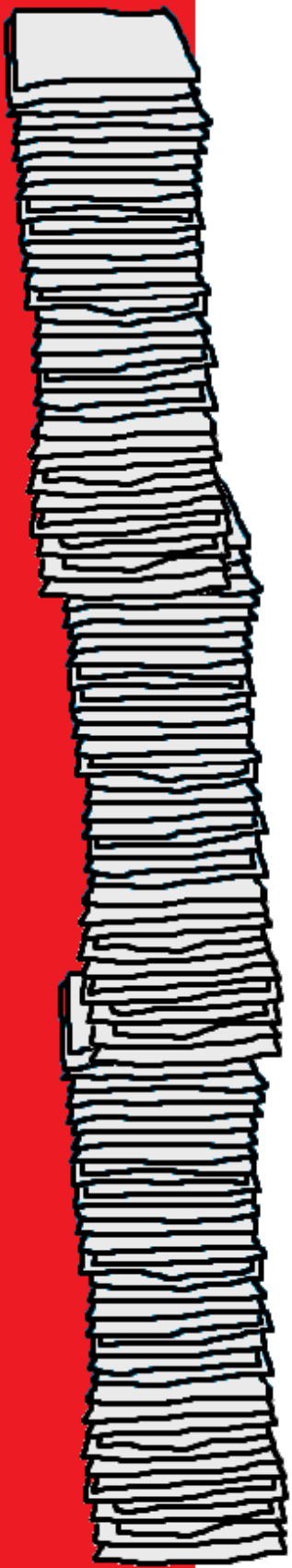▶ **Answer Stations for Tests and Quizzes**
This isn't a HUGE time-saver, but it's an easy way to give feedback: On test days, set up an answer station in a tucked-away part of the classroom (so test-takers can't see it), where the answer key is provided along with a colored marking pen. When a student is ready to hand their quiz in, send him to the answer station *alone*, *holding only his test*, and let him mark incorrect answers. This offers immediate feedback and keeps students from wondering how they did. For essay questions, provide a general summary of what you're looking for, but grade the response yourself. And of course, double-check student corrections for accuracy.
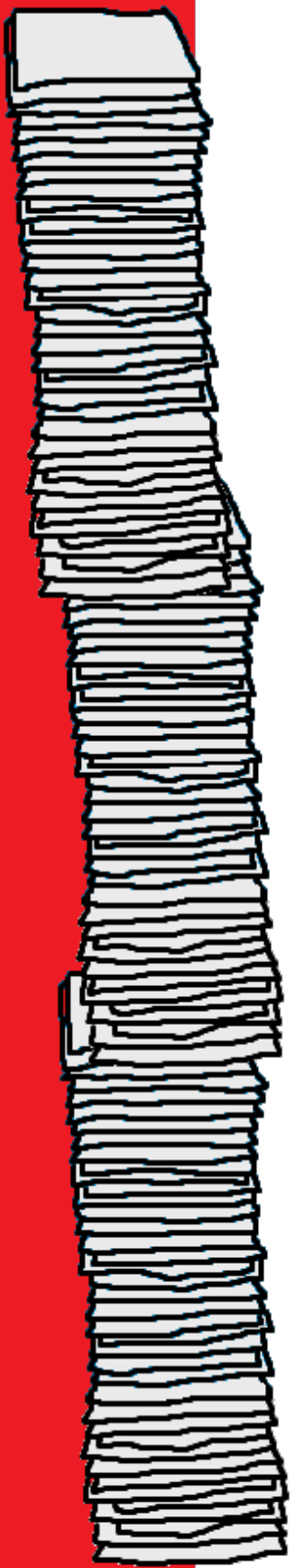
Get more efficient.

It might be that you don't actually have as much grading as you think; you just need to find different, more efficient ways to approach it.

▶ **Grade-as-They-Go** ⟵

This idea came from Marlana Evans, one of our Facebook followers. Thanks, Marlana!

Start grading assignments while students are still working on them: Move around the room, placing a check mark beside any items that are done correctly, and circle those that are incorrect. When papers are handed in, you can ignore everything with a check mark – your work is part-way done!

▶ **Collected Works**

If students do repetitive daily work, instead of taking up five separate items from each student per week, have students keep "running" assignments all on one paper (or a stapled set), then collect and grade them all at once.

▶ **Five-at-a-Time**

When you have a multi-page document to grade, especially one that can be checked quickly for correctness, don't go through each packet one at a time! Grade five (or more) simultaneously: Lay the papers side by side and grade all the page 1's at a time. Record the number missed at the bottom of the page, then turn all packets to page 2 and repeat. When you get to the end of the packets, just go through and add up the scores from the bottom.

► Mark, Comment, Record, and Reflect Separately

Grading student work actually has four separate components: There's the *marking* of correct and incorrect responses, *commenting* on the quality of work, *recording* scores in your grade book, and *reflecting* on student progress for the purpose of planning for differentiation, re-teaching, or enrichment. Trying to do all four at the same time can make grading drag on and on. Next time, try running through that stack once just to mark incorrect items, then again to comment, and so on. See if this picks up the pace.

► Shorthand Your Feedback

Teachers waste hours of time repeating the same comments on paper after paper: "run-on sentence," "not clear," "can you elaborate?" Whenever possible, find ways to put your comments into some kind of shorthand, and teach your students how to interpret them. Take a look at our video on Rubric Codes for a great example of how this can be done.

► Automate Your Feedback

Build a nice long repertoire of phrases you can use to provide feedback to students. This will cut way back on the time it takes to think of something unique for each student. Angela Watson's fabulous list of feedback comments for student writing is a fantastic resource for this.

Get your files in order.

It's not just student work that piles up; you have administrative paperwork, lesson plans, curriculum materials, and all sorts of other print and digital documents that threaten to swallow you whole. If you can set aside a little time to get really organized, here are some starting points:
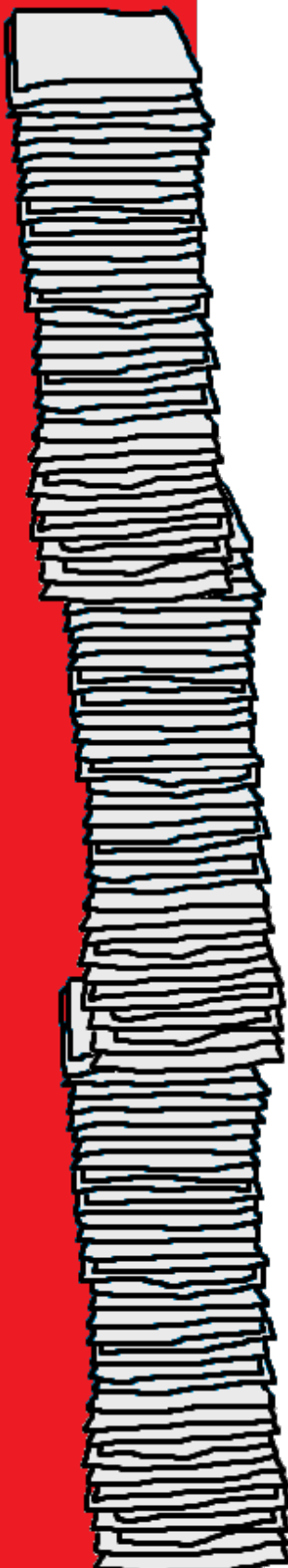
▶ **Set up a Comprehensive Paper and Digital Filing System**
The Organized Teacher blog has a really detailed set of instructions for setting up your entire filing system, including curriculum materials, notes from faculty meetings, e-mails and digital files. Click here to take a look.

▶ **Sort Out Online Bookmarks**
You find a ton of stuff online, too much to keep track of, right? While your browser's bookmarks do a decent job of storing links to these resources, you might be ready to step up to something more robust. A social bookmarking tool like Diigo allows you to save, sort, highlight and annotate online materials. To learn how to use it, check out our 3-part tutorial.

▶ **In and Out Folders**
Although I think this one's fairly obvious, I figured I would show you how I kept student papers sorted out for grading: I set up stacking files, one for each class period. Inside each slot, that class would get one "in" folder for work that needed grading, and an "out" folder for graded work. Elementary teachers can do this same thing by subject.
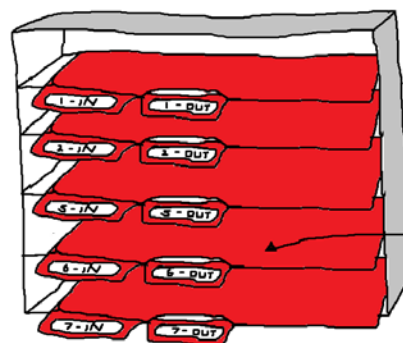
two folders for each class period; one "in" and one "out."

When all else fails, just dig out.

A lot of what I've shown you here are proactive strategies you can use to prevent grading and paper overload. But what if you're already way behind? Already overwhelmed? Sometimes you just need ideas to help you dig out of the hole you're in. Here are a few:

▶ **Reward Yourself**
Break up the work into small, manageable chunks. At first it might be only three papers at a time. Then find small ways to reward yourself after completing each set of three. The rewards can be small, too, like allowing yourself to do the thing you want to procrastinate with (2 minutes on Facebook, eat a Hershey's kiss, move the laundry from the washer to the dryer...that's right...because when you have papers to grade, laundry actually starts to look fun!). Then start working and rewarding!

▶ **Get Help**
Depending on the kind of work you have to grade, you can get others to help you. Some teachers have family members or student assistants help with simple assignments that just need incorrect answers marked, using a key. If and when you have someone help you grade, be sure to look over the papers for accuracy, and if students help you, only choose kids who are mature enough to keep other students' scores private.

▶ **Catch-up Day**
You don't *have* to take a sick day or show movies in class to get caught up. If your administration will allow it, plan a "catch-up day" with your students. Let them know you need some down time to get caught up on grading, and have them organize their binders, sort out the files on their tablets or laptops, catch up on make-up work, do homework, or read or write silently. You can give them a participation grade if that helps keep them quiet!
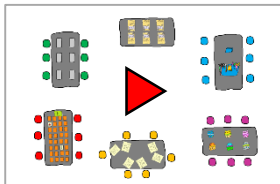
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Hi there. My hope is that somewhere in these pages, you found the one trick that will really help you feel less overwhelmed and more in control of your paper load. I would love to hear which one made a difference for you. E-mail me at gonzjenn@cultofpedagogy.com to tell me about it. And if you have suggestions for other e-booklets you'd like to see in the future, tell me about those, too.

Here are a few other things you can do next:

TEACHERS pay TEACHERS

Visit my store on Teachers Pay Teachers, where I am regularly adding products you can use in your teaching.

Come over to Cult of Pedagogy and watch a few short videos to learn some new instructional strategies.

Follow me through your favorite social media channels (click the icons to the left).

Thanks!

Jennifer Gonzalez

THE TEACHER'S GUIDE TO TECH

JENNIFER GONZALEZ

[A CULT OF PEDAGOGY DIGITAL BINDER]

The End of Tech Overwhelm

The **Teacher's Guide to Tech** is an absolutely gorgeous 200+ page handbook that organizes over 100 tech tools into categories, explains each one in plain English, gives you ideas for using every type of tool in your teaching, and links you to videos that show the tool in use.

To learn more and get your copy, visit **teachersguidetotech.com**

Interactive Posters

What are they?

An interactive poster is an online image that contains clickable elements, allowing the viewer to activate sections of the poster to reveal text, links to outside sources, or other embedded items such as audio clips or videos.

Teacher Uses

- Make interactive posters for ta... example, a series of photos fr... Depression, tagged with text... videos, audio recordings from... maps of key areas, and links t...
- Create interactive photos of cl... embedding text in key areas... them, or video to demonstrat...
- Share photos of classroom... parents, embedding text or... happening in one or more p...

Student Uses

- Create an interactive poste... demonstrate learning: a po... word, or music projects, a t... events or to document the... project, an instructional po... how to perform a task: ev... based game, where answe... or video clips.
- Create personal posters... activity at the beginning... be housed in a student...

Mixbook

A tool like Mixbook helps users create their... using photos or other images they upload t... Books can be kept in digital form or purchas... paperback or hardcover book.

Mixbook offers a variety of templates to get... started, or a book's layout can be designed f... scratch. This offers so many opportunities f... to practice combining images with text, app... design principles, showcase their growth in... or celebrate accomplishments in an activity... team.

Users can collaborate on books, which make Mixbook ideal for group work, and they can be shared through a direct link (each book is assigned a unique **URL**), or by **embedding** the book in a website. This means that students who are already at work on a larger website project can add Mixbook books inside those sites, and teachers can also feature student-created Mixbooks on their own classroom sites for parents and community members to enjoy.

Other sites like this:
Shutterfly
Snapfish

Haiku Deck

If you're a fan of the Presentation Zen movement, you are going to absolutely love Haiku Deck. This free web-based presentation tool gently nudges you to create slides that are works of art.

They do this by providing over 40 million free, beautiful, high-quality images to place in your slides. The images are searchable: If you want a picture of a mountain, type "mountain" in the search bar and you'll get dozens of gorgeous mountain photos to choose from. After you pick one, it fills the entire slide – not a cropped little picture in the corner of the slide. It's a dramatic effect that lets the image help you tell your story.

NO TWO ALI...

If prefer a solid background, you can have the... also add bar graphs and pie charts, and even l... lists, if you must.

When your Deck is ready to share, the options... extensive. It can be shared through five differe... media channels, viewed on a mobile device, or... download the slides as a PDF or a PowerPoint... now that Haiku Deck is integrated with Slidesha... can now also create and share presentations fr... right inside that platform.

Website: haikudeck.com
Difficulty: Easy
Platforms: Web, iPad. Viewable on any mobile device.
Price: Free

A Haiku Deck slide is a drastic departure

Kahoot

Kahoot is very similar to Class Responder: Teacher sets up questions up front, students log in with their own devices and answer the questions. But Kahoot has a bunch of extra features that make it super engaging and fun for students.

...rst, there's the music. Once a question has appeared... the screen, music plays – a different soundtrack for... ry question – along with a retro-sounding tick-tock... the clock counts down (questions are timed)... dents are awarded points for responding quickly... e decreases as the time runs out), and a... erboard keeps track of which students have the... scores.

Website: getkahoot.com
Difficulty: Easy
Platforms: Any device with a web browser.
Price: Free

YOUR DEVICE PROJECTED TO CLASS

The question is projected on the classroom screen, and answer choices are shown on student devices.

STUDENTS SEE... (ANY DEVICE)

T-V

tablet: a flat, hand-held, mobile computer, usually about the size of a medium-to-large book, that has a touchscreen; some examples are Apple's iPad and Microsoft's Surface

tag: (n) a label attached to a photo, blog post, or other file as a way of categorizing it, making it easier to search for items with common tags; (v) to label an item with a tag

TB: terabyte; a unit of measurement for electronic data equal to 1000 gigabytes; see conversion chart at right

1,000 KB	= 1 MB
1,000 MB	= 1 GB
1,000 GB	= 1 TB

TeachMeet: a type of unconference (see below)

tethering: a method for providing internet access to a computer or other device by attaching a mobile phone to it and borrowing the phone's internet capabilities; (See the troubleshooting section for links to articles with instructions.)

touchscreen: a display screen on a computer, tablet, or smartphone that allows users to input information and interact with the device by touching the screen

20 percent time: similar to genius hour, the practice of giving students 20 percent of the allotted instructional time for pursuing their own interests; (To learn more, read What Is 20 Percent Time?)

unconference: a grass-roots professional development conference organized by educators and composed of presentations given by the attendees themselves; (EdCamp and Teachmeet are two popular unconference movements in education. To learn more, read Why Every Teacher Should Attend an Unconference.)

URL: Uniform Resource Locator. The full "address" of a website. Example: The URL for the U.S. Department of Education is http://www.ed.gov)

USB: Universal Serial Bus (but no one calls it that); a type of plug that lots of computer-related devices use. It's what's on the end of your flash drive. A USB port is the place on your computer where you plug in a USB connector (the silver part). Wherever you see the symbol (right) on a plug or port on your computer, that's USB.

USB symbol