

Grading Contract for FYW Course

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<http://tinyurl.com/y3ys64y6>

Class:

Imagine that this wasn't an official course for credit, but instead that you had seen my advertisement in the newspaper or on the Internet, and were freely coming to my home studio for a class in cooking or yoga. We would have classes, workshops, or lessons, but there would be no official grading of omelets or yoga poses, since letters and numbers would be meaningless in those scenarios. But we all would learn, and perhaps in an encouraging, fun, and creative environment. In considering this course and that home studio scenario, we might ask ourselves three questions: Why are grades meaningless in that home studio setup? How do grades affect learning in classrooms? What social dynamics does the presence of grades create? In both situations, instructors provide students or participants with evaluative feedback from time to time, pointing out where, say, you've done well and where I, as the instructor, could suggest improvement. In the home studio situation, many of you would help each other, even rely on each other during and outside of our scheduled meetings. In fact, you'd likely get more feedback from your peers on your work and practices than in a conventional classroom where only the teacher is expected to evaluate and grade.

Consider two issues around grades. First, using conventional classroom grading of essays and other work to compute course grades often leads students to think more about acquiring grades than about their writing or learning; to worry more about pleasing a teacher or fooling one than about figuring out what they really want to learn, or how they want to communicate something to someone for some purpose. Lots of research in education, writing studies, and psychology over the last 30 or so years have shown overwhelmingly how the presence of grades in classrooms negatively affect the learning and motivation of students. [Alfie Kohn \(2011\)](#), a well known education researcher and teacher of teachers, makes this argument succinctly. To put it another way, if learning is what we are here for, then grades just get in the way since they are the wrong goals to strive for. An "A" doesn't build a good bridge for an engineer, nor does it help a reporter write a good story, or a urban planner make good decisions for her city. It's the learning that their grades in school allegedly represent that provides the knowledge to do all that they need to. And so, how do we make sure that our goals aren't about grades in this class, but about learning to write?

Second, conventional grading may cause you to be reluctant to take risks with your writing or ideas. It doesn't allow you to fail at writing, which many suggest is a primary way in which people learn from their practices. Sometimes grades even lead to the feeling that you are working *against* your teacher, or that you cannot make a mistake, or that you have to hide part of yourself from your teacher and peers. The bottom line is, failure at writing is vital to learning how to write better. And we have to embrace our failures, because they show us the places we can improve, learn, get better -- and these are the reasons we are in college! Grades on our work and writing do not allow us to productively fail. They create conditions that mostly punish failure, not reward it for the learning opportunity it can and should be.

As you might already notice, what I'm arguing for here is a different kind of classroom, and even education. [Sir Ken Robinson \(2010\)](#), a well-known education researcher, makes the argument in a TED talk that typical schooling, with grades and particular standards, is an old and mostly harmful system that we've inherited, but now needs to change. One harmful aspect of this old system is that it assumes

everyone is the same, that every student develops at the same pace and in the same ways, that variation in skills and literacies in a classroom is bad. It is clear the opposites of these things are more true. For all these reasons, I am incorporating a labor-based grading contract to calculate course grades in our class.

I offer this first draft of a contract that focuses on the responsibilities we'll assume, not the things to which someone else (usually the teacher) will hold you accountable. The pedagogical shift I'm suggesting is in part a cultural one, one that I would like you to control. Therefore, we will try to *approximate* the evaluative conditions of a home studio course. That is, we will try to create a culture of support, or rather a *community of compassion*, a group of people who genuinely care about the wellbeing of each other – and part of that caring, that compassion, is doing things for each other. It turns out, this also helps you learn. The best way to learn is to teach others, to help, to serve. So we will function as collaborators, allies, as fellow-travelers with various skills, abilities, experiences, and talents that we offer the group, rather than adversaries working against each other for grades or a teacher's approval.

Do not worry. You will get lots of assessments on your writing and other work during the semester from your colleagues and me. Use these assessments (written and verbal) to rethink ideas and improve your writing and practices, to take risks, in short to fail and learn from that failing. Always know that I will read everything and shape our classroom assessment activities and discussions around your work, but you will not receive grades from me. Sometimes, I will not even comment directly on your work, except in class when we use it or discuss it. I want you not only to rely on your colleagues and yourself for assessment and revision advice, but to build strategies of self-assessment that function apart from a teacher's approval.

Therefore the default grade for the course is a “B” (3.1). In a nutshell, if you do all that is asked of you in the manner and spirit it is asked, if you work through the processes we establish and the work we assign ourselves in the labor instructions during the quarter, if you do all the labor asked of you, then you'll get a “B” (3.1) course grade. It will not matter what I or your colleagues think of your writing, only that you are listening to our feedback compassionately. We may disagree or misunderstand your writing, but if you put in the labor, you are guaranteed a B (3.1) course grade. If you miss class (do not participate fully), turn in assignments late, forget to do assignments, or do not follow the labor instructions precisely, you will get a lower course grade (see the final breakdown grade table on the last page of this contract).

“B” Grades

You are guaranteed a course grade of “B” (3.1) if you meet all of the following conditions.

1. **Participation.** You agree to **fully participate in at least 84%** (26 of 31) of our scheduled class sessions and their activities and assignments, which means **you will need to be present in class, as most activities cannot be done before or after class and require your colleagues to compete.** So, you cannot miss more than 5 class sessions. Usually, attendance in class equates to participation.

NOTE: Assignments not turned in because of an absence, either ones assigned on the schedule or ones assigned on earlier days in class, will be late, missed, or ignored (depending on when you turn it in finally, see the guidelines #4, #5, and #6 below).

Any absence due to a university-sponsored group activity (e.g., sporting event, band, etc.) will be considered independently of the above attendance policy, as long as the student has FIRST

provided written documentation in the first 2 weeks of the quarter of all absences. This same policy applies to students who have mandatory military-related absences (e.g., deployment, work, duty, etc.). Again, the student must provide written documentation, stating the days he/she will be absent. This will allow us to determine how he/she will meet assignments and our contract, despite being absent.

2. **Lateness.** You agree to come on time or early to class. Walking into class late 1-2 times in a quarter is understandable.
3. **Sharing and Collaboration.** You agree to work cooperatively and collegially in groups. This may be the easiest of all our course expectations to figure out, but we should have some discussions on what we expect from each other.
4. **Late/Incomplete Work.** You agree to turn in properly and on time all work and assignments expected of you in the spirit they are assigned, which means you'll complete all of the labor instructions for each assignment. During the semester, you may, however, turn in a few assignments late. The exact number of those late assignments is stipulated in the table on the last page of this contract, which we negotiate. **Late or incomplete work is defined as any work or document due that is turned in AFTER the due date/time BUT within 48 hours of the deadline.** For example, if some work (say a written reflective piece) was due on Thursday, February 15 at 11:59 pm, that piece must be turned in by 11:59 pm on Saturday the 17th.
5. **Missed Work.** If you turn in late work **AFTER the 48 hours** stipulated in #4 above (Late/Incomplete Work), then it will be considered "missed work," which is a more serious mark against your grading contract. This is due to the fact that all assignments are used in class when they are due, so turning in something beyond 48 hours after it is due means it is assured to be less useful, and its absence has hurt your colleagues in class (since they depended on you to turn in your work for their use).
6. **Ignored Work.** You agree not to ignore any work expected of you. Ignored work is any work unaccounted for in the quarter – that is, I have no record of you doing it or turning it in. My sense is that ignoring the work so crucial to one's development as a learner in our community is bad and unacceptable, so accumulating any "ignored work" will keep you from meeting our contract expectations (see table below).
7. **All Work/Labor** needs to meet the following conditions. To be **complete and On Time**, you agree to turn in on time and in the appropriate manner complete essays, writing, or other labor assigned that meet all of our agreed upon expectations. (See #4 above for details on late assignments). This means you'll follow carefully ALL of the LABOR INSTRUCTIONS given for the assignment, and be honest about completing labor that asks for particular time commitments of you (for example, "write for 20 minutes," etc.).

Knowing Where You Stand

This system is better than regular grading for giving you a clear idea of what your final grade looks like at any moment. If you are doing everything as directed and turning things in on time (no matter what anyone says), you're getting a B (3.1). As for participation in class, you'll have to keep track of it, but you can check with me at any time. I'll tell you what I have recorded.

Improving Your Contracted Grade

The grade of B (3.1) depends primarily on *behavior* and *labor*. Have you shown responsible effort and consistency in our class? Have you done what was asked of you in the spirit it was asked? Higher grades than the default, the **grades of 3.4, 3.7, or 4.0**, however, require *more labor that helps or supports the class* in its mutual discussions and examinations of rhetoric or the myths of education, literacy, and identity. In order to raise your grade, you may complete as many of the following items of labor as you like (doing three gets you a 4.0). Each item completed fully and in the appropriate manner will raise your final course grade by .3. The first and last items may be done twice, each counting as a separate labor.

- **Extra Précis-Responses (2 total extra):** At particular times in the quarter, you can do extra précis-Responses. You must complete a total of two extra ones in order for this extra labor to count as enough extra labor for the .3 course grade bump. Each extra precis-response is due the day we have scheduled to discuss those readings.
- **Labor Journal Essay (2 total):** At week 7 and 10, you may write an essay that looks back at your labor journal entries as a record of your labors toward learning in this class. This essay will be about 3-4 pages long and be written directly to me (Asao), but the class likely will read them too in order to learn from your own discussion of your learning.
- **A Bigger Project:** For each project we do, you can opt to do more labor on it at each phase of invention, research, drafting, and revision. This mostly means more research and sources incorporated into the culminating artifact, and the related documents that help you build your drafts, such as our annotated bibliographies, which we will do before the project is drafted. See our [syllabus's "Extra Labor" section](#) for complete details on this labor.
- **Extra Assessments (3 extra formal ones):** You may do three extra assessments for three different colleagues not in your original writing group. You must do one extra assessment letter for each project (i.e. projects 1 and 2), and one extra portfolio assessment at the end of the quarter. So this extra labor must be planned from at the beginning of the quarter. These assessment letters will follow the same labor instructions as the normal ones you'll do.
- **A lesson/activity/handout:** These handouts are on a topic and material that you research for the class's benefit and will need at least 2 weeks lead time, working with me (Asao) on the materials. While we'll determine together the scope your lesson, the main elements of your labor will be to produce: (1) a 1-2 page handout for the class's benefit in our writing and thinking; (2) some outline for our in-class activity that introduces your handout; and (3) a short reflective essay to me (Asao) of about 1-2 pages (300-600 words) on what you learned in the process of doing this labor and what you feel the class stands to gain from the lesson you offered us.
- **Some other labor that benefits the class** and our mutual learning of rhetoric, language diversity, and academic writing. Do you want to write about and report to us on a cultural event related to the class? Or maybe you would like to read an article for us and summarize some of its findings or ideas that you think will help us do our work in class? If you have an idea, come to me (Asao)

early. We will plan it, while making sure the amount of labor is commensurate with the other items above.

Thus, for every item you complete on the above list, your contracted grade will **improve by .3 grade points**. So if you meet the conditions for a B-contract (3.1), then your grade can improve in the following ways:

- **1 item** completed = course grade of **3.4**
- **2 items** completed = course grade of **3.7**
- **3 items** completed = course grade of **4.0**

If you are working toward a C-contract (2.1) or lower, the same .3 movement up the grade latter applies by completing 1-3 items on the list above. You may even do more than three items and continue to raise your grade by .3 per item. Your course grade, then, equates to a 2.4, 2.7, 3.0, 3.3, respectively.

Breakdown of the Main Components

Below is a table that shows the main components that affect your successful compliance with our contract.

	# non-Partic Days	# of Late Assigns.	# of Missed Assigns.	# of Ignored Assigns.
A (4.0)	5	5	1	0
B (3.1)	5	5	1	0
C (2.1)	6	6	2	0
D (1.1)	7	7	3	1
E (0.0)	8	8	4	2

Gimme. I (Asao), as the administrator of our contract, will decide in consultation with the student whether a gimme is warranted in any case. The student must come to me (Asao Inoue) as soon as possible, usually before the student is unable to meet the contract (before breaching the contract), in order that he/she and I can make fair and equitable arrangements, ones that will be fair and equitable to all in the class and still meet the university's regulations on attendance, conduct, and workload in classes. **You may use a gimme for any reason, but only once in the semester.** Please keep in mind that the contract is a public, social contract, one agreed upon through group discussion and negotiation, so my job is to make sure that whatever agreement we come to about a plea will not be unfair to others in class. A gimmie does not allow you to ignore any work expected of everyone in the class. A plea is NOT an "out clause" for anyone who happens to not fulfill the contract in some way; it is for rare and unusual circumstances out of the control of the student.

Exemplary labor. If by our final meeting conference (end of quarter), **you miss no classes (participates in all activities), have no late, missed, or ignored assignments, and do not use a gimme**, then you will earn an extra .3 (equal to one item on the advanced contract) to your final course grade. This rule is meant

to reward those students who engage in all the labor of the course in the fullest spirit asked of them and demonstrate themselves to be exemplary class citizens.

By staying in this course and attending class, you accept this contract and agree to abide by it. I (Asao) also agree to abide by the contract, and administer it fairly and equitably.