Last year I had a meeting with my teacher to find out how I could raise my pre-calculus grade by 0.1%. While that should be embarrassing, it's fine -- because all my friends are stalking that elusive A, too! Ivy league-crazed high school students nationwide are desperately, neurotically hunting for flawless grades. This trend has made grades more important than the knowledge the percentage points are supposed to represent. It's time we stop this out-of-control obsession with all grades 90 through 100. I'll take the first step. Hi, my name is Matt, and I'm an A-oholic.

Sometimes at school I can't understand the point of what we're covering in class. 19th-century American poetry? Painful. The Law of Cosines? Useless! Unable to see the light at the end of the tunnel -- that moment when we finally understand why poetry or calculus actually matters -- my peers and I seek solace in grades. They give us a purpose, because just caring about Edgar Allan Poe doesn't get anyone into Princeton. Regrettably, when we only focus on grades, the entire learning environment suffers. This mentality has made high grades commonplace while classroom engagement deteriorates. According to Indiana University's 2009 High School Survey of Student Engagement, 58% of respondents received either "mostly A's" or "mostly A's and B's." Yet 81% of respondents said that the material they are learning is not interesting. We study and get good grades, but we don't actually care about what we are being taught. So why do we study? College, of course! Of those polled, 73% said that they go to school primarily because they want to go to college. The allure of the future distracts us from appreciating learning opportunities in the present.

So how do we restore the true purpose of learning? Abolish grades? Academic anarchy? Not quite, but high schools need to put more emphasis on the learning process, not just the final grade. My school has adopted a new formative and summative system. Formative assessments are graded, but if I receive a poor grade, I can revise and improve my work for a new grade. By putting in a concerted effort, I can raise my grade and learn from my mistakes. Summative assessments, on the other hand, are like old-fashioned tests; the grades are final. This blend of grading styles -- one that emphasizes the process and one that emphasizes the end result -- has helped me improve tremendously. By going back and correcting essays for English class, I learn how to fix my mistakes. By redoing the problem I missed on a calculus quiz, I can grasp the material in a low-pressure environment. Of course, when it comes time for the summative, there's no room for errors. After all, we can't just abandon traditional testing completely. In life, there aren't always redos! If you're thinking this whole formative business sounds like nonsense, just look at one of America's most acclaimed academics. Noam Chomsky, "father of modern linguistics," went to a high school that didn't give grades at all, and he turned out fine. In fact, he loved how he was simply encouraged to do his best without competition or grades. By eliminating our obsession with external rewards like grades, we can focus on internal excellence. Now I just need to follow my own advice. I pledge that this year I will just accept that B. I'm still an A-oholic, but at least I've found help.