

Our Grading Contract for First-Year Writing

Asao B. Inoue

Dear Class:

Most courses that have writing in them ask us to write something, turn it in to the professor, and get back a grade. If we get comments with a grade, often those comments have to justify why we got the grade we did, but we may have felt that the comments didn't help us understand that grade very well. Or perhaps in some classes, we received feedback on a first draft before our final drafts were graded. But the bottom line is: all of our writing usually is graded. We are writing for grades, not for feedback, not for developing the ideas we find most valuable, not for expressing those ideas in ways that we see as important. If we get comments from our teacher on your writing, typically, we are likely to read those comments so that we can figure out what the teacher wants, what will get a better grade. If we get comments or feedback from our colleagues in class, we may feel conflicted about listening to them or taking their advice. If they suggest something, would the teacher agree? What if we took their advice but the teacher did not agree with that advice?

Furthermore, using conventional grading systems to compute course grades often leads us to think more about our grade than about our writing, to worry more about pleasing a teacher or fooling one than about figuring out what we really want to learn, or how we want to communicate something to someone for some purpose. Additionally, conventional grading may cause us to be reluctant to take risks with our writing or ideas. It doesn't allow writers to fail at writing, which many suggest is a primary way in which people learn from their practices. Sometimes grades even lead to the feeling that students are working *against* their teacher or having to hide part of themselves from their teacher. For these reasons, the course uses a contract for grading.

I offer this first draft of a contract that focuses on the responsibilities we'll assume, not the things to which someone else (usually the teacher) will hold you accountable. We will try to create a *culture of support*: a culture where we all function as allies, fellow-travelers with various skills, abilities, experiences, and talents that we offer the group, rather than adversaries working against each other for grades or approval by teachers. We will be true colleagues, searching together for the best methods, ideas, and practices for our mutual learning endeavors here at Fresno State.

Do not worry. You will get lots of assessments on your writing and other work during the semester from your colleagues. Use these assessments (written and verbal) to rethink ideas and improve your writing and strategies. Always know that I will read everything and shape our classroom assessment activities and discussions around your work, but you will not receive grades or comments directly from me all of the time. I want you not only to rely on your colleagues and yourself for assessment and revision advice, but to build strategies of self-assessment that function apart from a teacher's approval. I want you to learn to rely on your own judgment of what good writing is, and how to detect it.

Thus the default grade for the course is a "B." In a nutshell, if you do all that is asked of you in the manner and spirit it is asked, if you work through the processes we establish and the work we assign ourselves during the semester, if you continue to improve those processes in order to gain more intensity and engagement in your writing, then you'll get a "B." If you miss class, turn in assignments late, do not attempt to increase your work's intensity, or forget to do assignments, etc., your grade will be lower.

"B" Grades

You are guaranteed a course grade of "B" if you meet all of the following conditions. Please note that in each item below, there are questions that I cannot decide alone, particularly questions of definition. We will decide these things together as the course evolves.

1. **Attendance/Participation.** You agree to attend and fully participate in at least 87.5% of our scheduled class sessions and their activities and assignments, which means **you may miss (for whatever reason) 4**

class sessions. For our class, attendance should equate to participation, so we need to figure out together what “participation” means and when someone does not get credit for it.

NOTE: Assignments not turned in because of an absence (whether assigned on the schedule, in class, or on Bb) will be late, missed, or ignored (depending on when you turn it in finally, see the guidelines #4, #5, and #6 below).

Any absence due to a university-sponsored group activity (e.g., sporting event, band, etc.) will not count against you, as stipulated by university policy, as long as the student has **FIRST** provided written documentation in the first 2 weeks of the semester of all absences. This same policy applies to students who have mandatory military-related absences (e.g., deployment, work, duty, etc.). Again, the student must provide written documentation, stating the days he/she will be absent. This will allow us to determine how he/she will meet assignments and our contract, despite being absent.

2. **Lateness.** You agree to come on time or early to class. Five minutes past our start time is considered late. Walking into class late a few times in a semester is understandable, but when does lateness become a problem (for the class as a whole and/or for the individual)? As a rule of thumb, **coming in late 4 or more times in a semester will constitute an absence.**
3. **Sharing and Collaboration.** You agree to work cooperatively and collegially in groups. This may be the easiest of all our course expectations to figure out, but we should have some discussions on what we expect from each other.
4. **Late Assignments.** You will turn in properly and on time all essays, assessments, evaluations, portfolio evaluations, reflections, and other assignments. Because your colleagues in class depend on you to get your work done on time so that they can do theirs on time, all late assignments are just as bad as missed assignments. However, depending on what we agree to in the first week or two of the semester, you may turn in a late assignment or two (see the “Breakdown” table below). In order for an assignment to be considered a **“late assignment,” it STILL must be turned in, at least 2 days (24 hours) after its initial due date, and it should be complete and meet all the assignment’s requirements** (e.g. if an essay was due on Friday, Sept 20 at noon, a late essay must be turned in by noon on Sunday, Sept 22). Please note that a late assignment may be due on a day when our class is not scheduled to meet.
5. **Missed Assignments.** A missed assignment is NOT one not turned in; it is one that has missed the guidelines for a late assignment somehow but is still complete and turned in at some point in the semester (e.g., after the 48 hours). Most missed assignments are those turn in after the 24 hour late turn in period (see #4 above). **In order to meet our contract for a “B” grade, you cannot have any “missed assignments.”** Please note that assignments *not turned in at all* are considered “Ignored Assignments” (see #6 below). A missed assignment is usually one turned in after the 48 hour “late” assignment deadline.
6. **Ignored Assignments.** Any assignments not done period, or “ignored,” for whatever reasons, are put in this category. One of these in the grade book means an automatic “D.” Two acquired gives you an “F.” Additionally, if any of the essays or portfolios become ignored assignments, it constitutes an automatic failure of the course.
7. **All the labor of the course** (e.g., reading, writing, and other activities) should be done in the spirit it is assigned. This means that you will meet the minimum **time** and **effort** (intensity) requirements. If asked to write for 20 minutes on a prompt, the expectation is that you will write for at least 20 minutes and address or respond to all the elements or questions in the prompt (depending on what the prompt asks you to do). Additionally, should you get feedback from the teachers or colleagues that suggest you spend more time or effort on your assignments than what is directed in assignment instructions, you will do this so that you meet the expectations of your readers (your colleagues and the teacher).

“A” Grades

As you can see, the grade of B depends primarily on *behaviors*. Have you shown responsible effort and consistency in our class? Have you done what was asked of you in the spirit it was asked? Grades of “A” depend on two additional things: (1) the acceptable completion of an extra project (listed on the syllabus as “project 2”), and (2)

engaging in both projects with the primary goal of offering the class, your colleagues, something that can help us all – that is, your projects’ research questions should be ones that we care about as a community of writers/citizens/scholars in our class. Thus you earn a B if you put in good time and effort, do all the work, and do one project in an acceptable fashion, regardless of how useful or interesting that project is for any of us in the class. We will expect this from everyone. But to get an “A” you have to draft and complete another full project of equal depth and time. The assumption is that doing the extra project, and shooting for work in both projects that tangibly helps your colleagues in some real way, will produce deeper engagement and excellence worth the highest mark possible, an “A” course grade.

Grades Lower Than B

The quickest way to slide to a “C,” “D,” or “F” is to miss classes, not turn in things on time, turn in sloppy or rushed work that doesn’t count as a complete assignment, or show up without assignments. This much is nonnegotiable: you are not eligible for a grade of “B” unless you have attended at least 86% of the class sessions (see also #1 above), meet the guidelines above, and those in the table below. If you are missing classes and get behind in work, please stay in touch with me about your chances of passing the course.

Break-Down of the Main Components

Below is a table that shows the main components that affect your successful compliance with our contract.

	# of Absences	# of Late Assigns.	# of Missed Assigns.	# of Ignored Assigns.
A	4 or less	3	0	0
B	4 or less	3	0	0
C	5	4	1	0
D	6	5	2	1
F	7	6 or more	2	2 or more

Plea. I (Asao), as the administrator of our contract, will decide in consultation with the student whether a plea is warranted in any case. The student must come to the teacher (Asao Inoue) as soon as possible, usually before the student is unable to meet the contract (before breaching the contract), in order that he/she and the teacher can make fair and equitable arrangements, ones that will be fair and equitable to all in the class and still meet the university’s regulations on attendance, conduct, and workload in classes. **You may use a plea for any reason, but only once in the semester.** Please keep in mind that the contract is a public, social contract, one agreed upon through group discussion and negotiation, so my job is to make sure that whatever agreement we come to about a plea will not be unfair to others in class. The plea is NOT an “out clause” for anyone who happens to not fulfill the contract in some way; it is for rare and unusual circumstances out of the control of the student.

By staying in this course and attending class, you accept this contract and agree to abide by it. I (Asao) also agree to abide by the contract, and administer it fairly and equitably.