

Dear Fellow Writer,

I will not mince words. Our current grading system is deeply flawed. Rather than students and teachers collaborating to create a meaningful learning environment, we focus on grades. Sadly, those grades don't always reflect a meaningful demonstration of knowledge. Grades can feel arbitrary, random or, at worst, harrowing. Furthermore, traditional assessment methods are often steeped in racist bias and judgment. I don't want that for you. (I honestly don't want that for me either as the facilitator of this classroom.) If we were to follow a traditional grading schema in our course, that would mean that the bulk of students would write *for* grades. I want you to write for *feedback*, for *developing ideas* and for *expressing your voice* in ways that are relevant, important and authentic to you. I want you to think about your writing *before* you think about your grade. So we will approach grades differently in this course, and this letter is the start of a **commitment** that you, your classmates and I enter into as co-conspirators and writing rebels. You could call this a contract, but I prefer the word commitment - as it implies that we are connected and devoted in our pledge to work as a team and hold up one another. By using Grade Bundles in this class, you will hopefully have the opportunity to take risks and to become a better writer, and it will allow us to focus on responsibilities and growth rather than unattainable or subjective standards.

As Asao Inoue – a proponent of labor-based contracts and anti-racist writing assessment – states, “We will try to create a culture of support: a culture where we all function as allies... rather than adversaries working against each other for grades or approval by teachers.” Together, we will search for methods, ideas and practices that work for you in regard to your writing and learning. We will also explore and interrogate the standards that exist in academia and the professional realm. I will provide lots of feedback for your writing throughout the quarter as will your fellow student writers. There will be times when my feedback – both written and verbal - is somewhat minimal (see reading response) and times when I respond with gusto (see essays). The point is to use teacher and colleague feedback to rethink ideas, improve your writing and experiment with different strategies.

I expect you to use these Grade Bundles to also develop your own self-assessment skills. It's important that you examine your *own* work as a writer and thinker rather than solely relying on teacher approval. As Inoue urges his own students, "I want you to learn to rely on your own judgment of what good writing is, and how to detect it." This might come easily to some while it might feel tortuous to others. If you are ever in doubt of where you stand as a developing and growing writer, let me know. We can talk with the aim of clarifying your goals and progress in the class.

You will see on the next page a **Learning Commitment** - a fluid document that will help us initially identify what we want to learn collectively and individually and what we pledge to do as we explore and labor as writers. This commitment is an integral part of our grading system as your participation, your vision and your dedication to this work matters. You will also see a breakdown of the **Grade Bundles**. I would keep this document handy as you set goals for yourself and keep track of your work throughout the term.

Finally, this grading system stems from antiracist research, teaching and practice. It is, at its core, rooted in love. I know that might sound strange coming from a teacher in a college English course. But it's true. This is about love of exploration, love of failing forward, love of learning and love of community. You don't have to love writing or school to get something out of this; this is about meeting one another where we are and finding ways to grow and evolve as thinkers and writers. This is good, hard work, and I'm so excited to join you in this commitment. I have a feeling we are going to have some fun.

Katherine Burns

Labor Commitment

We are a team this term. To grow and evolve as writers and thinkers, I am asking us to make some commitments to one another so that we can hold one another accountable but - most importantly - hold ourselves accountable. This commitment is about setting goals, creating a vision and claiming space in this class. It's also about the practical how-will-I-get-this-done? pieces of our labor. So here are three pieces we need to address - our collective commitments, our individual commitments and Katherine's commitments as your writing guide. We will revisit these commitments often this term, allowing for development and evolution.

Collective Commitments -

Individual Commitments -

Katherine's Commitments -

I commit to listening to you as a writer and thinker. I commit to welcoming your challenges just as I welcome your successes. I commit to challenging you individually and collectively. I commit to truly reading your work and responding as a fellow writer and scholar. I commit to being honest. I commit to feedbacking as swiftly as possible. I commit to laughing whenever and as much as possible. I commit to feeling challenged as a reader. I commit to shifting when necessary. I commit to writing and learning alongside you.

English 101 Grade Bundles: A Breakdown

A Bundle - To earn an A, you must do the following:

- Complete every discussion post & reading response (following all assignment requirements)
- Complete each essay assignment (with drafts and revisions).
- Complete two Writing Center Essay Deep Dives
- Complete two of the Content Plunges
- Complete Galaxies of Greatness Assignment
- Try Hard. Be Cool.*

Two missing assignments allowed (only applies to discussion posts and reading responses)

B Bundle - To earn a B, you must do the following:

- Complete every discussion post & reading response (following all assignment requirements)
- Complete each essay assignment (with drafts and revisions)
- Complete one Writing Center Essay Deep Dive
- Complete one of the Content Plunge
- Complete Galaxies of Greatness Assignment
- Try Hard. Be Cool.*

Three missing assignments allowed (only applies to discussion posts and reading responses)

C Bundle – To earn a C, you must do the following:

- Complete every discussion post & reading response (following most/all assignment requirements)
- Complete each essay assignment (with drafts and revisions)
- Try Hard. Be Cool.*

Four missing assignments allowed (only applies to discussion posts and reading responses)

D Bundle – To earn a D, you must do the following:

- Complete 75% of discussion posts (with follow ups)
- Complete 75% of reading responses
- Complete two of the three essay assignment (with drafts and revisions)

***Try Hard. Be Cool. – What is Katherine looking for?**

To do well, you will need to show up for class lessons, discussions, activities and assignments with a level of professionalism that shows that you are interested and engaged. You will learn by reading, writing, listening and talking with others. **How do I know if you are engaging and trying hard?**** I can tell when I see you:

- Adopting a Growth Mindset
- Asking questions
- Taking risks
- Engaging with others
- Engaging with the texts
- Making connections
- Embracing the revision process (and trying again when you need to)
- Doing the work

I also expect you to be cool. **What's cool?** When we are cool, we:

- Offer respect to fellow writers and scholars
- Do our own work
- Ask for help when we need it
- Show up on time
- Submit work on time
- Embrace mistakes as part of the writing and learning process
- Stay in touch

This may all seem a little fuzzy or complicated. It certainly is easier for me to assign points to an assignment and use traditional grading. But here's the thing – our lives are fuzzy and complicated sometimes. Our learning is complex and nuanced; our assessment methods should reflect that. Most importantly, these Grade Bundles will ideally allow for more agency and humanity in your writing. If you have questions at any point in the term, please don't hesitate to holler in my direction. I'm here to help.

***Please note that I am aware that not everyone engages the same way and that active participation can look different for different people. Fear not, introverted one-on-one'ers and neurodiverse rock stars; I am well aware that trying hard (and "being cool") is complex and varied.*

Some of this assessment methodology is based on Asao Inoue's text [Antiracist Writing Assessment and Ecologies](#) and Felicia Rose Chavez's work around decolonizing the writing classroom.