

CONTRACT GRADING for a Learning-Centered Classroom

Jackie Williams, *Fresno City College*

Jamie Dingman, *Citrus College*

Sarah Antinora, *San Joaquin Delta College*



Welcome

Session Goals

Outline the philosophy behind contract grading and its relationship with student equity
share the highs and lows of adopting a new grading system, and provide samples of contracts.





1.

What Is Contract Grading and How Do I Implement It in My Classroom?

How an anal-retentive, point-obsessed teacher converted all of her classes to contracts and never looked back.



How I graded before SJDC implemented the English corequisite model in Spring 2017:

- » EVERYTHING was graded for points.
- » I used rubrics for all essays.
- » I gave extra credit.
- » I rounded final grades to a 10th of a percentage point at the end of the semester.



What conversations did I often have with students because of my grading policies?

- » “Why is my paper an 89% instead of a 90%?”
 - » “How can I get more points?”
 - » “I’ve always gotten A’s. I worked hard on this. I should have an A.”

 - » “There’s no way I can pass now.”
- 



I wanted them to focus on how to be a better reader, writer, and critical thinker, but my grading policies made them focus on the points.

My grading policies defeated students from the very first graded assignments. My policies reinforced all the fears they had about their skillset and reaffirmed for many of them that they didn't belong in Eng 1A.



The Types of Contract Grading

NEGOTIATED CONTRACTS

The teacher and student negotiate a contract together based on the expectations of the teacher and the grade desired by the student. The student chooses which assignments to complete based on the desired grade.

COMMUNITY-CREATED CONTRACTS

The teacher and students create all the grading and assessment criteria together.

UNILATERAL CONTRACTS

These are based on the premise that if the students do the work, they will meet the expectations of the course. Most set the default grade of a B, which is earned if all work is completed.

The Key Parts of My Contract

Assignments

- **Essays 1 and 2** (multi-draft essays): These short (3-5 pages), multiple-draft essays will increase your writing fluency, sharpen your written voice, allow you to practice the *They Say/ I Say* (TSIS) moves, and require you to develop an argument based on research and analysis.
- **Essays 3 and 4** (research-grounded essays): While all of the essays from this course require you to engage with source materials, Essay 3 and the Essay 4 require you to conduct extensive scholarly research to guide you in your analysis. Essay 3 uses courses materials as a starting point but requires you to use research to narrow your focus. Essay 4 requires you to refine a topic of interest, create an annotated bibliography, and craft a well-reasoned 7-10 page seminar paper, using correct documentation format.
- **Participation:** Participation is comprised of all other work, including in-class writing, homework, discussion board posts, quiz scores, etc.

Assignments: The assignment categories align to the columns in the contract and assignment categories in Canvas.

The Key Parts of My Contract

All assignments are graded High Pass, Pass, or Not Yet, and go into the Eng 1A gradebook. **There are no points or letter grades in Eng 1A**, aside from the final letter grade you earn at the end.

- Pass—the minimum requirements and objectives of the assignment have been met; all complete participation assignments earn a Pass
- High Pass—the assignment goes beyond minimum expectations, not necessarily in length but in mastery of skill; risks are taken, attention is paid to detail, and critical thinking is demonstrated
- Not Yet—the assignment is almost there; revision is encouraged and expected

Grading “Scale”: This scale defines each type of grade students will receive.

The key is to couple the contract with a healthy revision policy, so the “below standard” grade should be one that signals the need to revise.

The Key Parts of My Contract

Contract Grading

I believe in the power of “yet,” which is a principle of growth mindset. This term means that, while you may not have mastery over a skill or idea right now, you always have the power to master it. It is important that my grading policies reflect that belief, so this course uses a form of grading called contract grading. Contract grading redirects your focus on the **process of learning** rather than on points. The default grade for this class is a B; if you complete all the work at passing level, you will earn at least a B. This assurance can free you up to focus on your learning rather than your grade.

- **Essay Reflections**
- **Mid-Semester Check-In**
- **Final Self-Assessment**

Defining “Contract Grading:” This section defines contract grading. It also explains how the students and I will communicate about their course grades over the semester.

The Key Parts of My Contract

Grade	Essay 3 and Essay 4	Essays 1-2	Participation	Attendance	
A	Submit and pass both research papers; at least one must be at "high pass" level.	Submit and pass both essays. At least two essays over the course of the semester must be a "high pass," with at least one of those being Essay 3 or the Seminar Paper.	Be consistent in submitting both class and homework. Engage in class and come to class prepared.	Arrive on time and maintain consistent attendance.	<p>You will earn an A in the class if you do all of what is required for a B and show excellence in your work.</p> <p>Notice that the key distinction between the A and B is that at least two of the essays must earn a "high pass." A high pass essay goes beyond minimum expectations, not necessarily in length but in mastery of skill; risks are taken, attention is paid to detail, and critical thinking is demonstrated. The focus is on the essays because those are the culminating assignments that demonstrate all the skills you develop in this class: reading, writing, and critical thinking.</p> <p>To increase your chances of earning an A, I suggest that you meet with me after I give you back your first essay to check in about your goals for learning. Remember, you can revise work to bring it up to a "high pass."</p>
B	Submit both essays at passing level.	Submit both essays at passing level.	Be consistent in submitting both class and homework. Engage in class and come to class prepared.	Arrive on time and maintain consistent attendance.	<p>You will earn at least a B* in the class if you complete all of the work in the class with sincere effort and on time. This means reading and annotating your texts for every class session; submitting all homework, quizzes, and essays; and revising your work to passing level if I ask you to. To earn a B, I expect you to come to class regularly (not missing more than 10% of classes in the semester) and to be fully present in class. Remember, you can revise work to bring it up to a "pass."</p>



Messaging Course Grades to Students

- » Using the contract, students reflect on their grade frequently over the semester (Essay Reflections, Mid-Semester Check-In, Final Self-Assessment).
- » After each essay is graded, I send an announcement that sends a general message about grades.
- » I conference with students both in the corequisite class and in office hours.

If you earned a High Pass, you are well on your way to an A. Congratulations! That is hard to do on a first essay with a new professor.

Essays that earned a Not Yet require very little work to qualify not only for a Pass but even a High Pass. It is very common for students to earn a Not Yet on the first essay in Eng 1A and still go onto earn A's and B's in the class. Meet with me; let's build on your successes.



Tips for Using Contract Grading in Canvas

- » In “Settings,” select “more options.” Then select “Hide totals in student grades summary.”
- » Use the “Complete/ Incomplete” option if that works for you.
- » Create an easy-to-use “point scale.” For example, I use this one:
 - ◇ High Pass = 3
 - ◇ Pass = 2
 - ◇ Not Yet = 1
 - ◇ Not Submitted = 0

*The assignment is out of 2 because a “pass” is seen as full credit.

*Include a blurb with the point scale in all work feedback.

Tips to Making the Transition

- » Review different contract models.
- » Start with one class.
- » Work collaboratively with other faculty.
- » Ask students for feedback.
- » Revise after each semester.
- » Begin the semester with strong affective domain support and connect that to the rationale behind the contract.
- » Set guidelines for revision that work for you.
 - ◇ I do a “revision week” after the first two essays.
- » Be open to re-negotiating the contract if needed.

The Benefits

- » I don't lose students who get D's on the first paper. I retain more students.
 - » I give much better, targeted feedback:
 - ◇ My response
 - ◇ Areas of success
 - ◇ Ways to improve
 - » Students come to office hours more.
 - » I have conversations with students about their ideas and writing--not percentage points.
-
- » Students revise more often and with better results.
 - » Students know that I believe in their capacity.
 - » Students know they have the possibility of passing the course, even if they struggle at the start.
 - » I see equally positive results across demographics:
 - ◇ The pressure is eased on my high achievers. They know exactly how to get the A, and they don't have to get a "high pass" on all assignments.
 - ◇ The most vulnerable and marginalized students persist in the class



2.

**WE MADE IT!?!?
A CONTRACT-GRADING
NOOB'S PERSPECTIVE**



- Have you ever had a student numerically able to pass your class, but they lack the skills/proficiency?
- Do your students get caught up on earning points instead of improving skills?

MY BIGGEST QUESTION:

- How can I design a contract that is student-centered while meeting school/department/district requirements?

Considerations

- Language
- Numbers
- Layout
- CYA clauses



“The traditional A-F grades will only be issued at the time of final grades. In every other instance in my class, your learning will be reflected in the following feedback categories instead of grades: “above expectations,” “meeting expectations,” “developing the skill,” and “not yet passing.”





“Ideally, I want all assignments turned in on time. However, life happens, and sometimes it becomes necessary for you to submit a late assignment or skip it altogether. There is no time limit on late work, and I won’t give you any penalty, but there are limits to how many assignments you can submit late and how many assignments you can miss.”



EXAMPLE: PASSING GRADES

A

- 90% of all assignments from all categories are submitted complete
- All essays are “above expectations” or “meeting expectations”
- No more than 8 missed assignments
- No more than 8 late assignments

B

- 80% of all assignments from all categories are submitted complete
- All essays are “meeting expectations”
- No more than 12 missed assignments
- No more than 12 late assignments

Highs

- Students loved the policy
- Liked being treated like “adults”
- Appreciated the extra time
- Late work was higher quality because there was no penalty. Half-credit = half-assed work.

- Really supports working students, homeless/housing insecure students, immature students
- Focus on quality over points or deadlines.
- Like the essays, you can have them do the work until it's done correctly
- I did not have the huge flood of late work at the end

Lows

- Easy for some students to fall behind
- Overall success rates weren't great - other factors there, though
 - I did have a good chunk of students who did not pass, but about half of those students were not passing other classes.
- Canvas can be confusing and students did not keep in mind that the grades in Canvas did not accurately reflect their true grades.
- Had trouble getting those struggling students to complete revisions.

Things to Change (maybe):

- Reduce the number of missing/late assignments
- Put limits on when you'll accept late work.
- Maybe only accept late work until the next unit/essay starts.
- More frequent conferences with students

Up Next for Me

- Contract grading online for Spring 2020
- Both 16 and 8-week courses are on contract
- Work on success rates and retention
- bit.ly/dingcontract

3.

CONTRACTS and EQUITY

You have the power to empower through grading

Building an Equity-Minded Classroom: Areas of Instructor Agency

Embedding Equity: Areas of Instructor Agency

**VALUES &
BELIEFS**

CURRICULUM

**CLASSROOM
FACILITATION**

**RULES &
POLICIES**

**INTERPERSONAL
RELATIONSHIPS**

Adapted from the
USC CUE Rossier
School of Education

Adapted from the USC CUE Rossier School of Education

Embedding Equity: Areas of Instructor Agency

**VALUES &
BELIEFS**

CURRICULUM

**CLASSROOM
FACILITATION**

**RULES &
POLICIES**

Reflect on your rules/ policies and whether they improve or undermine a positive classroom culture, or disproportionately impact certain groups



Key Components for Increasing Equity in your Rules and Policies for Grading

- » Allowability
 - » Messaging
 - » Environment
 - » Reflection and Revision
- 

ALLOWABILITY

- » Zero Tolerance vs Case-by-case
 - ◇ How do zero tolerance policies serve student learning/growth?
- » Multiple Ways to Measure Outcomes
 - ◇ The portfolio component allows students to submit what they feel is best fit for each outcome

MESSAGING

Projects vs Assignments

- » Projects indicate multiple steps/complexity
- » Assignments feel finite/isolated
- » Projects can be graded on labor/revision
- » Assignments are often graded only once

MESSAGING

Things to think about:

- » Not all classwork needs to be project-based; contracts allow you to give “credit” for assignments, too!
- » Contract (and its enforcement) should be messaged to the student with consistency and authentic care - *is it clear that you believe students will meet the terms of the contract and succeed?*

ENVIRONMENT

The contract allows students to access a space which dominant power structures previously excluded them from.

- Does the contract create a safe space to practice and fail?
- Does the contract deconstruct norms of dominant groups (ie.emphasis on perfect academic grammar vs emphasis on growth)?



“Using grades based on judgments of quality (or comparisons to expected, dominant academic discourse) usually devalues the students’ labor, and therefore devalues students’ writing as experience”

Asao B. Inoue, “A Grade-Less Writing Course that Focuses on Labor and Assessing”





CAN'T CONTRACT? **Include a Class** **Compact**



Fall 2019 Coreq Class Compact

Tardiness

Roll will be taken during the freewrite at the start of class, and at the start of the coreq time. Four tardies equal one absence.

Students who arrive late to class will sit down quietly, check in with Anna to see what we are working on, will not interrupt their peers or instructor to find out what they missed, and will check in with the instructor at the end of class to get marked on the roster.

Missing Class

Students who miss class will check Canvas, ask a classmate for class notes, and email the instructor if they have questions.

Spring 2020 Coreq Class Compact

Tardiness

Students who arrive late to class will sit down quietly, will not interrupt their peers or instructor to find out what they missed, and will check in with the instructor at the end of class to get marked on the roster. A sign will be placed on the door during student presentations, and tardy students will not enter until the presentation is finished.

Missing Class

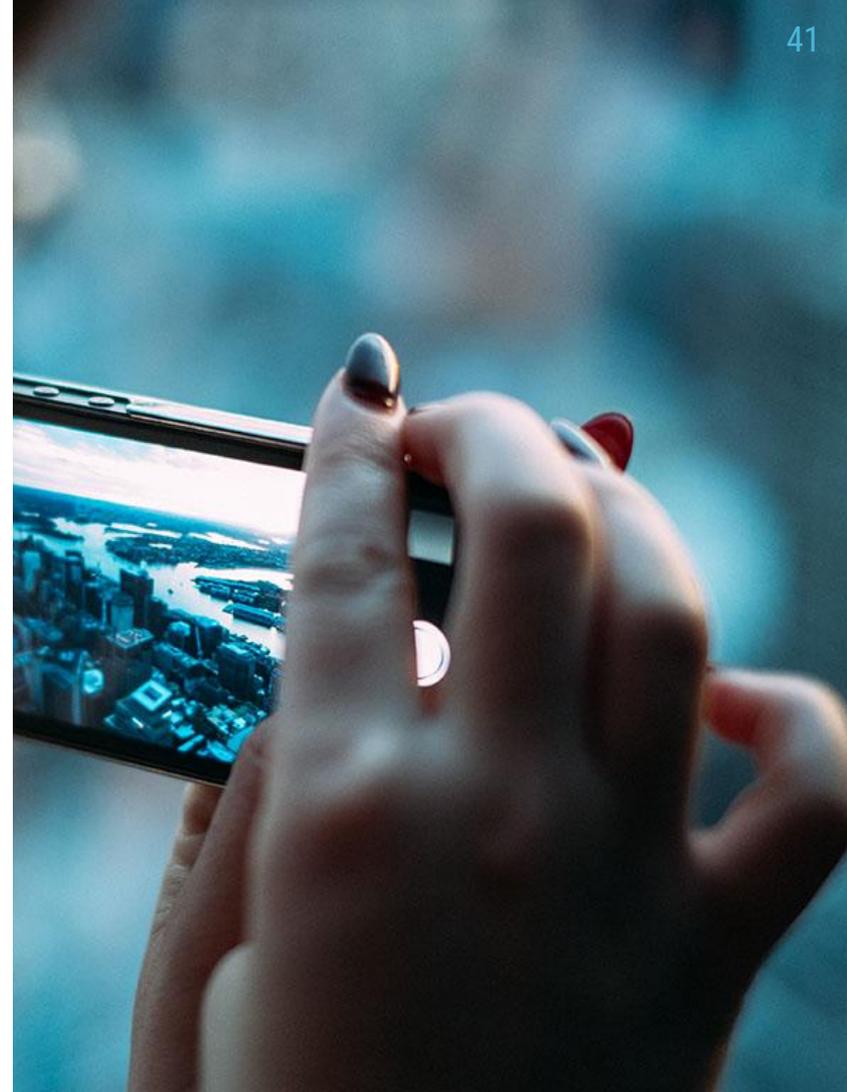
Students who miss class will post to the "I Missed Class" Forum on Canvas and either the instructor, PASS leader, or a classmate will answer any questions about what they missed. All class powerpoints will be posted to Canvas.

REFLECTION and REVISION

What Changed?

- » Experience in college
- » Median Age
- » Race

An equity-minded instructor makes adjustments for every class - the compact/contract makes it easier!





Contracts in Your Classes

Brainstorm the following 2 questions for ~5 minutes:

- 1. How could/would you use contract grading in your course?**
 - 2. What is one issue/problem you might anticipate by switching to contract grading?**
- 

Discussion

Get into pairs or groups of 3, and discuss/troubleshoot contract grading.

Review the blue contract - how could the policies/presentation be more equity-minded?



Questions?



THANKS!

Still have questions?

You can find us at

- » sarah.antinora@deltacollege.edu
 - » jdingman@citruscollege.edu
 - » jacqueline.williams@fresnocitycollege.edu
- 