

LP Picard
Teaching Associate Professor
2021 DU Writing Program Retreat

A Classroom That Embraces *Practice*

“Engagement” has always been important to my pedagogy, but its value as part of student assessment has become more prominent over the last five years. For example, in my Winter 2016 WRIT 1122/1622, “engagement” accounted for 35% of students’ final grades (15% for Discussion Questions prepared for each class session, 15% for in-class participation, and 5% for individual conferences). “Participation” in this course included process (completing drafts and participating in peer feedback), class discussion, and individual or small group activities. By Winter 2017,¹ “engagement” grew to account for 40% of students’ final assessment, with process accounting for 20% and DQs and in-class participation making up the other 20%. This trend of engagement being more and more significant has only grown; in each course I taught during the 2020-21 academic year, engagement made up at least 50% of grading.

From Winter 2016:

Grading:

Writing Projects	65%
Rhetorical Analysis	5%
WP #1	10%
WP #2	15%
WP #3	10%
WP #4	15%
Author’s Notes	10%
DQs	15%
Participation	15%
Conferences	5%

¹ This also appears to be the year when I finally caved and moved from letter grades that students and I kept track of outside of our LMS to a points-based system for final assessment. While I have concerns/hesitations with LMS’s,

From Winter 2017:

Grading:

Projects—300 points		
Open Letter (WP #1)	30 points	
Analysis 1 (WP #2)	30 points	
Analysis 2 (WP #3)	30 points	
Editorial (WP #4)	80 points	
Genre Swap (WP #5)	60 points	
Genaroo Presentation	60 points	
Portfolio	10 points	
Process—100 points		
Drafts	20 points	4 drafts x 5 points each
Peer Feedback (PF)	40 points	4 PFs x 10 points each
Author’s Notes	20 points	2 notes x 10 points each
Conferences	20 points	2 conferences x 10 points each
Engagement—100 points		
Discussion Questions	80 points	20 sets x 4 points each
Participation	20 points	

Some students tend to get a little anxious when they hear that *participation* and *engagement* are so heavily weighted in my courses, and I think that’s because those terms are both ubiquitous and ambiguous in academia. These concepts, what they mean, and how they are assessed differ widely across disciplines and even sometimes within them. For instance, in Kylee Thacker Maurer’s 2020 dissertation on “engagement” in first-year writing and composition classrooms, they note:

Although these fields invoke the concept frequently, review of the scholarship on engagement from Rhetoric and Composition, Education, and Psychology demonstrates that “engagement” is used haphazardly to cover all varieties of cognitive and affective phenomena, such as behavior,[1] cognition,[2] effort,[3] emotion,[4] interest,[5] intrinsic motivation,[6] involvement,[7] and participation,[8] to name a few.² Such haphazard application translates to inconsistency and disunity in defining the concept across disciplines with related focuses of study. Scholars offer a variety of related terms yet rarely do these scholars provide a

I know that students expect to use Canvas in all of their classes.

² See Appendix A for these footnote references.

definition for engagement, more than likely because engagement seems self-evident.³

Back when “participation” was a single grade that was assigned at the end of the term (as in the two courses above), I dedicated early class sessions to clarifying *what* engagement means to me and within the context of our class. Eventually, I decided to spell everything out—all activities, drafts, homework exercises, etc., were given their own points value and submission spot on Canvas—and assess “engagement” throughout the quarter, not just at the end.

From Winter 2020:

Grading:

Writing Projects (50%)—200 points

Review (WP #1)	40 points
American Anthem Story (WP #2)	40 points
Commentary (WP #3)	60 points
Taking an Approach (WP #4)	60 points

Process & Engagement (50%)—200 points

Process

Drafts of WPs	30 points	6 drafts x 5 points each
Peer Feedback (PF)	40 points	4 PF opportunities x 10 points each
Workshops	10 points	2 Workshop opportunities x 5 points each
Author's Notes	20 points	4 notes x 5 points each
Conferences	20 points	2 conferences x 10 points each

Engagement

Reflections	25 points	Opening = 10 points; Closing = 15 points
Portfolio	15 points	Design, Curation, and Submission x 5 points each
Exercises	40 points	10 Group or Individual Exercises x 4 points each

Total: 400 points

This benefits of this system were:

- 1) It made explicit what is expected by *participation*—that it’s not just an impression of someone’s responsiveness or chattiness in the classroom; instead, it’s about engaging in the active processes of writing and learning, and
- 2) It gave students many ways to succeed (part of my move toward equity in the classroom).

³ Thacker Maurer, Kylee. *Defining “Engagement” for the Composition Classroom*. 2020. Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, PhD dissertation. Page 3.

⁴ In explaining my grading scheme to students, I make sure to discuss the *subjectivity* in assessing writing (in education and in the real world) and the many issues with grading grammar (and why I want to bring linguistic justice into the classroom). I’ll elaborate more on this later + in Appendix B.

⁵ As I imagine we all did. Some colleagues smartly reduced their content before starting the Spring 2020 quarter. I

I think it worked for the most part. With the split between *engagement/process* and *product*, there was less pressure for students to have perfect⁴ assignments. They were more willing to take risks in their writing and play with voice. Students also came to see that our homework, in-class activities, drafts, and peer feedback sessions weren’t “busy work”—these were important parts of the learning and writing processes. The main downside to this system, though, was that having *points* for everything put pressure on me to grade/respond to everything—even the low-stakes scaffolding activities.

But!—*and there was going to be a ‘but’*—things changed dramatically in Spring 2020. In the past, it wasn’t a problem if I cut one or two exercises (“hey, you all get 4 *free* points!”), but I ended up cutting *drastically* during those 10 weeks.⁵ It felt easier to give everyone full credit for all of the things I cut (e.g., any remaining Discussion Board activity, half of our exercises, and one scaffolding mini project) than to re-imagine the grading breakdown and make those changes to Canvas.

Lesson learned, I knew I had to be more flexible for both students and myself in the 2020-21 year. This flexibility came in the form of a “Pragmatic Compassion Clause”⁶ and a grading contract.

Pragmatic Compassion Clause [used for 2020-21 courses]

This is adapted from a generous colleague who has shared their policy:

Obviously, the circumstances for this course differ tremendously from when you first applied to DU, in ways we couldn’t have foreseen. Our lives are disrupted, and there’s a

dearly love my WRIT 1133/1733, so believed I could somehow make the content delivered in a fully face-to-face course work in a mostly-asynchronous with a 25-minute small group meeting online course. During a global pandemic. That lasted 3 weeks.

⁶ Our Executive Director, Doug Hesse, sent a version of this to the Writing Program faculty before Spring 2020. I included it in that quarter’s course materials and adapted it for my 2020-21 courses.

chance that you—or I—might become ill or have to deal with an unexpected home/income/living/personal situation.

Please rest assured that I'll be sensitive to your individual circumstances. That includes some flexibility with deadlines and how I arrive at your final grade. I'm operating under the assumption that we're all going to do the best we can, working in good faith unless circumstances prevent us. If those circumstances happen, I'll work with you compassionately to figure the best course of action.

What does that look like?

- I'll expect all of us to meet deadlines and due dates. I'm confident that we'll all rise to the unique occasion we find ourselves facing. That said, if you find yourself at some point needing to be modestly late (say, a day or so) turning in a piece of writing, no big deal. Just let me know via e-mail, and turn it in.
- Beyond that, if something happens to your ability to work for a longer stint, we'll figure things out. Perhaps you get ill; your computer dies; you need to care for someone; you need to work; your housing situation deteriorates. Whatever. In that case, let me know as soon as you can. We will explore alternative paths that take into account your personal circumstances.

If you communicate what's going on and request extensions, late work will not negatively affect your E&P grade. I will be empathetic, but I am not a mind-reader. I cannot offer accommodations or modifications without first hearing from you.

Contract grading “emphasizes writing processes and labor as much or more than final products”⁷ either by:

- 1) articulating the tasks and expectations for students to earn a “B,” with higher quality work allowing for a higher grade (i.e., the “guaranteed B” model from Elbow and Danielewicz),
- 2) allowing students to negotiate what earning an “A,” “B,” and “C” look like through class discussion (Shor 1996; Inoue 2005), or
- 3) articulating the tasks and expectations for students to earn a B, as with the contract model from Elbow and Danielewicz; in this final version, though, students earn an “A” not through ‘higher quality writing’ but through further labor—drafting, completing extra credit, going above and beyond requirements of a given assignment, etc. (Inoue 2019).⁸

I have wanted to test our contract grading in my classrooms since this is a “method of assessment that lowers stress, helps students focus on learning, and emphasizes educational equity.”

Given my emphasis on linguistic justice, I prefer the third model over the first two. However, I know that students (particularly DU students) are used to tracking their *week by week* success in their courses, so not getting a grade until mid-term or even the end of the course may offset some of the benefits of the contract. I also *do* value giving writing an assessment beyond effort and labor—considering the rhetorical success of a given project (*see Appendix B for syllabi language about this evaluation system*).⁹

⁷ Melzer, Dan, DJ Quinn, Lisa Sperber, and Sarah Faye. “So Your Instructor is Using Contract Grading...”

⁸ Details and citations for these contract grading models can be found here: <https://www2.cortland.edu/offices/ict/files-to-share/2020%2003-03%20Grading%20Contracts%20Handout%20Examples.pdf>

⁹ As a first-day activity, I give students a handout with eight excerpts of writing that includes: a news article, a lit review for a scholarly article, an essay on the state of news media, a room-for-rent post on Craigslist, a tweet, lyrical prose, a (mostly sarcastic) recipe for making ice, and a scathing review of a *Transformers* film. I ask them to first determine

which is “the best,” and we discuss why. I then ask them “which is their favorite,” and the results are usually different. The goal of this activity is to demonstrate how challenging it is to apply one method of assessment to writing that varies in genre, audience, and purpose.

This is a segue into our conversation about how I will assess their writing—by considering its relative success given the rhetorical situation. This includes 1) how well it fits the given audience, 2) how well it adheres to the conventions of the specific genre, 3) how well it conforms to matters of fact & reasoning, 4) how well it achieves its given purpose, which is defined by students in an

My compromise, as I experimented with this grading system, was to hold off on using a contract for the *full* grade. Major projects were given their own grades, using the criteria explained in footnote 9 and Appendix B, and the contract was used to assess engagement, participation, and process.

From Winter 2021:¹⁰

GRADE BREAKDOWN:

Writing Projects (50%)—200 points			
Open Letter (WP #1)	40 points		
American Anthem Story (WP #2)	40 points		
Commentary (WP #3)	60 points		
Revision of WP #1 or WP #2	20 points		
Opening & Closing Reflections	20 points	2 x 10 points each	
Portfolio	20 points		
Engagement, Participation, & Process (50%)—200 points			
<i>Engagement & Participation</i>		<i>See "Doc. #3: E&P Contract"</i>	
Weekly E&P Grade	160 points	10 weeks x 16 points each	
Signing Contract	5 points		
<i>Process (not included in Weekly E&P)</i>			
Author's Notes	15 points	3 notes x 5 points each	
Conferences	20 points	2 conferences x 10 points each	
Total:	400 points		

Here is how I framed the contract in our syllabus:

Engagement, Participation, & Process—worth up to (50%)

Weekly E&P Grade, Author's Notes, & Two Conferences with LP

Since the goal of our WRIT section is to foster more critical **engagement** with the rhetorical strategies and texts we encounter, **participation** is a crucial part of the course. Engagement & Participation (E&P) for this course does not mean having to always speak up when I ask a question in class (and no one will be penalized for being more of a listener than a talker). It's also more than simply showing up. Instead, Engagement & Participation is about grappling with, responding to, and reflecting upon assigned materials, completing exercises, and being prepared for conversations with classmates.

accompanying *author's note*, and 5) how much ambition it displays.

¹⁰ For WRIT 1133/1733 in Spring 2021, there was a similar breakdown between Projects and Engagement: our final Interpretive Constellation Essay was worth 100 points, our Mini Projects (which provided scaffolding and

My field (Rhetoric and Composition) also theorizes the act of writing/composing as an *ongoing, collaborative process*. Turning in complete, thoughtful drafts demonstrates investment in one's work and engagement in *invention*—single drafts leave no room for growth. Additionally, students without a draft will miss the opportunity to **receive** and **provide** valuable feedback—two crucial skills to hone for success in our personal, professional, and academic lives.

If students adhere to the expectations articulated on our E&P Contract (*see Doc. #3*), they will earn 14 points for the week (roughly equivalent to a B+ grade). Students who go above and beyond expectations can earn up to 16 points per week. Students who aren't engaging or participating will earn fewer points.

Included in E&P weekly assessment:

- **Attendance & Engagement**—both in-person (Tuesdays) and online (Fridays);
- **Drafts, Peer Feedback, and Revision Plans** for our Writing Projects; and
- **Completing in-class or asynchronous Exercises** on Canvas.

For the drafts, peer feedback, revision plans, and exercises, I articulated expectations for those process-assignments, set the canvas assignment to “does not count toward final grade,” and used letter grades to signal check/met expectations (X), exceeds expectations (X+), does not meet expectations (X-), or incomplete/missing (0).¹¹ Each week then had its own “E+P” grade, based on whatever we were able to accomplish in class and as independent work that week.

The contract I used this year most closely aligns with Asao B. Inoue's "[Labor-Based Grading Contract](#)," and I even participated in a group

opportunities to conduct primary research for our main essay) were worth 100 points combined, and our Weekly Engagement + Process were worth a total of 200 points.

¹¹ An unfortunate side effect, I think, is that the students' “total grade” often showed up using the same letter system instead of points... *I really do not like Canvas.*

discussion about adapting this contract led by Inoue via zoom in July 2020. This conversation was *so* valuable in not only helping me decide how to adjust grading contracts for hybrid/hyflex modalities, but the group addressed one of my main hesitations.

While I appreciate the philosophy of this grading contract, I've been bothered by the word "labor." The idea of this work being "labor" only considers the *doing of it* and not the *why* we are doing it. The logging of this labor (one of the methods of assessment in this model) also seems to emphasize productivity and production over reflective practices. Finally, the use of the word "labor" also seems to fall into the trap of framing the purpose of college as being to prepare students for 'the working world'/life under capitalism. I was thrilled when this concern came up during the group conversation—and these concerns both mirrored by broad hesitations about the use of the word labor and considered it within the specific context of learning during the era of COVID.

Someone suggested that the term "**practice**" might fit the pedagogy better—no matter where we are in our craft, we can always benefit from further practice... we can always continue to build toward mastery. Among the other reasons I prefer the term practice is that 1) it highlights *purpose* (to grow and develop our skills), 2) it isn't strictly measured by output or time invested, and 3) it reframes the outcome as being for the student (we practice for *ourselves*) rather than for the instructor (typically, we labor for *others*). So while I've adopted Inoue's grading contract, I've really adapted and reworked the language.

Here's how I frame the idea of "practice" for students in the contract itself (*see Appendix C for full*):

¹² I might even consider applying the "contract grading" to our main assignments. Since I evaluate projects based upon genre conventions, appropriateness for a given audience, and application of rhetorical/argumentative strategies of that particular unit, I'm already spelling out the "tasks" that are expected of them. The other two criteria of my current evaluation model are ambition displayed and achieving the purpose that students determine for themselves, which

To my students:

It should be clear by now that my priority for our section of (Advanced) Rhetoric & Academic Writing is deeper *understanding*. Yes, we will gain *knowledge*—the kind that might be assessed via quizzes, labs, term papers, and worksheets—but there is only so much we can reasonably accomplish in a 10-week quarter. Becoming more compassionate, more critical, more curious, and more contextualized writers *is* something that we can accomplish. It's not about where we end up, but rather reframing and redesigning how we embark upon this journey.

Conventional grading makes teaching and learning difficult. Captured below in an excerpt from Asao B. Inoue's *Labor-Based Grading Contract*, it often leads students to think more about grades than writing, critical thinking, or learning; to worry more about pleasing a professor than figuring out what you really want to say or how you want to say it; to be reluctant to take risks; to focus on minor details rather than the bigger picture. Instead of creating a classroom culture based around the all-encompassing grade, I want to create a culture of support, a culture where you and I function as allies rather than adversaries. A culture that embraces **practice**.

As a philosophy and pedagogical practice, I think this year provided a strong trial run for my practice-based grading contract. It provided me with flexibility in class planning and provided students with agency in their engagement/participation grades. I'm excited to continue the practice in the future.¹²

However, there were two constraints to acknowledge. First, I had *no* idea what to do if students were absent for both class periods in a

brings in the *negotiation* framework from the Shor grading contract model.

I would still keep these grades "separate" from overall Engagement, Participation, + Process, but at least I'd be using one approach to assessment for every aspect of class.

given week and there was no homework (e.g., drafts, scaffolding exercises, peer feedback, etc.) to collect. Second, the nature of hyflex modalities and paperless classrooms caused some students to conflate these *practice*-oriented activities with *product*-orientated assignments.

In the past, our in-class activities, informal homework exercises, and process components were seen as being *lower stakes*—as being part of the learning process. Students understood that what mattered was just *doing it*, that there were typically no “correct” answers and that I wasn’t going to look at whatever was completed. Homework DQs (discussion questions) or free writes were meant to foster better conversation in class; whatever activities we did in small groups were practice for their independent primary projects. And we would always have the chance to debrief—to discuss what was challenging, what came easier, what insight we gained, how it applied to our ongoing work, etc. It helped, too, that I was able to wander around the room, check in, guide, raise complications.

But that kind of *checking in* and *guiding* was limited or full-on restricted, depending on the classroom, given our COVID protocols. Additionally, to accommodate the paperless classroom and students who were on zoom, all activities (no matter how *low stakes*) had to be set up on Canvas. Something was *always* submitted. And so what was meant to be *process* got turned into *product*.

I hope that returning to normal classroom practices will change the way students engage with the contract and our E+P. But I also wonder if there’s another way to further emphasize that this is *process*—and that’s by adopting a pedagogy that I actually helped my husband create.¹³

¹³ He’s a working professional in local journalism and an alum of CU Boulder’s College of Media, Communication, and Information. He was hired as an adjunct to co-teach a Sports Writing class in Spring 2020—A SPORTS WRITING CLASS! I can’t imagine a more stressful entry into teaching than having your whole theme suddenly canceled in the midst of a global pandemic, especially without any formal pedagogical training. He then taught a

My husband worked as an adjunct for CU Boulder from Spring 2020-Spring 2021 and taught three completely different courses—Sports Writing, Reporting 1, and Reporting 2. For Reporting 1, there was a shared Canvas shell, which we thought would help, but it was designed to be taught in person... his section was online. There were *so* many quizzes, homework exercises, activities, etc.—the entire structure of the course and all of its shared materials required significant adaptations. The sheer volume of ‘submissions’ on Canvas became too much. On top of teaching at CU, he was working for local newspapers, running two prep recruitment websites, and freelancing as a sports photographer. When he was offered the chance to teach Reporting 2, which had no shared curriculum, he was excited to create a course that matched his teaching style and skills—one on one mentorship and thorough feedback on stories. While he appreciated the need for exercises, drafts, + scaffolding, he acknowledged that he just didn’t have the time to provide feedback on it all. So we came up with a way to streamline that engagement—to have students discuss and analyze *their own* learning through weekly reflections.

Here is the breakdown of product + process from his JRNL 4002: Reporting 2 class:

GRADE BREAKDOWN (400 points total)

Four Beat Stories (160 points, 40 points each) 40%

Enterprise Story (60 points) 15%

Final Project Package (100 points) 25%

Reporting 1 class in Fall 2021 and a Reporting 2 class in Spring 2021. So that’s *three* completely new course preps over the course of the most challenging 18 months we’ve had in education. I was happy to help design and shape these courses, as it offered me some ideas for renovating my own classes, but I give him *so so* much credit for taking on that challenge.

Engagement and Participation (80 points, 5 points a week) 20%

Given the Pragmatic Compassion clause (see *Syllabus Statements handout*), there is a need to be flexible with assignments and workload. Rather than assign a numerical value to each individual exercise, draft, or discussion board post, we will tackle engagement week by week. To succeed as both a student and writer, one needs to engage fully with assigned materials and classmates. This means submitting homework assignments, practice exercises, drafts, and peer feedback in a thoughtful and punctual manner.

Here is the description of those weekly reflections from the syllabus:

WEEKLY REFLECTIONS

By the end of each week, you will submit a short reflection on your experience covering your beat, your reaction to the reading and discussion, current events, case studies and things you may be experiencing in your other classes or journalistic endeavors. This will factor into your participation grade.

The reason I am drawn to this as a potential model for my *practice*-based grading contract is that it would allow me to focus my feedback on the *reflection* and *learning*, not on the scaffolding that got us there—only collecting weekly reflections would allow me to say “don’t show me the *practice* itself, but tell me what came from it. Tell me how you plan to use this and build upon it.”

¹⁴ One idea is to dedicate the final 15-20 minutes of every Thursday or Friday session to starting a 250-word reflection; these then get brief feedback from me and are compiled for the final portfolio.

¹⁵ The default in most grading contracts is a B (or 85%) so that’s where I’m getting this number as our baseline.

I will admit that this might be tricky in my WRIT courses, since there is already *a lot* of writing, but I think I could make it work now that I’ll be back to teaching the full 3.6 hours of synchronous face-to-face class sessions.¹⁴ I’d pair these weekly reflections with a running checklist on Canvas—all exercises and process-activities are marked as either ‘complete’ or ‘incomplete’ on Canvas, and students are allowed to miss 15%¹⁵ of these before the overall E+P grade begins to drop. I have some time to continue reimagining and revising my grading contract, and can pilot the weekly reflections in my FSEM.¹⁶ But my goal for this upcoming year is to return my classroom to a space of practice, exploration, experimentation. To encourage students to worry less about the final product.

We have ten weeks together. Just *do it*. Get in the *practice*. And then tell me what came out of that.

¹⁶ I already assign a weekly Class Log entry that contains two parts: the first is an exercise related to that week’s content and the second is a more general reflection on their experiences in the course. I could make that second part be our “E+P Weekly Reflection.”

Appendix A—*footnotes from Thacker Maurer*

For instance, in Kylee Thacker Maurer’s 2020 dissertation on “engagement” in first-year writing and composition classrooms, they note:

Although these fields invoke the concept frequently, review of the scholarship on engagement from Rhetoric and Composition, Education, and Psychology demonstrates that “engagement” is used haphazardly to cover all varieties of cognitive and affective phenomena, such as behavior,[1] cognition,[2] effort,[3] emotion,[4] interest,[5] intrinsic motivation,[6] involvement,[7] and participation,[8] to name a few. Such haphazard application translates to inconsistency and disunity in defining the concept across disciplines with related focuses of study. Scholars offer a variety of related terms yet rarely do these scholars provide a definition for engagement, more than likely because engagement seems self-evident.

¹ Committee on Engagement; Connell and Wellborn (Klem and Connell 262); Faculty Learning Community (Oele et al. 113); Fredricks et al.; Gregory et al.; Groccia; Gunuc and Kuzu

² Connell and Wellborn (Klem and Connell 262); Faculty Learning Community (Oele et al. 113); Fredricks et al.; Gregory et al.; Groccia; Gunuc and Kuzu; Nystrand and Gamoran; Toshalis and Nakkula; Winne

³ Committee on Engagement; Connell and Wellborn (Klem and Connell 262); Hu and Kuh; Marks (Klem and Connell 262); NSSE; Skinner et al.; Toshalis and Nakkula

⁴ Committee on Engagement; Connell and Wellborn (Klem and Connell 262); Faculty Learning Community (Oele et al. 113); Fredricks et al.; Gregory et al.; Groccia; Gunuc and Kuzu; Skinner et al.; Winne

⁵ Akey; Axelson and Flick (Groccia 12); Bray and McClaskey; Burgess; Claxton; Committee on Engagement; Glossary of Education Reform (Groccia 13); Greenberg et al.; Marks (Klem and Connell 262); McDonald

⁶ Barkley; Bray and McClaskey; Glossary of Education Reform (Groccia 13); Martin and Dowson; Toshalis and Nakkula; Winne

⁷ Australian Council (Baron and Corbin 761); Axelson and Flick (Groccia 12); Coates (Groccia 12); Council of WPA (Cruz 34); “Framework for Success”; Kaplan et al.; Little et al. (Baron and Corbin 762); Nystrand and Gamoran

⁸ Akey; Baron and Corbin; Coates (Groccia 12); Greenberg et al.; Gregory et al.; Harper and Quayle (Baron and Corbin 761); NSSE; Willms et al.

Appendix B—criteria used to assess writing in my courses (language from syllabi)

A note on grading for the WPs

Many instructors use rubrics to assess academic writing—they make evaluating student work efficient, consistent, and objective. Many students find rubrics helpful as they provide students with a clear understanding of what is expected of a given assignment. Rubrics offer a multidimensional framework for spelling out and valuing the criteria of “good writing”—e.g., “mechanics,” “source use,” “organization,” “thesis / main idea,” “evidence / development,” etc.

While there are many solid reasons to use rubrics, there are limitations to consider. Rubrics ignore outside circumstances, effort or ambition displayed, and creativity. Rubrics value product (the final paper) over process. Rubrics can encourage formulaic thinking and formulaic writing.

I’m sorry to say that you won’t see a rubric in our class. Please don’t mistake me—writing rubrics are a sound pedagogical tool and are very helpful to both students and instructors.

But I want you to feel encouraged to take risks in your writing, to think outside the box. I want you to value the process of meaning-making (and of intellectual inquiry) as much as you value the artifact created through this process. I hope you will expand your understanding of what makes “good writing.”

This quarter, “good writing” will be evaluated using five flexible criteria¹⁷:

- How well it fits a given readership or audience;
- How well it matches formal conventions expected by its audience (adherence to genre and research traditions);
- How well it achieves a given purpose;
- How well it conforms to matters of fact and reasoning; and
- How much ambition it displays.

These criteria do encourage and reward taking risks in your writing.

Each assignment prompt will include a rough translation of point values to letter grades. Please keep in mind: a **B** is a *strong* grade. A **B** means “above average,” “good,” and “meeting the rigorous expectations and standards of college work.”

¹⁷ Borrowed from Doug Hesse:
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer->

[sheet/wp/2013/05/02/grading-writing-the-art-and-science-and-why-computers-cant-do-it/](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2013/05/02/grading-writing-the-art-and-science-and-why-computers-cant-do-it/)

Appendix C—sample grading contract

Engagement & Participation

A Practice-Based Grading Contract

WRIT 1622-4, Winter 2021

Professor: LP Picard

adapted from a similar contract designed by Asao B. Inoue
language adapted from a DU WRIT contract designed by Manuel Sanz

To my students:

It should be clear by now that my priority for our section of (Advanced) Rhetoric & Academic Writing is deeper *understanding*. Yes, we will gain *knowledge*—the kind that might be assessed via quizzes, labs, term papers, and worksheets—but there is only so much we can reasonably accomplish in a 10-week quarter. Becoming more compassionate, more critical, more curious, and more contextualized writers *is* something that we can accomplish. It's not about where we end up, but rather reframing and redesigning how we embark upon this journey.

Conventional grading makes teaching and learning difficult. Captured below in an excerpt from Asao B. Inoue's *Labor-Based Grading Contract* ([appendix a](#)), it often leads students to think more about grades than writing, critical thinking, or learning; to worry more about pleasing a professor than figuring out what you really want to say or how you want to say it; to be reluctant to take risks; to focus on minor details rather than the bigger picture. Instead of creating a classroom culture based around the all-encompassing grade, I want to create a culture of support, a culture where you and I function as allies rather than adversaries. A culture that embraces **practice**.

Given the learning objectives I articulated in our syllabus, the majority of your final grade (65%) will be determined by *process*—the acts of critically engaging with our assigned texts, working out the application of our course concepts, and reflecting upon your reactions, experiences, knowledge, and understanding through exploratory writing. Of this, 15% (60 points) is dedicated to Reflective Writing Projects; another 10% (40 points) is captured by conversations we have about the process of your projects, whether in writing (Author's Notes) or in person (Conferences).

The remainder of your process grade—40% of your final course grade—is captured by “Engagement & Participation,” a weekly **practice-based grade** determined by this contract.

*In standard contract-based courses, you would only receive one grade (**the** grade) at the end of the term, with updates and feedback along the way. While the conditions for the grade are outlined in detail, the uncertainty of not having any grades can sometimes cause students stress. That's why I'll be giving you a practice-based grade determined by this contract each week. The total you can earn is 160 points (16 points × 10 weeks).*

You are guaranteed a B+ (14 points) each week if you meet the following conditions:

- **Minimum Requirements**
 - Fulfill the minimum requirement for any assignment as articulated in the syllabus or in the exercise's description. This includes, but isn't limited to: Drafts, Peer Feedback, Revision Plans, Reflective Responses, and Exercises.
- **Practical Punctuality**
 - Reasonably meet deadlines for both attendance and submissions. This means no more than **one** occasion of tardiness in a week (for either attendance or submitting work).
- **Prepared & Present**
 - Come to class or small-group meeting having completed the homework. Be *present* for our time together, which ranges from 2.5-3.6 hours a week.
 - In the event of an absence, you have communicated that you are missing class *before* our meeting (even if you don't share the reason why).

Lower than a B (13 or fewer points). Your weekly E&P grade will be lowered by:

- **Incomplete or Missing Work**
- **Ghosting**—Absences will not affect your weekly E&P grade, but not reaching out will.
- **Excessive Lateness**—More than one occasion of tardiness in a week (for either attendance or submitting work).
- **Distracted or Disruptive Classroom Behavior**—Please see the *Active Participation* policy from “Doc. #5: Course Policies” handout.

Higher than a B (15 or 16 points). Your weekly E&P grade will be raised by:

- **Exceeding Expectations**—Going above and beyond the bare requirements for assignments.
- **Diligent Deadlines**—Submitting all work on time and arriving to our class at the designated time (whether in person or on zoom).

A note on Canvas Grading:

Assignments that fall within E&P will show up as being worth 4 points and will display a grade of X (meets expectations), X+ (exceeds expectations), X- (does not meet expectations), or 0 (missing or does not fulfill assignment). Please note: these assignments are set to *not* count toward your final grade; they can help you track what is contributing to each week's E&P grade. They also *will not* always add up to 16 points each week. This gives us the flexibility to adapt to whatever comes our way—*aka, we won't need to worry about what happens to the overall points for the course if we need to cut or skip an assignment some week.*

A note on signing the Contract:

Typically, students would provide a written signature to confirm that they've read & understood all policies and agree to abide by the contract. Since DU is going paperless in Winter 2021, I'll ask that you use the "E&P Contract Agreement" assignment on canvas to write "I accept," the date, and your name to provide electronic consent. Submitting this before our second class meeting will be worth 5 points.

Appendix A

From Asao B. Inoue's *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity And Inclusion In The Compassionate Writing Classroom* (2019):

Imagine that this wasn't an official course for credit at UWT, 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.