

Contracting English Composition: It Only Sounds Like an Illness

Contract grading offers a solution to grading problems.

by John A. Smith

Introduction

I have always disliked grading because I have been unconvinced that assigning a letter grade to a student essay improves learning.

In an introductory college composition course, assigning a grade to every essay runs contrary to the writing process; some problems are not easily solved in a mere two weeks of brainstorming, writing, and revising. “Consequently, one piece of writing—even if it is generated under the most desirable conditions—can never serve as an indicator of overall literacy, particularly for high stakes decisions” (CCCC Committee 432). However, necessary or not, *course grades* remain the most erosion-resistant features of the academic landscape. Grades seem to serve an administrative and, probably, societal purpose. Indeed, it is impossible to label grades as universally bad things. Grades are easily quantified, allowing educators and employers rapidly to rank skill attainment. Grades provide some evidence of competence. Certainly, as Bloom points out, “Grades are an efficient means of reducing complicated information to a simple code . . .” (362). So course grades can be justified.

However, grading every essay is not needed to arrive at a final course grade. Alienation from writing seems a natural consequence for many composition stu-

dents, who sense a paradox between process preaching and product practice. The CCCC’s official statement on writing assessment is clear. “Writing assessment that alienates students from writing is counterproductive . . .” (434). Like many others, I have developed an alternative method for arriving at a course grade that works for my philosophy of writing.

Contract Grading

Peter Elbow, in a 1996 CCCC’s presentation, presented the elements of his grading contract, and he suggested “less verticality” in grading along with raising the stakes to get a high grade. For almost two years now, I have graded by contract in first-year composition courses. I no longer assign letter grades to individual essays because contract grading more effectively supports my belief that good writing evolves from the interaction of many discrete intellectual processes not easily delineated or objectified and that effective writing develops from various levels of evaluation and response developed over time.

Requirements

All students sign a contract for a course grade of *B*. I mark individual essays *S* or *U*. Since the composition course is trans-

ferable, the students ostensibly plan to complete a bachelor's degree. Students need a C in the course to transfer, so I define "failing" or "unsatisfactory" individual essays as below a C. To maintain a B grade, the students must

- attend and participate regularly;
- keep a journal throughout the course;
- pass nine of ten content quizzes on their assigned readings;
- prepare drafts for class peer review;
- satisfactorily write three of four preliminary papers;
- respond in writing to my comments when each paper is returned;
- submit a satisfactory evaluation of one of those papers and a revision;
- pass a midterm and final exam; and
- submit a satisfactory final documented argument essay.

Students can raise their grade to an A by submitting an extra writing project. Their grades may be reduced for failing to fulfill contract items satisfactorily.

I give quizzes on assigned readings in an essay collection, Connelly's *The Sundance Reader*. To some students and teachers, the practice seems precollegiate and a capitulation to traditional grading practices. It is and it is not. The quiz grades are a factor in the course grade, and, as noted above, the course grade is required. Yet the reading quizzes are separate from the evaluation of student writing. Not intended to be evaluative, the quizzes are content-based, ten questions, true or false. Students must answer seven of ten correctly to pass. No numerical scores are given or recorded. Over the course of the semester, students must pass

nine of ten quizzes. For each quiz failed (beyond the one forgiven), a student's course grade is lowered by one third, e.g., from a B to a B-. Therefore, discussion of a student's written work remains largely separate from the routine duties of a college course (such as taking quizzes), which often have little to do with a student's performance on individual essays.

However, a student's ability to write develops along with critical reading and analysis. Practicing organizational strategies and stylistic techniques presented in model essays is a mainstay of composition pedagogy. There's the rub: students must read and read attentively. Regular quizzes do help keep them carefully reading the text, which enhances discussion, another necessary activity in the development of language skills.

Student Responses

Too often the instructor becomes a one-way conduit of information about writing. To justify a grade, I had found my final comments became increasingly generic, which inhibited my ability to address the writing itself and further distanced me from the student as learner. Summer Smith, in her study of the end comment, concludes that "the focus on assigning a grade . . . works against recognizing the individuality of the student writer" (257). With the exception of papers deemed unsatisfactory—the minority—there is no need to justify a C+ versus a B-. Thus the commentary I write now tends to be more direct and honest, a more individualized and varied discussion of the writing itself.

Still, the most important element of the commentary is the required student response. When I return essays, I ask the students to respond to my comments, but

I provide no guidelines for content or format, allowing a “real life” writing situation to dictate the content, form, and accommodation to the audience. Usually written in class upon receiving my criticism, this response is also ungraded. The result is usually a continued dialogue about the student’s writing.

Linda, for example, had this to say about the comments on her comparison of the ideas of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung:

Obviously, paragraph 5 was where I had the most trouble keeping your attention. Basically, I was not defining one specific topic, rather adding more information about the differences of these two theorists that I thought could be handled in one simple sentence. Should I have made these topics completely different paragraphs and then elaborated on them?

Linda’s self-evaluation and question provide a “teachable moment” where she is seeing her paper as an evolving commentary. It is at this point that the writing process becomes recursive.

Student Self-Evaluation Essay

I require students to write a self-evaluation essay to accompany a revision of one of the first three essays assigned in the course; this enables students to make choices among their previous essays based on what they have learned about writing. Without the authoritative grade designating the “best” and “worst” essays, the student is better able to evaluate choices made in composing and provide a rationale for the revision.

Moreover, these evaluations often give insight into what writing does for the students. Shawn, for example, had this to say:

Going through this paper is like finding a better way to say the things that I want to say, to make my thoughts and feelings bet-

ter known. . . . As I want to make this paper clearer as I write it, as I want to make it sing farther from the page, it will mirror the things I am learning.

Janet writes, “Although the Sonnenberg gives me the warm fuzzies, and the narrative essay is difficult to write, the latter makes me feel more powerful.” And, in explaining her choice to revise a description, Donna also reveals her personal investment in her writing:

In contrast, with loving coaxing, the temperament of my golden child has a solid character, and the superficial flaws in my descriptive essay can be cosmetically altered the way a muddy, snotty-nosed kid in ripped play clothes is transformed into an elegantly feminine, satin-beribboned beauty. Like a sweet, good child, this paper pleases me. For this reason, I wish to groom her for the Debutante’s Ball.

The responses indicate not only a personal connection with the labors of writing, but also a context and a purpose for writing. It is clear that at least some writing “does something” for these students; it serves a useful purpose other than achieving a grade. Additionally, such responses require the interplay of intellectual activities so necessary to produce good writing, without the limitations of a single grade on a single essay.

Some Cautious Conclusions

There are certainly pitfalls inherent in this system, as there are in any system of evaluating writing. For students who are used to being rewarded with prominent A’s affixed to their work, a mere S is a bit slippery. “What does this mean” they ask, as if a B+ has more profound meaning. Some students are dismayed by receiving U’s for work that would, in a traditional system, receive a C- or D+. They feel they have been unfairly penalized. While such writ-

ers acknowledge an essay was not good, they don't see it as a failure. Other students, used to traditional percent scores and averages, find the system confusing.

The system does tend to reward students who are unspectacular but diligent in their coursework. I can think of few systems that don't. Many teachers offer students "extra credit," which also rewards the diligent but unspectacular. Provided the demands are high enough and the rewards not too lavish, a properly-constructed contract system is not out of line with other grading practices throughout a college.

My fears of rampant grade inflation, apparently the fifth horseman of the academic apocalypse, have thus far been unfounded. Students earn B's for the same reasons they had in the past: pride, perseverance, and preparation. C's and D's appear on grade reports for the same reasons they have in the past. The students who've earned A's, though, have done so because they've gone beyond what's been presented by the instructor. They have displayed not only talent but initiative and independence. And the results have been quite satisfying.

Works Cited

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