

Using Mindfulness as a Heuristic for Writing Evaluation: Transforming Pedagogy and Quality of Experience

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Abstract: Mindfulness, or present-moment awareness, and its associated qualities of calm/relaxation, nonjudgment, intentionality, concentration, and compassion, are increasingly being used to help cultivate self-awareness, attention, and optimal learning experiences. After defining mindfulness and selecting key concepts, we apply the construct and features of mindfulness to writing evaluation in the form of contract grading, offering a model for using mindfulness as a generative heuristic for pedagogy. In turn, we create a new, innovative, mindfulness-based writing evaluation process and pedagogy, widely applicable across disciplines. This Mindful Grading Agreement Process, or MGAP, helps cultivate several desirable teaching-learning outcomes, including: 1) student agency, creative risk-taking, and intrinsic motivation; 2) enhanced potentiality for transfer of learning through more co-created reflection; and 3) a pedagogy grounded in collaborative evaluation processes, privileging quality of experience for teaching-learning writing and student agency. In effect, the MGAP makes possible an integrated pedagogy of “what is”—paying better attention to students lived experiences and literacies. We offer, then, a model for productively applying mindfulness to teaching and learning as well as a mindfulness-based tool for evaluating writing in a variety of disciplinary contexts.

Introduction

Mindfulness, most broadly understood as the practice of nonjudgmental present moment awareness (Kabat-Zinn, 1994), is currently enjoying an unprecedented cultural moment in the West, influencing myriad societal spaces and endeavors, for example in healthcare, workplaces, government, the military, business, creative arts, and education (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, 2011; Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute; Mindful Schools). Mindfulness as a way of knowing and its growing scholarship, resources, and communities of practice currently offer educators, in particular, accessible and generative possibilities for transforming school culture, curriculum, pedagogy, and learning across the disciplines (Mindful Schools; Rechtschaffen, 2014; Zajonc, 2009). As educators teaching writing and directing university writing programs, inspired by the work of numerous educators integrating mindfulness and pedagogy across the disciplines (Barbezat & Bush, 2013; Kirsch, 2009; Kroll, 2013; O’Reilly, 1993; Wenger, 2015), and motivated by our personal understanding and uses of mindfulness, we wanted to create the kind of consistent, student-centered quality of experience for teaching-learning writing based in hospitality and trust often enjoyed in mindfulness-based pedagogies. We sensed, however, that our traditional grading

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practices promoted students' preoccupation with points and percentages, rather than their learning and quality of experience. Consequently, we looked to the nontraditional, already student-centered practice of contract grading for evaluating writing (Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009; Inoue, 2012, 2014, 2015; Shor, 1996), and we wondered how we might bring mindfulness and contract grading together to enhance both writing evaluation and in turn the classroom culture. We asked: In what ways can we intentionally and explicitly apply the lens of mindfulness to inform contract grading for evaluating writing? And to what ends? In response, we created an innovative classroom writing evaluation process, featuring values from both mindfulness and contract grading—offering an explicitly mindfulness-based evaluation process and pedagogy widely applicable across disciplines.

Like other contemplative teacher-scholars who integrate mindfulness into their pedagogies (Barbezat & Bush, 2013; Kirsch, 2009; Kroll, 2013; O'Reilly, 1993; Wenger, 2015), our project offers a model for applying mindfulness to a significant aspect of pedagogy, i.e. evaluation, making a dual contribution to the current conversation about using mindfulness for teaching and learning. In particular, we note how the new evaluation tool helps cultivate conditions for enhancing several desirable teaching-learning experiences and values, including: 1) student agency, creative risk-taking, and intrinsic motivation; 2) enhanced potential for transfer of learning through more co-created reflection; and 3) an integrated writing pedagogy grounded in collaborative evaluation processes and students' quality of experience. Together, both our mindfulness-based process and revised evaluation tool offer an object lesson in the integral relationship between assessment and pedagogy (Inoue, 2015).

We begin our discussion by developing a nuanced understanding of mindfulness, contextualizing our project within the broader societal turn toward mindfulness and education, and Writing Studies; we follow this with a brief history of contract grading, a description of relevant mindfulness features, and our revised contract reflecting our application of those features; and finally, we conclude with a discussion of our process, experiences, and the values of using the new mindfulness-based grading contract for writing and teaching writing—especially for cultivating an integrated pedagogy. Ultimately, we identify the ways in which mindfulness can productively inform, indeed transform, our writing pedagogies, evaluation practices, and students' quality of experiences of writing and writing instruction in both first-year writing courses and across the disciplines.

The Mindfulness Turn

Once considered an exotic Eastern import introduced to Western culture at the turn of the last century in the form of Zen meditation (Suzuki, 1970), mindfulness as both a construct and set of formal practices is increasingly integrated into mainstream culture due in part to extensive research studying and substantiating its benefits (American Mindfulness Research Association). Jon Kabat-Zinn, founder of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Healthcare, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, is one of the earliest proponents of evidence-based mindfulness practices for symptomatic relief of chronic illnesses and overall well-being (Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Healthcare, and Society). He defines mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p.4). While Kabat-Zinn's definition seems straightforward and indeed is often commonly referenced, it merits unpacking—as part of the process for our using mindfulness as a heuristic—in that it implicitly refers to nuanced, simultaneous states of being and doing, mutually reinforced, and the natural consequences of such. “Paying attention” mindfully refers to an ability to bring both awareness of and focus to any experience; with “on purpose,” Kabat-Zinn notes the importance of being intentional—*intending* one's attention; “present moment” refers to paying attention to and with our senses to whatever is unfolding in mind-body—valuing first-person direct experience—made possible by practicing focused concentration or meditation, often on the breath, and other complementary mindfulness practices like visualization, deep listening, and journaling, as featured on “The Tree of Contemplative Practices” (Center for Contemplative Mind in Society); “nonjudgmentally”

refers to cultivating an accepting stance—or what is—towards self, others, and the world, through an intentional practice of letting go of story, assumptions, and otherwise being caught in thought or emotion. Sharon Salzberg (2018) captures both the complexity and simplicity of mindfulness: “It is about *how we are* when something arises—how much presence, balance, and compassion are we bringing forth in relation [to whatever arises]...” (para. 8). In turn, the natural consequence of these simultaneous states of being-doing include an expanded awareness that allows for greater empathy, ethical insight, and compassion (Fronsdal, 2008; Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Salzberg, 2018; Siegel, 2001; Nhat Hanh, 1975).

Grounded in this understanding of mindfulness, Kabat-Zinn (2011) created an initiative that integrates Eastern religious insights for Western secular purposes. In 1979, Kabat-Zinn founded the influential Stress Reduction Clinic, creating an evidence-based curriculum for Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) using formal meditation practices as an integrative therapy intervention for people with chronic illnesses and for overall well-being (Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society). His understanding and practices of mindfulness parallel two forms of Buddhist teachings—“Vipassana,” or “insight meditation...a direct and gradual cultivation of mindfulness or awareness” and “Samatha” or “concentration...tranquility...a state in which the mind is brought to rest focusing only on one item” (Gunarata, n.d., para. 2). Kabat-Zinn’s MBSR is informed by both of these Buddhist practices and states of being (2011). While some have rightly problematized secular approaches to mindfulness (e.g., Batchelor, 2018), Kabat-Zinn offers a model for how to both honor and teach the practices for secular purposes and audiences. (See also Mindful Schools for a secularized model for Education.)

In contrast to Kabat-Zinn, Harvard psychologist Ellen Langer (1998), one of the first educators to theorize mindfulness for learning, defines mindfulness as simply “noticing,” and contends that mindfulness and its educational benefits do not require formal meditation practices but instead can be learned by practicing various shifts of mind, especially in terms of cultivating “the continuous creation of new categories; openness to new information; and an implicit awareness of more than one perspective” (p. 4). Both Kabat-Zinn and Langer represent important secular efforts to value and instruct for mindfulness as a useful way of knowing. These vital efforts for using mindfulness practices contribute to myriad applications and research throughout Western culture, creating a perceivable societal turn toward mindfulness.¹

The Mindfulness Turn in Education and Writing Studies

Educators at all levels serve as key participants in explicitly applying mindfulness concepts in classrooms, curriculum, and organizational culture. Many K-12 educators offer stand-alone, general mindfulness practices to improve students’ social-emotional capacities, attention and focus, self-awareness and security, and empathy—all of which are shown to enhance students’ capacities to learn, as well as their capacity for compassion and compassionate behaviors (Hanson, 2009; Rechtschaffen, 2014; Siegel, 2001). In addition, many schools offer stand-alone instruction in mindfulness practices based on instructor certification programs, used to enhance student learning and noncognitive skills (similar to those listed in the Framework for Success in Postsecondary Writing, National Council of Teachers of English, 2011), as well as the overall school culture (Mindful Schools, MindUP, and Mindfulness in Schools Project). In contrast, while those teaching in higher education may also teach formal mindfulness practices for similar learning ends, many instructors do so by *integrating* mindfulness practices within their pedagogies (Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education; Barbezat & Bush, 2013; Zajonc, 2009). In addition, some universities (Brown University; Naropa University) offer formal academic programs in Contemplative Studies, focused on the history, theory, and practices of contemplative ways of knowing.²

Many scholars and instructors from the field of Writing Studies integrate mindfulness practices and pedagogies for better understanding the nature of writing and improving the teaching and learning of writing. One of the earliest discussions of using mindfulness practices for teaching writing is James

Moffett's (1982) "Writing, Inner Speech, and Meditation" in which he theorizes and applies meditation for teaching invention in particular. Additional significant discussions focus on: understanding mind-body connections (Elbow, 1998; Perl, 2004); reading and writing pedagogies to support writing as a spiritual and creative act to enhance the inner lives of students and faculty (Kirsch, 2009; O'Reilly, 1993; Yagelski, 2011); writing for social justice, social agency, and nonviolence (Inoue, 2015; Kroll, 2013; Kirsch, 2008; Mathieu, 2016; O'Reilly, 1993); integrating feminist and contemplative/yogic pedagogies for teaching and learning writing (Wenger, 2015) and administering writing programs (Wenger, 2014); and using Zen principles for teaching and living (Inoue, 2015; Tremmel, 1999). Together, these efforts demonstrate that mindfulness is a generative heuristic given that it is inherently metacognitive, noncognitive, and experiential, offering a wider, nonjudgmental lens for investigating and developing pedagogy.

As a contribution to this current educational turn, we used mindfulness as a lens through which to more intentionally enact one of educators' most fraught processes—the evaluation of student writing in the classroom—by applying mindfulness concepts to the writing evaluation practice of contract grading.

Contract Grading as Student-Centered Evaluation

Many fields, such as education, nursing, and social work, historically have used contract grading for their courses (Knowles, 1980; Lemieux, 2001; Schoolcraft & Delaney, 1982). Originally called "learning contracts," contract grading originated in U.S. educational institutions in the 1960s and 70s as a two-way agreement between instructor and student for the grade the student wanted to earn, often an "A" and often focused solely on the amount of writing the student produced. As a result, the instructor might end up having numerous different contracts, and typically focused on the students' writing *quantity*, rather than quality, process, or labor (Nilson, 2014, pp. 73-74).

In Writing Studies, contract grading is more explicitly associated with student-centered goals, especially empowerment and resisting power differentials as framed by critical liberatory pedagogy (Moreno-Lopez, 2005; Shor, 1996); writing process (Elbow, 1981; Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009); and race and justice systems (Inoue, 2012, 2015). For these theorists, the contract grading process values both the quantity *and* the quality of students' writing, but in distinct ways. For example, critical pedagogy theorists Ira Shor (1996) and Isabel Moreno-Lopez (2005) use contract grading to actively engage students through more power-sharing and agency in the classroom than they might otherwise experience in a traditional classroom. Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow (2009) build on the student-centeredness of Shor's contract grading, by placing more emphasis on the student's writing *process*—e.g. ongoing drafting, responding, and revising. Danielewicz and Elbow create a baseline "B" grade contract for their students based entirely on effort and participation—on what they "do" towards the writing, rather than only the quality of their writing, as in traditional writing classes. To earn higher than a B, however, students rely on the instructor's judgment of writing quality, again as in traditional grading.

Building on the student-centeredness of both Shor, and Danielewicz and Elbow (2009), Inoue's contract (2012) also privileges student's process and a default "B" grade, now with the focus on what Inoue terms "labor," a rigorous enacting of student writing process (p. 192). In addition, Inoue's (2015) grading contract privileges the lens of race and justice systems, focusing on the diversity of the classroom and removing grades from the classroom "ecology" to create "productive antiracist borderlands in the course's writing assessment ecology" (p. 185). All three of these iterations of contract grading foreground student-centeredness by inviting student agency and voice in the evaluation process, focusing on students' writing process, and paying attention to issues of power and power-sharing.

Contract Grading as Mindful Evaluation: Mindful Grading Agreement Process (MGAP)

Like those before us, we frame the discussion of contract grading as an opportunity for students to let go of the prevailing grade-centered mindset for writing—distracted by points or guessing what the instructor wants—to instead enjoy greater agency and a growth mindset. Distinct from previous already student-centered contract grading systems, however, is our explicitly applying key concepts from mindfulness, drawn from our unpacking of Kabat-Zinn’s deceptively simple definition of mindfulness, key concepts from both secular and Buddhist mindfulness literature, and our own direct experience of what helps cultivate mindfulness—to demonstrate the generative ways these features can be integrated into writing pedagogy and evaluation and in turn enhance quality of experience in the classroom. These key mindfulness concepts are: **calm/relaxation, present-moment awareness, non-judgment, intentionality, concentration, and compassion.**

- **Calm/Relaxation:** The ability to enter a relaxed state of mind-body; the relaxing of the sympathetic nervous system, making possible increased spaciousness, equanimity, non-reactivity, and present-moment awareness (Fronsdal, 2008; Hanson, 2009).
- **Present-Moment Awareness:** Made possible by a relaxed state, the ability to notice and accept one’s thoughts, feelings, and physical state without getting caught by, identifying with, or judging them (Fronsdal, 2008; Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Langer, 1998).
- **Nonjudgment:** The ability to observe a mind-body state without judging, made possible by greater present-moment awareness and the ability to pause following stimuli (Kabat-Zinn, 1994).
- **Intentionality (Choice and Agency):** The ability to make and create choices, made possible by an open, nonjudgmental, felt-sense awareness of “what is” (Palmer, 1998; Perl, 2004).
- **Concentration:** The ability to pay attention without internal or external distractions, made possible by a relaxed mind-body state, present-moment awareness, non-judgment, and intentionality (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Fronsdal, 2008).
- **Compassion:** The ability to holistically understand the interconnection of all beings and act with generosity and care towards oneself and others, made possible by...all of the above.

As suggested above, these key mindfulness-based abilities are not isolated but work together, and despite their seemingly linear relationship, are realized, with practice, in an organic and integrated way.

After identifying these key mindfulness concepts, as described above, we used them as a heuristic to re-envision the traditional grading contract. We asked, for example, what kind of evaluation process would help to create calm and relaxation for writing? How can the evaluation process offer greater present-moment awareness? How can a stance of nonjudgment aid in evaluating writing? How can we cultivate greater intentionality or choice for students’ writing? How can the grading contract help cultivate increased concentration? And how can we design an evaluation process as a practice of educating with and for compassion? Essentially, how can we use mindfulness, being based in first-person direct experience, to enhance the quality of experience in the classroom? Together, these questions helped generate the Mindfulness Grading Agreement Process, or MGAP.

Specifically, we applied mindfulness-based revisions to both the language of the assessment agreement and its specific features to reflect the above mindfulness qualities. For language revisions, for example, we replaced the legalese typical of many grading and other kinds of contracts, first by renaming it: Mindful Grading Agreement Process. “Mindful” seeks to signal our intention to pay attention to what’s here, now, in terms of the complexities of students’ writing and teaching-learning writing; “Agreement,” rather than contract, affirms the spirit of collaboration between students and instructors; and “Process,” in contrast to a static rubric, emphasizes the integrated, dynamic, process-oriented nature of the agreement.

In addition to changing the name to MGAP, we used our mindfulness lens to revise the legal language *within* the agreement. For example, throughout, we changed “contract” to “agreement”; “breach” to “omission”; “plea” to “request for consideration,” “plagiarism” to “academic integrity”—reflecting a non-judgmental, affirming intent. Also, in our Base B Agreement (the foundational grading contract in which students can earn a B based on established criteria, created by Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009, and later modified by Inoue, 2012; see appendix), we changed all agreement items from third-person perspective “you” to first-person perspective “I”: “*You* agree to be consistently prepared for class...” becomes “*I* agree to be consistently prepared...” Changing “you” to “I” allows for students to more actively *intend* and *own* the responsibilities, cultivating an awareness of the role of their agency in the class and in their writing. In its supportive tone and spirit, the MGAP’s language revisions lay the foundation for enhancing the quality of students’ experience of the course.

We also maintained, re-named, and re-ordered some features of the original contract, and using the mindfulness qualities noted above, added **new key features, bolded below**, ultimately compiling a list of fifteen agreements for a baseline grade of B, as follows: 1) Attendance and Punctuality; 2) Engaged Class-time Participation; 3) Course Work Effort/Labor; 4) Writing Process/Drafting; 5) **Taking Risks/Stretching Your Writing**; 6) Collaboration/Workshops 7) Revision; 8) Polishing/Editing 9) Reflection; 10) **Checklists**, which in turn includes additional mindfulness-based features, with an extra focus on the **students’ respective rhetorical situations** and **subsequent “achievable quality goals”**; 11) Conferences; 12) **Final Course Reflection and Portfolio**; 13) Academic Integrity; 14) Personal Online and Offline Behavior; and 15) **Instructor’s Responsibilities**, explicitly stating what students can expect from us as the work of the MGAP and semester unfolds. Together, the new features compose a revised learning evaluation agreement reflecting a mindfulness-based ethos, as discussed for each below.

Taking Risks

Throughout the semester, we discuss that one of the ways we grow as writers is to take risks with our writing by “stretching” or trying something new in our projects. All course writing projects offer a variety of creative options, including: bending genre conventions, trying a new medium or genre, using language creatively, and incorporating design or multimodal elements. We also spend time identifying real forms, audiences, and publication venues. Being intentionally invited to take risks in their writing, without negative judgment, and for real audiences, is “mindful” in the sense that students may recognize, perhaps for the first time, the extent to which their previous writing experiences and conditioning influence their perceptions of what’s doable, what’s allowable, what they’re capable of, and what writing is **really** for—using agency to strategically make creative choices to authentically engage others.

The Checklist

Instead of relying on a traditional, instructor-created, static, traits-centered rubric, for each project the students and instructor co-create a checklist of project features and processes, categorized according to the kinds of choices writers generally make as they write for purposes and audiences, as well as specifically mindful-oriented categories (e.g. risk-taking features and achievable quality goals, as discussed in subsequent sections). In turn, students apply the checklist, naming and reflecting on the specific choices they make for each category in composing the project.

The checklist as tool, of course fundamental in education, (as well other professional contexts, e.g., air transportation and healthcare, Gawande, 2011) is inherently mindful in that it draws deliberate attention to one’s intentions, offering instructors and students an opportunity to *pause* together to identify and adapt responses about what’s most important for the writing project, in terms of all kinds of writing processes and features. And because the checklist is theoretically a wide-open container, instructors and students can name both conventional writing values and other desirable, more ambitious “stretch” goals

in the context of any discipline. And because the checklist is co-created anew with each project, it acts as a mechanism of *presence*—to recognize the real nature of the present work, offering students a concrete opportunity to connect and distinguish writing projects and experiences.

Our particular checklist categories reflect the criteria and choices that writers generally aim for and make, and each category itself is an open container with room for freedom and flexibility. They are:

1. *Process/Labor Features*, in which students document supporting work;
2. *Project Quality Features*, in which students identify the ways the writing meets or exceeds specific quality requirements (e.g., effectively synthesizing ideas);
3. *Rhetorical Features*, in which students note rhetorical strategies used to effectively address purpose and audience (e.g., effectively using appeals—ethos, pathos, and logos);
4. *Risk-taking Features*, in which students identify creative risks attempted (e.g., effectively integrating multimodal elements);
5. *Achievable Quality Goals*, in which students identify and more intentionally practice individual quality goals (e.g., enhancing coherence within and between paragraphs).

Collaboratively, instructor and students create the criteria and choices for each checklist category, and then each student adds their own specific risk-taking and achievable writing goals, while reflecting and sharing responses to all categories, criteria, and choices as the project unfolds. This process cultivates substantial, authentic, student-centered dialogue about the complex juggling act of writing and how to strategically meet it, supporting the student as active and reflective agent in their learning. In addition, this exchange about each checklist category informs our better responding to students' writing needs, grounded in students' choices and reflection, expanding our awareness and intentionality. The humble yet powerful checklist is central to the MGAP—a simple, generative mechanism for helping instructors and students pay attention, with intention, to what's important for writing and creating here and now. Indeed, the MGAP is itself a substantial checklist, offering students an expanded understanding of the nature of writing, right from the start of the course.

Checklist Item: Rhetorical situation/features. The MGAP makes rhetorical situation more explicit, both in terms of the course itself and for students' writing. First, as an overall frame for the course, the absence of traditional grading shifts the rhetorical situation of the writing classroom, in which students are more empowered. Second, as a discrete checklist item, students are more deliberately directed to analyze and shape the rhetorical situation for each writing project, continually noting context, purpose, audience, genre, style, design, and rhetorical appeals. Thus, for each writing project, students are directed to richly write from this authentic rhetorical framework: to find their own motivation for writing, beyond the classroom; to clearly articulate their project's purpose and goals; to learn about how they can best connect with their audience, including the tone, language, and writing strategies they can use to make that connection. They also choose the best genre(s) and design features to communicate their ideas. For many, this is the first time they have needed to consider the rhetorical situation in which they are writing, and to make creative decisions for connecting with an actual audience, beyond that of instructor. Indeed, such real writing opportunities offer optimal conditions for students to experience that deep level of relaxed-attentive concentration, reflecting states of mindful being-doing, and creative production, or flow, which, as Csikszentmihalyi (1996) notes, requires that kind of intrinsic motivation. In addition, since students are invited to think beyond the scope of the classroom, they may experience writing as agency, an opportunity to create real change in their lives and in the lives of others. Ultimately, this expansive emphasis on the rhetorical situation, the creative process, and a public audience, serves to support students' experience of writing as a fully intentional act, from one agent, to or for another.

Checklist Item: The student's rhetorical situation and achievable quality goals. In addition to offering students nuanced awareness of the nature and function of the rhetorical situation for writing, this item compels both instructors and students to apply the construct of rhetorical situation to the students

themselves. That is, the checklist item of Achievable Quality Goals (AQG)—with an emphasis on *achievable*—creates an opportunity for an empathic pause, a mechanism for instructors to deliberately investigate, acknowledge, and value each student and their respective literacy backgrounds—i.e. *their* unique rhetorical situations, a move that reflects a mindful quality of attention based in balance and compassion (Salzberg, 2018), honoring students’ direct experience and meeting them where they are. Then, instructor and each student co-discern quality goals the student can *realistically* achieve for any given writing project and throughout the semester. Such material collaboration or “negotiation” reflects Jerry Lee’s (2016) construct and practice of “translanguaging assessment,” meaning, “we approach assessment according to the assumption that the teacher’s linguistic and institutional authority is negotiable—that assessment itself is a negotiation” (p. 189). These negotiated achievable goals are then named on each checklist, practiced, and accounted for throughout the semester. With guidance and support, students are able to see, choose, and prioritize their own goals or skill targets to practice in each project. This selection process gives students a practice of agency and the confidence to make their own choices based on both risks and goals *they* choose, with increasing skill, as they learn more about writing and writing processes.

Thus, instead of offering a set of generic writing outcomes that may or may not be realistic for students to meet given their respective rhetorical situations (old mindset), the “*achievable* quality goals” (AQG) recognizes the complex reality of students’ actual, lived literacy backgrounds and writing abilities— what *is*—their particular present language and literacy experiences and needs. In other words, this mindful approach to writing standards disallows setting some students up for failure by expecting unrealistic leaps in writing within a semester. Instead, the checklist’s focus on the student’s AQG creates the pause for identifying and targeting writing skills and processes that students can more *realistically* and *actually* achieve, working from their own competencies that grow their writing foundation for the next writing context. Such focus may enact what Inoue (2014) calls “productive failure,” which “produces judgments, investigations, negotiations, and discussion among students and with the teacher about expectations, new drafts, and future practices,” allowing students to learn and grow where traditional notions of quality are removed and embracing inclusivity of students and their diversities (p. 346). Teaching, learning, and evaluating based on “what is” reflects a pedagogy of presence, balance, and compassion (Salzberg, 2018): meeting students where they are, creating opportunities for students to enact meaningful agency, and setting substantive, truly achievable goals, and in turn fostering greater self-awareness of their processes and writing options—a pedagogy of “teach who you have,” as 2016 International Writing Across the Curriculum plenary speaker Jonathan Hall implored. This particular MGAP mindfulness-based item deliberately activates that pedagogical stance.

Related to the concept of realistically achievable quality, the MGAP includes a conception of quality based on students’ “bringin’ it”—to exceed the Base B agreement (see appendix). That is, earlier iterations of grading contracts address writing quality in terms of relative conventional performance goals (Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009; Shor, 1996), extra work (Inoue, 2012), and ongoing engagement and labor (Inoue, 2014, 2015). The MGAP, in contrast, addresses quality in at least three ways: taking risks, practicing AQG, and then “bringin’ it,” i.e. incorporating “more” of everything detailed in the agreement—more risk, creativity, effort, as well as making their work “publication-ready,” and showing evidence of these processes in the final portfolio and reflection. Importantly, then, the MGAP serves to expand the conversation of what we talk about when we talk about quality in the context of contract grading.

Portfolio and Reflection

The use of the portfolio as an effective means of writing evaluation is well-established (Cambridge, Cambridge, & Yancey, 2009; Yancey & Weiser, 1997) and is especially suitable for contract grading, as both assessment processes value self-awareness, student agency, reflection, and ongoing revision. As

another new feature of the MGAP, students assemble a final portfolio of documents reflecting their process work and final revisions as well as an essay of both reflection and persuasion demonstrating the ways in which “each [project] fulfills the necessary rhetorical requirements, how my writing has changed throughout the semester, as well as my detailed revision process, and what I have learned throughout the course.” As noted above, the project checklists help students intentionally track their writing choices for each project, informing the creation of both the portfolio and the persuasive reflection.

Responsibilities of Instructors

In addition to outlining the expectations of students, we also state our responsibilities as instructors to more explicitly show students that we transparently hold ourselves accountable for supporting them, e.g., through offering detailed assignment sheets; choices for creative assignment options; writing strategies and models; and feedback and revision opportunities throughout the semester. While these obligations reflect typical teacher roles, this move of naming instructor responsibilities, helps cultivate a classroom culture of reciprocity and collaboration rather than assumed, and sometimes abused, asymmetrical power relations—creating a safe classroom space, which in turn creates calm and relaxation for writing and risk-taking, and enhances quality of experience.

Using the MGAP

On the very first day of class, as part of our course overview, we introduce the MGAP by inviting students to share their experiences of writing and writing evaluation, which invariably reflect a traditional grade-centered mindset and all that comes with it (see our framing discussion on the MGAP in the appendix). In contrast, we share our course evaluation process—the MGAP—based instead on a collaborative, growth-centered mindset in which students share authority, are free to take creative risks, and otherwise more deliberately attend to and take ownership of their writing and learning. After reviewing the MGAP, we offer opportunities for students to discuss their reactions—what they’re thinking and feeling about this new evaluation process—through writing and in small groups, and we invite their questions and suggestions for revisions. Students offer a range of reactions: skepticism, anxiety, indifference, curiosity, excitement. So from the start, students become part of the process and experience a sense of agency for the course, which begins to lay the foundation for trust and an atmosphere of nonjudgment. We address any questions, consider suggestions, make any negotiated revisions, offer clarifications, and above all, assurances that the MGAP is designed from a student and writer perspective.

As the course unfolds, each new writing project includes the MGAP’s checklist, the open, fluid, and flexible container within the larger container of the MGAP that triggers several opportunities for the student to pause, name, reflect, and for the instructor to support the student’s choices and efforts through mini and formal conferences, during and following the projects. To help students understand both risk-taking options and AQG, we offer writing project models and identify examples of risks the writer took and other ways the piece is effective for the purpose and audience. We then ask: What might risk-taking look like for you? And, how do you want to advance or grow your writing? Some examples of students’ risk-taking choices include: re-seeing introduction possibilities, writing in new genres beyond the five-paragraph theme, and integrating personal experience and voice. Some examples of achievable quality goals include: both higher- and lower-order concerns like coherence, concision, and punctuation, as well as process-oriented goals, like completing multiple drafts and avoiding procrastination. Thus, the checklist creates an opportunity for ongoing dialogue with the student about their writing choices and course progress, and a record of their work, helping them craft critical project and end-term reflections.

Student MGAP Experiences: Initial Values and Opportunities

From these various reflective pieces, a picture of MGAP values and opportunities is emerging.³ These relate to: 1) the educational and experiential function of relaxation and non-judgment, especially in terms of creative risk-taking and student agency; 2) present-moment awareness, self-assessment, and enhanced potentiality for transfer of learning; and 3) an integrated pedagogy, emphasizing quality of experience for writing and sharing writing with compassion.

Relaxation and Non-judgment: Intrinsic Motivation, Creative Risk-Taking, and Agency

The MGAP's allowance for shared power, achievable writing goals, and creative risk-taking, as informed by our selected mindfulness qualities of relaxation and nonjudgment, cultivates conditions for enhancing students' intrinsic motivation and creative agency. Numerous studies related to contemplative pedagogy and educational psychology bear this out: a relaxed mind is a pre-condition for learning (Hanson, 2009; Siegel, 2001). Because the roles of instructor and student are re-cast, the student is empowered to exercise authentic agency about the myriad writing choices for each project; in turn, the instructor acts as knowledgeable facilitator, helpful guide. Essentially, the MGAP operationalizes a culture of hospitality and trust in which students can perform more authentically, creatively, freely.

As Inoue (2015) notes, classroom writing assessment drives the learning and outcomes of a course and thus requires “good assessment, assessment that is healthy, fair, equitable, and sustainable for all students” (p.9), aligning assessment with epistemology. With the MGAP, and other process-oriented grading contracts, free from the instructor as all-knowing judge, the student *experiences a shift* in her *understanding* of what it is to write, a shift from performing under too-narrow scrutiny to one of performing with spaciousness, freedom, a relaxing into writing. With less preoccupation with what the instructor wants, or fear about errors, the student enjoys more space to attend to creative possibilities for their own purpose and audience. The following representative student reflection speaks to this productive shift in relaxation and in turn creative risk-taking:

The MGAP always supported me in being able to take risks and be creative. In previous writing courses I have taken, I had to write the way my professor and teachers wanted me to, which made me scared to take any risks in my writing or be creative.... I am proud of myself for going out of my comfort zone and being more creative than ever before...all to better my writing and myself as a writer....

The MGAP's shared power, combined with its emphasis on relaxation and nonjudgment, acts as useful preconditions for enhancing intrinsic motivation to write, taking creative risks, and advancing understanding without fear of punishment in the form of a failing grade if the risk-taking somehow falls short.

Present-Moment/Self-Awareness: Reflection, Transfer, and Practice in Unlearning

The MGAP's valuing of self-awareness manifests in its many opportunities for reflection and self-reflection about writing and learning, thus cultivating conditions for enhanced metacognition, (more) accurate self-assessment and, in turn, possibilities for transfer. For example, our inclusion of a checklist for each project offers students opportunities to be more reflective and intentional about any of the checklist items. As one student reflected on the checklist item of rhetorical situation: “I will forever remember the rhetorical situation and how to analyze it. I now know how important it is to have a crystal-

clear purpose and strong connection with the audience.... My writing process has greatly improved and become more productive and effective...mostly in the sense that it is more purposeful....” While learning about rhetorical situation is commonplace in a first-year writing course, this writer may ‘forever remember’ the importance of rhetorical situation as they travel from one writing context to the next, as continually prompted by the checklist. She experienced what Yancey, Robertson, and Taczak (2014) refer to as a feature of “signature pedagogy” in support of transfer of knowledge and practice, in which students are invited to “*think like*” the doers of a discipline, all of which, in this case, require knowledge and practice of rhetorical situation and reflection (p.4).

Also, importantly, as part of the end-term portfolio process, students offered well-developed reflections and uncharacteristically accurate self-assessments about the ways and extent to which their work fulfilled the MGAP criteria. That is, we agreed with the vast majority of students’ self-assessments, which has not been our typical experience. One way to understand students’ improved self-assessment is that the MGAP offers students engagement with more explicit knowledge and practice of the nature of writing, as well as *mechanisms of pause*—again, via the checklists, the goal-setting, and choice-making. In addition, students may feel more comfortable identifying and even valuing their “productive failures” given the nonjudgmental classroom ecology.

A form of self-awareness that came less easily to students relates to their attachment to traditional grading. That is, despite the MGAP’s explicit jettisoning of traditional grading—and that students were informed after each project if they were meeting, exceeding, or not exceeding the base B agreement and why—some nonetheless reported that they wanted the traditional letter grading system. At first, we questioned whether or not we were stating clearly and often enough their agreement status following each project, and we saw that we were—in writing, on the checklist, on their work, and in conferences. And then we suspected what their calls were *really* about: their conditioned response to numerous years of earning points and grades for writing. Like Spidell and Thelin (2006) in “Not Ready to Let Go: A Study of Resistance in Grading Contracts,” we too found that “students... had a difficult time letting go of previous educational conditioning, much of which had disempowered them” (p. 40). Inoue (2012) observes the same resistance by some groups of students in his study on the effects of contract grading. We suggest that the MGAP, as explicitly based in mindfulness, cultivates conditions for students to become aware of their relative acceptance of an alternative grading system. The MGAP invites students to inquire into the nature of their resistance, to see what’s behind it, and ultimately to see it for what it is—a form of conditioning based on extrinsic rewards—and to practice experiencing and abiding the discomfort that arises from attachment to traditional grading. Students may begin to unlearn the desire for it, a practice that serves both the immediate classroom context that can transfer to a broader mindfulness practice to better understand and productively work with attachment in general—teachable moments made especially productive through a mindfulness-based context.

A Pedagogy of ‘What Is’: Integrated Pedagogy and Quality of Experience

In addition to learning about how the MGAP enhances students’ classroom experiences, we’re also learning about how the MGAP has enhanced our instruction. That is, the MGAP both informed and transformed our instructional selves and pedagogy, our relationship to and with students, which dramatically, and somewhat unexpectedly, enhanced our quality of experience teaching, and reportedly, students’ quality of experience writing.

The use of the MGAP invited us to become more mindful instructors, to show up to each class session with an intention for greater present-moment awareness and attention. Many of us have experienced hastily rushing into the classroom, distracted, and with too much packed into the curriculum and feeling like there is never enough time to get it all “done.” We instructors aren’t the only ones who end up feeling that pressure; the students are apt to feel it too, from their own harried lives and from our often-harried

presence. As more mindful instructors, we are more consistently intentional about coming to class actually present and responsive to whatever the class brings. Of course, we still come to class prepared, with agendas and lessons; however, we are now more invested in and attuned to allowing the students to productively shape where we actually end up being taken. The MGAP, which helps create conditions for a more relaxed and spontaneous pedagogy—a pedagogy of “what is”—has allowed us to take that pause and notice where our students are as we seek to support their unique writing processes and writing.

A related pedagogical value of the MGAP is our enhanced relationships with students, due in large part to our now co-hosting, with students, a classroom of transparent and shared authority. In the past, we have always *wanted* to share the power dynamics with our students, letting them know that this class would be different in that they would have the opportunity to make choices, take risks, and to be creators of their own learning. Students wanted to believe that too and often it would *seem* as if that would indeed take place. But, as many of us have experienced, the reality of the power inequity and the “climate” effects of traditional grading-judging materialize after returning that first set of traditionally graded papers: the classroom climate shifts from warm and collaborative to cold and wary. We all see it, feel it, and the teaching and learning invariably suffer. With much traditional grading of writing, students experience, as in other classes, that they have little understanding or control of the evaluation process, and we lose the productive ground that we have made in those first few weeks. However, in the MGAP classroom, for perhaps the first time in our respective careers, after returning those first projects, we did not experience the negative shift. This shared authority, then, continually enacted within a frame of mindfulness makes possible more authentic, collaborative student-instructor relations and an overall supportive, compassionate vibe in the classroom.

Together, these pedagogical values of improved student-teacher relations and classroom climate constitute a final benefit: enhancing the *quality of experience* for instructors teaching and assigning writing, and for students learning writing—no small thing—and in turn, underscoring the importance of affect in teaching-learning writing (Yagelski, 2011). Students reported in their reflections that the class was fun, interesting, and that they unexpectedly learned things about themselves, as illustrated in the following representative student comments: “The most important thing I learned about writing and myself is that it is enjoyable if you challenge yourself and are open to new ideas....” “Instead of freaking out over my grade I was encouraged to go beyond my comfort zone for the sake of my grade. The [MGAP] caused this turn-about in my thinking which is why I found a new sense of comfort in trying something new in my writing....” “I really enjoyed learning how to write for myself without worrying about getting a bad grade...which allowed me to finally enjoy writing for what seemed like the first time in my life.”

For many, the MGAP allowed students to actually enjoy writing and learning to write, many for “the first time.” We know that they are now more likely to continue to write and in turn improve their writing in and for subsequent writing contexts. Both instructor and student experiences serve as an object lesson in the validity of Inoue’s assertions about the integral relationship of assessment and pedagogy (Inoue, 2012, 2015). As he writes: “...a large part of designing a writing course is considering how the assessment of writing creates the ecology of the classroom in which students and teacher interact and learn together” (2015, p. 283). The MGAP makes possible that integrated, collaborative ecology.

Mindfulness-Based Evaluation: The “Gap” in MGAP

Perhaps the central utility of mindfulness as a heuristic to inform teaching and learning is its emphasis on the pause—for example, as experienced in mindful meditation, the space between the inhale and the exhale, the space between the arising and passing of thought, as famously articulated, “between the stimulus and response”: “Human freedom involves our capacity to *pause* between the stimulus and response and, in that pause, to choose the one response toward which we wish to throw our weight. The

capacity to create ourselves, based upon this freedom, is inseparable from consciousness or self-awareness” (May, 1975, p. 100). The MGAP, in effect, helps create mindful space—or the “gap,” as announced in its acronym—for instructors and students to see *what is* and to respond skillfully, particularly in its making space for instructors and students to value “what is” in terms of closely attending to students’ actual literacy histories, i.e., the students’ respective rhetorical situations, and the writing contributions they can reasonably and creatively make, and pause to reflect on and learn through the checklist and other MGAP reflection opportunities, as they advance their literacies in our classrooms.

Like other contemplative pedagogies, our creating and using the MGAP is an illustration of how mindfulness can be used as a generative heuristic to enhance teaching and learning, especially for cultivating greater student awareness, agency, quality of experience, and an integrated pedagogy. Our distinctly applying a lens of mindfulness to evaluation processes, through defining mindfulness, selecting key concepts, and applying them to the evaluation tool of contract grading, offers a model for productively applying mindfulness to teaching and learning—specifically for reimagining the way we can practice assessment in our classrooms, especially in terms of cultivating an engaging and life-affirming experience of creating and making knowledge through writing. A deliberate mindfulness-based evaluation process makes possible the relaxed-alert state necessary for deep concentration and creative flow, reflecting in part what Yagelski (2011) calls “writing as a way of being.” Applying a lens of mindfulness to evaluation—our MGAP—with its emphasis on quality of experience, and tuned into “what is”—i.e. honoring each student’s lived experiences and literacies with presence and non-judgment, inviting the student’s whole person into the classroom—cultivates a pedagogy of balance and compassion.

Appendix

MINDFUL GRADING AGREEMENT PROCESS (MGAP)

CONTEXT: WRITING AND COURSE EVALUATION BASED ON A GRADING AGREEMENT

In this course, evaluation for each project and the final course grade is based on a form of evaluation known as contract grading or grading contracts (Peter Elbow, 1997; Peter Elbow and Jane Danielewicz, 2009; Asao Inoue, 2012, 2014). Essentially, contract grading is an evaluation practice in which the students and instructor establish and agree to predetermined criteria to achieve a particular grade. The following agreement process and discussion, adapted in part from the above scholars, form the basis of our particular course evaluation practice: the Mindful Grading Agreement Process (MGAP).

A Traditional Writing and Grading Mindset

Here’s a simplified, though arguably accurate, description of traditional evaluation practices in many writing classrooms (to be discussed more thoroughly in class):

1. Generally, students are asked to draft, share, review, and revise something, submit it to the instructor, and then receive a letter grade based on points or percentages.
2. If the graded work is also accompanied by instructor feedback or comments, the comments often serve to “justify” the grade: i.e., the comments tell, or are used to tell, students why the work earned the grade it did. The comments, however, may not actually help students understand that grade very well AND may not be useful for helping students to improve their writing for next time.
3. Students may use the comments to try to get in the instructor’s head, to guess what she wants, focusing more on pleasing the instructor—for the grade—instead of exploring what they really want to say/write or how they can effectively write it.

4. Students may also receive comments or feedback from classmates, which they may choose to ignore, even if they agree with it. They may wonder or worry: “Would the instructor agree? Will this get me to an A?”
5. Students may even feel they need to hide parts of themselves, their knowledge and experiences, and instead convey only what will get them the grade they want. Thus, students may be reluctant to take any risks with their writing, to experiment, to practice, to stretch their writing skills and abilities, to grow as writers.

Essentially, in many traditional writing classrooms, students’ motivation to write is often overly influenced by grading, leading student writers to think more about the grade than about the writing, to worry more about pleasing (or fooling) the instructor instead of exploring what’s worth writing, discovering the possibilities to convey that, and then trying out those possibilities in an appropriate form for an actual audience.

The MGAP: A Better (More Mindful) Writing and Grading Mindset

In contrast to traditional evaluation practices, our course’s evaluation process is based in qualities of mindfulness—or enhanced awareness and attention—to help both students and instructors pay better attention to the activity of writing, in all its complexity: to seek to create, craft, and convey something worthwhile in writing for intentional purposes and audiences. This new writing and grading mindset is realized through the MGAP, as based in the following writer- and process-centered questions. The italicized and bolded terms, below, will drive our collaborative work throughout the semester, informing our curriculum and instruction, ongoing feedback and evaluation, and the final course grade.

1. What is my *motivation* for writing? What event(s) prompted me to want to write about this topic? (**context/occasion**)
2. *Why* am I writing? What do I want to communicate? And what is the most effective way to communicate this important thing? (**purpose**)
3. *Who* am I writing for? Who is my intended audience? What are my audience’s values/beliefs? And what are some effective ways to communicate my purpose so my audience will consider it, connect with it? (**audience**)
4. What kinds of *writing processes and strategies* are available to help me discover and create my expression, for my purpose and audience? (**processes**)
5. What *techniques of development* will I use to get my audience to listen to me? How will I effectively use appeals based in *ethos, pathos, logos, and kairos* to connect with my audience for my purpose? And how much *detail* will I include? (**appeals/development of ideas**)
6. What is an effective *genre* or form to communicate my information with my audience, and what are the *conventions* or audience’s expectations of that genre? (**genre/form/organization/structure**)
7. What *language* will I use to connect with my audience to fulfill my purpose? And what written *voice* will I seek to create, use? (**language/style/voice**)
8. How accurately or correctly have I used the *grammar* of my language choices? (**editing**)
9. What is the most effective way to *design* my information to my audience? How will I incorporate image, color, font, headings, etc.? (**presentation/design**)
10. What *publication forum* (beyond the class) is appropriate for my writing, given my purpose and intended audience? (**publication**)

MGAP Overall Aims:

- to help me focus on writing (and not grades);
- to advance writing knowledge, processes, sensibilities, and skills from authentic engagement and intrinsic motivation;
- to experience writing as discovery and creation for an intended purpose and audience;

- to encourage taking risks and experimenting with writing;*
- to take more responsibility for my writing;
- to cultivate and co-create classroom conditions for authentic collaboration and trust;
- to experience “what it takes” to confidently share that writing, in terms of both labor/effort and achievable quality goals;
- to experience, deeply, writing knowledge and processes that are transferable to other writing contexts.

***On Taking Risks:** Conventional grading may cause you to be reluctant to take risks with your writing or ideas. Taking risks, experimenting, and playing with writing is often the best way for you to really learn and to grow as a writer. I want to allow room for that risk-taking and play in our classroom. We will be true collaborators, searching together for the best methods, ideas, and practices for our mutual learning endeavors here at Lewis.

The Practice and Function of Feedback

Ongoing feedback, and revising are key to advancing your writing—both the particular piece of writing and your writing abilities. Throughout the semester, you will:

1. Receive and offer lots of strategic feedback on your writing, from and with the instructor, peers, and yourself, considering multiple perspectives about the effectiveness of your writing.
2. Use this feedback to rethink ideas, improve writing, and advance your writing.
3. Practice and improve your strategies of self-assessment, especially about how your writing effectively meets purpose and audience.
4. Reflect on the ways in which feedback and revision processes can be transferred and applied to other writing contexts.

Students’ Work, Ongoing Feedback, Project Checklists, and Making the MGAP Grade

As noted above, during and following each **major writing project**, you will receive **feedback** on your writing, including the extent to which you are fulfilling the terms of the MGAP. (You will not, however, receive a grade or points for each project; again, that’s traditional grading.) As each project is assigned, you will help create a **project checklist** stating in detail the various writing/assignment goals and criteria. As each project is submitted, you will receive feedback about the extent to which the project goals and criteria have been met, and in turn, the extent to which the overall MGAP is being met. Your **final grade**, then, will be established based on the extent to which you have fulfilled the MGAP, as discussed more fully below in the actual MGAP Form.

THE MGAP FORM

The Base Agreement: B

All students receive a base agreement for the grade of B, detailed below. Following this base agreement are details about the ways in which the agreement can fall below B or rise above B.

The “B” agreement: Students who do the following will earn the grade of “B”:

1. **Attendance and Punctuality:** I agree to attend all scheduled class meetings. However, I may miss three classes during the semester without penalty. Each additional absence will result in the lowering of my final course grade one full letter grade (four=C, five=D, six=F). Additionally, I

- agree to arrive on time. Every three times I am late it counts as an absence; and more than 15 minutes late for class counts as an absence.
2. **Engaged Class-time Participation:** I agree to actively contribute to creating an inspired space for learning. *Every day, with mindful intention, I agree to make my contribution count in a meaningful and productive way.* I will **keep track** of the ways I have actively participated and engaged in the course to be used later for the portfolio.
 3. **Course Work Effort:** I agree to engage and complete the course work in the high-energy, self-motivated spirit in which it is assigned, as well as meeting or striving to meet the more explicit, product-oriented criteria. I agree to be consistently prepared for class, especially in terms of: completing assigned readings, printing any necessary materials, and being prepared to discuss the relevant topics—regarding both the information presented in the readings and your own opinions or ideas. Homework assignments/readings/process work are to be submitted during class on the day for which they were assigned.
 4. **Writing Process/Drafting:** I agree to write thoughtful, complete drafts, as well as complete the accompanying prewriting and other process activities for each assignment.
 5. **Taking Risks/Stretching Your Writing:** I agree to seek to stretch my writing abilities, for example: ideas/content, form, language use, technologies, publication. Risk-taking expands our writing experiences. You are invited to find something to write about and create that you are truly invested in, find important or otherwise meaningful. Dig in and see where it takes you. You will be encouraged and supported along the way.
 6. **Collaboration/Workshops:** I agree to collaborate as directed. Collaborative work is integral to writing, creating, and the work of our course. I will actively participate in all collaborative activities, including draft workshops, in which I will share projects, ideas, and drafts with other members of the class, Writing Center tutors as directed, as well as with the instructor. I will provide my peers with thorough, thoughtful, and helpful feedback. My goal is to support and help others become stronger writers throughout the semester and to receive that support in return. In addition, I will visit the WC at least once in the semester, though I am encouraged to visit throughout the writing process and for all projects.
 7. **Revision:** I agree to revise, both as directed, and as self-directed. I will revise my drafts with effort and intent after each draft workshop and before submitting it for my detailed feedback.
 8. **Polishing/Editing:** I agree to proofread and edit my drafts before submitting them as a way to minimize distracting surface errors, build my *ethos* as a writer seeking a real audience, make as “publication-ready” as possible.
 9. **Reflection:** I agree to write/submit a detailed reflection that discusses: my participation and effort; my experience of working on the project; my writing process; the rhetorical choices I made in terms of purpose, audience, context, appeals, genre, style, and design (images, color, font, format, etc); my primary challenges in creating the work; my biggest influences in creating the project; what I would like to work on moving towards revision; what I have learned from the project; and what skills, abilities, processes, or understanding I will likely be able to use in other writing contexts.
 10. **Checklists:** I agree to help co-create and complete each project checklist detailing the project requirements and the ways in which your work reflects those requirements, especially in terms of **writing processes, rhetorical situation features, product features, creative risk-taking, and achievable quality goals.**
 11. **Conferences:** I agree to meet for required conferences with the instructor during the semester to discuss my projects, writing, and to address any of my questions or concerns. Conferences are not merely a one-way conversation at which the instructor will simply “correct” my projects. Instead, we will discuss my project’s strengths and needs, especially in terms of purpose and

audience, and the strategies I may use for effective revising. We will also have many “mini-conferences” throughout the semester to serve as check-in points on my work.

12. **Final Course Reflection and Portfolio:** I agree to submit a thorough and thoughtful course reflection and portfolio that documents the extent to which I have achieved or exceeded the based contract/agreement of B. This portfolio project assignment will be distributed after the midterm; it is included here in the contract to help prepare you to create, collect, and keep any documents that will serve my reflection and portfolio and thus my contracted or desired/deserved grade. These documents include: all planning, notes, peer workshop sheets, research, annotated readings, drafts, and final versions of projects. Because writing is an ongoing, developmental, and recursive process, I can expect to write better/better projects at the end of the semester than at the beginning, and as a result, I will have the opportunity to revise a designated number of your projects to strengthen your final grade. **Please note: The final course reflection makes the case for how I have fulfilled the contract throughout the semester, how each paper/project fulfills the necessary rhetorical requirements, how my writing has changed throughout the semester, as well as a detailed revision process, and what I have learned throughout the course.** I can use my notes, checklists, and other records about my level of effort, participation, and labor, with concrete examples. This reflection is persuasive in purpose, with instructor as audience, and will convey the extent to which I have fulfilled, or exceeded, the agreement.
13. **Academic Integrity:** The policy on academic integrity applies in this class as stated in our Academic Integrity Policy. When writers use material from other sources, they must acknowledge those sources. Not doing so is plagiarism, which means using without credit the ideas or expressions of another. I am cautioned (1) against using, word for word, without acknowledgment, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, etc. from the printed or manuscript material of others; (2) against using with only slight changes the materials of another; and (3) against using the general plan, the main headings, or a rewritten form of someone else’s material. These cautions apply to other students’ work as well as to published pieces. I am also cautioned against simultaneous submission (submitting the same work to more than one class). Since we will be discussing how to acknowledge and cite sources, including Internet sources, I will acquire skills for avoiding plagiarism. If I am in doubt, please ask me since the consequences for plagiarizing are severe. Plagiarism will be attended to on a case by case basis and may result in the failure of the assignment or course.
14. **Personal Online and Offline Behavior:** I agree to show kindness and respect to both my peers and to the instructor, including using respectful language, taking each other’s ideas seriously, and refraining from any distracting behaviors during class, including but not limited to, falling asleep, texting, and participating in social media.
15. **Faculty Responsibilities:** My instructor, in the spirit of intentional reciprocity, has responsibilities that she will explicitly articulate and agree to. See below.

Not Meeting the MGAP: Omissions

I encourage you to meet the base B MGAP and seek to exceed it. The following section details some of the common ways in which you may find that you are not meeting the MGAP, with project and final course grade consequences.

Minor Omission: Not doing and/or not submitting regular homework as assigned. Examples include: missing a reading response/blog post or not completing your responses/posts sufficiently, etc. Every two minor omissions will result in half a letter grade reduction (B-, then C+, and so on); if you don’t revise or meet assignment expectations by each major assignment’s due date, then your overall course grade will be lowered. These lowered grades can still be improved by an exceptionally strong portfolio.

Major Omission: Not performing as directed in major course activities and assignments. Examples include: missing a draft workshop, not being prepared or participating in scheduled workshop activities, not participating actively in group activities, not turning in or revising a major assignment, etc. For a major omission, your grade will be lowered half a letter grade *without exception* (B-, then C+ and so on). These lowered grades can still be improved by an exceptionally strong portfolio.

Unforeseen Extraordinary Circumstances

If at some point during the semester, circumstances beyond your control prevent you from meeting the base MGAP, inform me as soon as possible (usually before not meeting the agreement), and we'll try to come to a fair and equitable arrangement, one that will be mindful and fair of not only you as the student, but also me as the professor, the rest of the class, and the University regulations on attendance, workload, and conduct. This consideration is offered not as an "out" for anyone who does not fulfill the MGAP; rather, it is for unusual circumstances that are out of the student's control.

Course Standing

The MGAP may better convey your course standing than more traditional grading, since our ongoing collaboration, the detailed MGAP requirements, and project checklists can provide a clear/er idea of what your course grade is and means at any time. For when the instructor offers feedback on a major assignment, they will tell you clearly, and how, if you have satisfied or have not satisfied the requirements of the MGAP B. (As for absences and lateness, you, too, need to keep track of them, based on the MGAP policy, and you can check with my records at any time.)

Grades Lower than B

Aim for higher grades. The quickest way to slide to a C, D, or F is to miss classes, show up without assignments, and turn in rushed or sloppy work that does not fulfill the assignment work expectations and criteria. **This much is nonnegotiable:** you are not eligible for a grade of "B" unless you have attended all the class sessions, with the 3-session exception (see #1 above for full attendance/tardiness policy) and meet the guidelines outlined above and for each course project. If you miss classes and get behind in your work, please contact me regarding your chances of passing the course.

Grades Higher than B

If you wish to earn a grade higher than a B, you will need to, in effect, "**bring it.**" You will need to incorporate more of everything outlined above: more **effort**, more **participation**, more attention to **achievable quality goals**, **more risk-taking and creativity**, more attention to making your work being "**publication-ready**" and then actually attempting to get your work published. We will discuss possibilities for this extra effort throughout the semester and with each project. Some examples of bringing "more" to the class/project include but aren't limited to: getting additional feedback on your writing, completing extra process/planning work to help strengthen your writing, giving extra feedback to others, making genuine efforts to help others learn, visiting the Writing Center, seeking publication, putting in more time, effort, energy into your projects and incorporating other creative components. You can detail these efforts in your reflections for each project and your overall reflective letter in your final portfolio.

Additional Items to be Negotiated as a Class

We will take time during the first week of the semester to discuss any additional agreement items we may wish to consider/include.

The Instructor's Responsibilities

I wish for each and every one of you to be successful in this course and for you to learn, grow, and develop as writers and as thinkers, and to experience writing as worthwhile, productively challenging, enjoyable, and in service to yourself and others. To help support you, I will:

- Provide detailed assignment sheets and supporting documents for each of our major assignments so that you know what to expect regarding the assignment, all process activities, and daily assignments and activities;
- Provide choices and opportunities for creative options for each of the projects so you can choose and create writing projects that you can connect to;
- Respond to your questions or inquiries in a timely manner, typically within 24-48 hours;
- Provide opportunities for you to revise your writing throughout the semester and to receive detailed feedback from me on your drafts and revisions in order for you to best strengthen your writing and writing process;
- Assist in developing effective collaborative processes with your fellow peers to give each other useful feedback to support drafting and revising;
- Offer writing strategies and models to help with developing and building your writing repertoire to not only strengthen each writing project but your overall writing ability;
- Provide check-in points throughout the semester regarding your fulfilling, not fulfilling, or exceeding the contract/agreement;
- Listen to your questions, comments, and suggestions, and work together to create a culture of support for our learning goals

By staying in this course, regularly attending class, and signing this contract/agreement, you accept this contract/agreement and agree to abide by it. I also will agree to abide by the contract/agreement.

Your Signature: _____

My Signature: _____

Date: _____

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Notes

¹ e.g., Center for Healthy Minds; Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMHE); Mindful Schools; Google's Search Inside Yourself Leadership Institute; regional Insight Meditation Centers; popular media like *Tricycle*, *Mindful*.

² For a discussion of the recent media critiques about the complexity of mindfulness applications and research, see Brensilver, 2017.

³ The fuller study is in process.

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