# **Grading Contract**

# The following is borrowed from Asao B. Inoue’s FYS Contract

Imagine that this wasn’t an official course for credit, but instead that you had seen my advertisement in the newspaper or on the Internet, and were freely coming to my home studio for a class in cooking or yoga. We would have classes, workshops, or lessons, but there would be no official grading of omelets or yoga poses, since letters and numbers would be meaningless in those scenarios. But we all would learn, and perhaps in an encouraging, fun, and creative environment. In considering this course and that home studio scenario, we might ask ourselves three questions: Why are grades meaningless in that home studio setup? How do grades affect learning in classrooms? What social dynamics does the presence of grades create? In both situations, instructors provide students or participants with evaluative feedback from time to time, pointing out where, say, you’ve done well and where I, as the instructor, could suggest improvement. In the home studio situation, many of you would help each other, even rely on each other during and outside of our scheduled meetings. In fact, you’d likely get more feedback from your peers on your work and practices than in a conventional classroom where only the teacher is expected to evaluate and grade.

Consider two issues around grades. First, using conventional classroom grading of essays and other work to compute course grades often leads students to think more about acquiring grades than about their writing or learning; to worry more about pleasing a teacher or fooling one than about figuring out what they really want to learn, or how they want to communicate something to someone for some purpose. Lots of research in education, writing studies, and psychology over the last 30 or so years have shown overwhelmingly how the presence of grades in classrooms negatively affect the learning and motivation of students. [Alfie Kohn (2011)](http://www.alfiekohn.org/article/case-grades/), a well known education researcher and teacher of teachers, makes this argument succinctly. To put it another way, if learning is what we are here for, then grades just get in the way since they are the wrong goals to strive for. An “A” doesn’t build a good bridge for an engineer, nor does it help a reporter write a good story, or a urban planner make good decisions for her city. It’s the learning that their grades in school allegedly represent that provides the knowledge to do all that they need to. And so, how do we make sure that our goals aren’t about grades in this class, but about learning to write?

Second, conventional grading may cause you to be reluctant to take risks with your writing or ideas. It doesn’t allow you to fail [...], which many suggest is a primary way in which people learn from their practices. Sometimes grades even lead to the feeling that you are working *against* your teacher, or that you cannot make a mistake, or that you have to hide part of yourself from your teacher and peers. The bottom line is, failure [...] is vital to learning [...]. And we have to embrace our failures, because they show us the places we can improve, learn, get better -- and these are the reasons we are in college! Grades on our work and writing do not allow us to productively fail. They create conditions that mostly punish failure, not reward it for the learning opportunity it can and should be.

As you might already notice, what I’m arguing for here is a different kind of classroom, and even education. [Sir Ken Robinson (2010)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZFcDGpL4U), a well-known education researcher, makes the argument in a TED talk that typical schooling, with grades and particular standards, is an old and mostly harmful system that we’ve inherited, but now needs to change. One harmful aspect of this old system is that it assumes everyone is the same, that every student develops at the same pace and in the same ways, that variation in skills and literacies in a classroom is bad. It is clear the opposites of these things are more true. For all these reasons, I am incorporating a labor-based grading contract to calculate course grades in our class.

I offer this first draft of a contract that focuses on the responsibilities we’ll assume, not the things to which someone else (usually the teacher) will hold you accountable. The pedagogical shift I’m suggesting is in part a cultural one, one that I would like you to control. Therefore, we will try to *approximate* the evaluative conditions of a home studio course. That is, we will try to create a culture of support, or rather a *community of compassion*, a group of people who genuinely care about the wellbeing of each other – and part of that caring, that compassion, is doing things for each other. It turns out, this also helps you learn. The best way to learn is to teach others, to help, to serve. So we will function as collaborators, allies, as fellow-travelers with various skills, abilities, experiences, and talents that we offer the group, rather than adversaries working against each other for grades or a teacher’s approval.

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| A Grade | B Grade | C Grade | D-F Grade |
| **Discussion Board**  \_ All 12 discussion questions follow the guidelines and are submitted on time.  \_ All 12 discussion responses follow the guidelines and are submitted on time. | **Discussion Board**  \_ All but 1-2 discussion questions follow the guidelines and/or are submitted on time.  \_ All but 1-2 discussion responses follow the guidelines and/or are submitted on time. | **Discussion Board**  \_ All but 3-4 discussion questions follow the guidelines and/or are submitted on time.  \_ All 3-4 discussion responses follow the guidelines and/or are submitted on time. | **Discussion Board**  \_ 8 or fewer discussion questions follow the guidelines and/or are submitted on time.  \_ 8 or fewer responses follow the guidelines and/or are submitted on time. |
| **Activism and Nature Assessment**  \_ Submitted on time  \_ Addresses all assignment guidelines  \_ Review draft and/or ideas during office hours  \_ 30 minute writing consultation with Learning Center tutor | **Activism and Nature Assessment**  \_ Submitted no more than 1 day late  \_ Addresses all assignment guidelines  \_ Review draft and/or ideas during office hours  -or-  \_ 30 minute writing consultation with Learning Center tutor | **Activism and Nature Assessment**  \_ Submitted 1-2 days late  \_ Addresses all assignment guidelines | **Activism and Nature Assessment**  \_ Submitted more than 2 days late or not at all  \_ Addresses some assignment guidelines |
| **Capstone Project**  \_ Submitted on time  \_ Addresses all assignment guidelines  \_ Review draft and/or ideas during office hours  \_ 30 minute writing consultation with Learning Center tutor | **Capstone Project**  \_ Submitted no more than 1 day late  \_ Addresses all assignment guidelines  \_ Review draft and/or ideas during office hours  -or-  \_ 30 minute writing consultation with Learning Center tutor | **Capstone Project**  \_ Submitted 1-2 days late  \_ Addresses all assignment guidelines | **Capstone Project**  \_ Submitted more than 2 days late or not at all  \_ Addresses some assignment guidelines |
| **Class Participation**  \_ 0 absences  \_ Consistently engaged, high-quality class participation  \_ Consistently high-quality peer feedback | **Class Participation**  \_ 1 absence  \_ Consistently engaged, high-quality class participation  \_ Overall high-quality peer feedback | **Class Participation**  \_ 2 total absences  \_ Inconsistent class participation  \_ Inconsistent quality peer feedback | **Class Participation**  \_ 3 or more total absences  \_ Consistent lack of class participation  \_ Unsatisfactory or missing peer feedback |