

Grading Options/Grading Practices

The following is a summary from a presentation given on Wednesday, September 4, 2019 on “Grading Essays, Giving Feedback,” co-sponsored by The Institute for College Teaching and the President’s Office.

Key Points

Grading and responding to student writing comes from deep structures of ideologies in part based on how we understand writing as . . .

- Product
- Process
- Personal
- Emplaced in Time, Place, and Social Structure

Some Possible Grading Structures

- Rubrics
- Analytical Grids (like a rubric, but only with feedback specific to a student’s paper)
- Letters and End-Comments
- Contract Grading
- Self-Developed Criteria

Flexible Ways to Use Rubrics or Analytical Grids

Although it can be helpful to give students a rubric where all the cells contain language explaining the different gradations of success for a given criteria, receiving that information in response to a piece of writing could be overwhelming.

One way to address that information overload is to use a different rubric for the grading process, which may have empty cells. This could also allow some brief comments specific to a student’s paper.

Ex.

	1-Not Yet	2-Sometimes	3-Mostly	4-Always
Demonstrates Considerations of Purpose				
Meets Audience Needs Based on Genre				
Complex Use of Source Material				
**				

** This fourth criteria could be another “flexible” category of assessment, a process-based category (such as “evidence of revision”) or something like “swing points” where students choose the criteria in which they felt most successful to “double count.” Other possibilities could include: depth of reflection statement or design statement, “professionalism,” or even “meets assignment criteria.”

Here is how that same approach might work as an “analytical grid”:

Ex.

Criteria	Score (0-4) and Description/Rationale
Design Demonstrates Considerations of Purpose	
Meets Audience Needs Based on Genre	
Complex Use of Source Materials	
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There are also many more options for thinking about building flexibility and individualized learning into the use of rubrics or analytical grids. However, the remainder of this handout will now consider a very different approach to grading itself.

Contract Grading

Contract Grading

Labor-Based (or “work-based”) Contract Grading is a system of grading based off the research of Asao Inoue (2015; 2018). It differs from traditional grading in that you do not receive a grade based on the subjective quality of your work, but instead based on the labor (or work) you complete within the course. In other words, you will receive feedback from me, comments, suggestions for revision, encouragement, and support, but you will not receive an “A, B, C, D, or E” based on how “well” you completed the project.

Many contract grading systems, including the one developed by Inoue involve a grid such as this:

	# Non-Partic Days	# of Late Assigns.	# of Missed Assigns.	# of Ignored Assigns.
A (4.0)	3	3	1	0
B (3.1)	3	3	1	0
C (2.1)	4	4	2	0
D (1.1)	5	5	3	1
E (0.0)	6	6	4	2

(Table 4.1 taken from Chapter 4: Inoue, A. B. (2019). *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*. Perspectives on Writing. Fort Collins, Colorado: The WAC Clearinghouse and University Press of Colorado. Available at <https://wac.colostate.edu/books/perspectives/labor/>)

The structure of Inoue’s Labor-Based Contract Grading is that students are graded based on the labor they complete within the course (breakdowns such as the one above,) that measure the number of assignments completed, and in some cases additional assignments attempted.

The following is a student-facing handout explaining the system which I will be using for the first time, involving a “base” or “core” set of project requirements and then three “+ parts,” meant to scale up a student’s learning experience. While my grading system is not as focused on degrees of late work acceptable to each grade, I am also working from the assumption of grading based on labor, or work completed.

Contract Grading FAQs

Q: Will I still receive grades for my projects?

A: Yes, there are three types of labor in our class—**projects, practices, and community labor**. In the first type you will receive a grade based on the following table:

Project Grading Table

Criteria	Grade Earned
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Your project includes all specified criteria (ex. page length, parts of project, types of questions explored, number of texts or sources used, etc.)Turned in within 48 hours of the assigned project deadline	B
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Your project includes all parts but it more than 48 hours late ORYour project does not include significant parts	B-
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Your project does not include all parts AND is more than 48 hours late	C+
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Your project is more than 4 days late	C
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Your project is more than 4 days late AND is missing significant parts	C-
<ul style="list-style-type: none">Your project is 8 days late or later	D
<ul style="list-style-type: none">You didn't turn in the project	0

Q: What????!! How do I get an A on my projects?

A: In order to move up from any of these scores, at the time you turn in the project you will have the option to complete any of the 3 “+” parts associated with the project. (Ex. if you are completing a tutorial project an example of a + part might be a 2-page audience analysis. If you are writing a short story an example of a + part might be to write a scene in an alternate point of view.)

It is important to note that each assignment prompt will always include the 3 optional + parts from the start. If you turn in your completed project on-time and you do 1 + part that = B+, 2= A-, and 3=A. However, these + parts can also help you to move up from any of the other scores on the table. So, if you turn in a project 8 days late, but you complete all 3 + parts you can move from a D to a C.

Q: So the + parts are extra credit?

A: Not exactly. The + parts are designed to move your learning experience from a B to an A level of exceptional work. However, they are also designed to be accessible. What that means is that even if you are struggling with the assignment, you will be able to complete any or all of the 3 + parts. Also, unlike extra credit, the + parts **MUST** be turned in at the time of the assignment.

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However, you will have the opportunity to complete only 2 additional + parts (not per project, but 2 in total) by the last day of classes. This is so that if you had wanted to do more but life got in the way, you still have a small chance to do so at the end. HOWEVER, you cannot turn in more than 2 + parts in total at the end.

Q: You said there were three types of labor—projects, practices, and community labor. How do the others work?

A: Practices are completion-based homework and informal writing. You will receive a score based on the number you complete within 48 hours of the time assigned. (# completed/#offered.) Practices cannot be turned in later than 48 hours of the assignment because they are based on *practicing* for the projects.

Community Labor is also graded on a completion score (# completed/#offered) with a grace allowance of 3. (This means you can miss up to 3 community assignments or participation in class days.) Like in-class participation, community labor assignments benefit your class community, such as peer review letters or critiques. Community labor cannot be made up or accepted late.

Q: Why did you do this? What if I'm used to getting As in my writing classes? Doesn't this system hurt me?

A: Labor-based contract grading is meant to address inequities in courses. If you consider yourself an "A" writer, this system does not disadvantage you. It will likely still take you less time to complete a project or a + part, and if you identify as loving writing—it might be "more fun" for you than it is for some of your peers. That is still a tangible advantage. What labor-based grading does is try to correct for some of the subjectivity of writing, some of the power structures by which we assess writing, and make it possible for everyone to earn the grade for which they labor.

****Labor is NOT the Same as Effort**

Labor-based systems are different from assessing people based on "effort." I have no way of knowing how much effort you put into any given project. I cannot look into your minds, hearts, or lives and know that. Therefore, grading on effort would not be a fair system. For example, you might put forth a tremendous amount of effort (and I hope you do!) However, I have no way of fairly assessing how much "effort" a project required of you. What I can assess is how much labor you completed in terms of how many projects and project components (+ parts) you chose to complete. I understand that it may take different students different amounts of time to complete projects, but a labor-based system focuses solely on good faith completion, and writing as a learning process.

Q: This seems difficult.

A: I think it might be a difficult adjustment for some of you at first. But remember, you will still receive grades. This system just removes some of the surprises from grading. It isn't perfect, but you know when you did a + part or you didn't and you know when you turned something in on-time or you didn't. Beyond that, you will still receive all the feedback, support, and encouragement you need in order to revise and improve on your writing projects and learning process.

Examples of How Contract Grading Could Work

With the “Base” Project and Additional “+ Parts” that scale learning up from a B to a B+, A-, A depending on how many of the three offered “+ Parts” a student completes at the time of the core assignment.

Example: Inquiry/Analysis Project

If the core of this assignment was a Genre Analysis, then the “Base” or “Core” of the project might involve the following requirements of the assignment:

The Genre Analysis must be 4-5 pages, talk about the preconceptions of the genre or history of the genre or antecedent genres, talk about the 3 texts as examples of the genre, talk about genre boundaries, genre blurring, similarities and differences.

The “+ Parts” are as follows: += 1-pg revision/process discussion, += 2-pg. related genres comparison, += 1-pg analysis of why it is useful to study genres

Example: Tutorial (Set of Instructions) Project (from my current PWR 393 Syllabus)

In this project you will compose a complex, multiple-step tutorial (or set of instructions.) It is essential that your tutorial be written for a specific audience and serve a need. (Ex. You should not design a tutorial for a “simple” task such as making a peanut butter and jelly sandwich or an audience that would already know how to accomplish the task.) Additionally, your tutorial **MUST** involve visual and verbal components, and involve at least 6 complex steps.

The following are 3 possible “+” parts: += a 1-pg audience analysis and rationale for your tutorial; += a 2-pg genre analysis of at least 3 other tutorials that already exist on your topic/related topics and why your tutorial fits the needs of your audience better; += a 1-pg revision memo, detailing which revisions you would want to make in design, content, layout, and organization would better address the needs of your audience. **Remember, you can choose to do any, all, or none of these + parts.