

Contract Grades: An Agreement between Students and Their Teachers

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Background

Contract grades essentially transform the grading process from teacher-developed criteria into an agreement between teacher and student, with considerable freedom for students to propose and assess work on their own initiative. Like the related concepts of point systems, achievement grading (Adkison and Tchudi), total quality assessment (McDonnell), and outcomes-based grading (Pribyl), contracts eliminate highly subjective and pseudoscientific gradations (O'Hagan) and link grades to the quantity of high-quality work completed. I was first introduced to contract grades several years ago during my graduate studies and felt a tremendous amount of freedom because I could write for myself, rather than for my professor or for a grade. Having been liberated from my own phobia of the "bad grade," I implemented contracts in my own freshman and sophomore literature and writing courses. My initial concerns were as follows:

- to ensure quality controls within the contract to make certain students were producing good work, not just lots of work;
- to deal with the objections of students who were opposed to having to work harder for an A than students who earned B's or C's and those who operated under the assumption that A's are awarded simply for not doing anything wrong, rather than for showing an ability beyond the minimums.

I had students maintain a portfolio, and if their portfolio contained the core assignments to satisfy basic course requirements, they were guaranteed a C, provided they had attended class and participated actively. Students were then allowed to contract for a B or an A on the basis of their willingness to add high-quality work to their portfolios, work such as additional readings and writings, with a range of possibilities that I outlined in class. Students needed to turn in their contract proposals for their chosen project by the fifth week of the semester and complete drafts by the twelfth week. To ensure that students understood that quantity does not replace quality, I included a statement in the contract that established my right to ask students to revise assignments that did not demonstrate competent writing skills, including originality of thought, clarity of focus, depth and detail of development, precision of language, and control of mechanics and usage. To deal with the objections of being forced to work harder, I reminded students that those who earn exceptionally high grades should and often do work harder than others. (Not every student has been convinced by this argument.)

Several years later, after numerous personal comments and class evaluations from my students, I conclude that at least 90 percent of my students like the freedom of the contract grade. They feel secure knowing that if they "don't get it right" the first time, they can revise. As the teacher, I enjoy the freedom of not having to include grade justifications in my comments and responses. I praise what they do well, focus on areas that need improvement, and request revisions when necessary. For those students who are less trusting of contract grades, I offer the choice of waiving the contract and opting for a traditional grading system. Interestingly enough, even those who complain about the contract system seldom choose to forgo the opportunity to control their grade.

I highly recommend this alternative to grading and maintain that teachers at any level, in any subject matter, can successfully implement such a strategy either for individual units or entire semesters.

Introduction and Aims

This workshop will help you determine, first, whether a contract-grading system is a viable alternative and beneficial to both you and your students and, second, how to implement such a system. Through this workshop you can

- examine where such a system would be beneficial, i.e., the grade level and subject matter;
- devise various strategies for incorporating contract grades into your current grading practice;
- develop satisfactory contracts for both individual units and entire courses;
- create a contract-grading policy statement or set of guidelines for your faculty interest group;
- develop strategies to deal with objections from other faculty and administrators.

Resources

In This Volume

Adkison, Stephen, and Stephen Tchudi. Chapter 13: "Grading on Merit and Achievement: Where Quality Meets Quantity."

McDonnell, Charles. Chapter 14: "Total Quality: A Farewell to Grades."

Nelson, Marie Wilson. Chapter 2: "Growth-Biased Assessing of Writers—A More Democratic Choice."

O'Hagan, Liesel K. Chapter 1: "It's Broken—Fix It!"

Pribyl, Rick. Chapter 17: "Unlocking Outcome-Based Education through the Writing Process."

Other Resources

Courts, Patrick L. *Literacy and Empowerment: The Meaning Makers*. South Hadley: Bergin & Garvey, 1991.

Elbow, Peter. *Embracing Contraries: Explorations in Learning and Teaching*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986.

Kirschenbaum, Howard, Rodney Napier, and Sidney B. Simon. *Wad-Ja-Get? The Grading Game in American Education*. New York: Hart, 1971.

Knowles, Malcolm S. *Using Learning Contracts*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986.

"Reporting What Students Are Learning." *Educational Leadership* 52:2 (Oct. 1994).

Smith, Frank. *Insult to Intelligence: The Bureaucratic Invasion of Our Classrooms*. New York: Arbor House, 1986.

Discussion Topics

- Review the recommended essays in this book and discuss or outline the traits of contract grading, including:
 1. How work is "graded" pass/fail or accept/revise;
 2. How work is credited or translated into report-card grades;
 3. How various systems are designed and implemented in the classroom.
- Consider how contract grading attempts to solve the following problems:

A child who has learned that something is worth doing only for a grade has learned the wrong thing. (Smith 183)

[Students] write in order to evidence that they have listened to what the teacher said....The student's language and thought is directed at getting through the day...and achieving success (good grades, promotion), and almost none of it is directed at the...expression of one's ideas, at the process of assimilating and/or wrestling with what is being learned. (Courts 83)

When they trust the teacher to be wholly an ally, students are more willing to take risks, connect the self to the material, and experiment. Here is the source not just of learning but also of genuine development or growth. (Elbow 144)
- Consider the following arguments that are frequently raised against contract grading:
 1. Contract grades would replace quality with quantity.
 2. Traditional grades are needed to maintain control.
 3. Students need the threat of grades to do high-quality work.
 4. Such systems would result in everyone receiving A's and B's, leading to grade inflation.
- Consider ways in which contract grades could be linked with other kinds of grading alternatives and writing practices, such as pass/fail, accept/revise, point systems, and portfolio grading.
- How can contract grades satisfy university, district, or school grading policies and restrictions and requirements while supporting current composition theories such as student

ownership, collaborative writing, peer-group analysis and discussion, multiple drafts, and teacher as collaborator, not judge?

- What benefits do contract grades afford students at all ability levels? What benefits do they afford teachers?
- What happens if students fail to meet their contracts?

Activities

- Hold discussions with students in which you introduce the contract-grading system. What are their positive and negative responses? What can you do to deal with each kind of response in designing a system?
- Discuss the grading systems currently being used in the classes at your school (not only for English, but for other disciplines, as appropriate). Consider how you could develop contract approaches in those courses by
 1. specifying the quantity and quality of work required for a base grade of C;
 2. detailing the options for students to earn B's or A's;
 3. using the portfolio or other system to document work completed;
 4. engaging students in self-assessment of their work.
- Design a series of trial contracts. Start simple. The first contract might simply be for a B or an A in a single unit of work or as part of a unit. You might want to make contract grading optional the first time around so that students who are distrustful of the system can continue with familiar grading practices. Treat your trials as an action-research project. Keeping accurate data is a must, especially when dealing with the reservations of students and even opposition from administrators or parents. (See also the material on "Weighing and Choosing Alternatives" by Tchudi, this volume.)
- Consider developing a set of guidelines for contracting in your interest group, grade level, or department. What are the elements of a good contract? How can those elements vary? Begin conducting trials of a variety of systems. Include samples in your guideline publication.

Follow-up

- After completing trials, ask students to comment again on the contract system. How has their attitude changed?

- Discuss the claims of contract grading. Does it seem to relieve grade anxiety for students? Does it free up the teacher to teach? Does the quality of student work improve or get better?
- Hold a workshop on contract grading for parents, to show them how this system makes both teachers and students accountable.
- Hold a contract-grading workshop for teachers at other levels.
- Solicit teachers from different grade levels and/or content areas who are interested in contract grades in their classes. Encourage these teachers to keep logbooks and later to compare the results of student growth and performance in, for example, math, science, physical education, and social studies.
- Hold an exhibit or exposition of student work completed under contracts, along with a display of the contracts themselves, students' ancillary work (notes, drafts, etc.), and the final products, with self-assessment showing how the work fulfilled the contracts.