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A Legacy of Grading Contracts for Composition

by Michelle Cowan, Texas Tech University

The efficacy of traditional letter or numerical grading for composition classes has been questioned for decades, but still, most instructors use conventional grading systems in their writing classes. This article outlines a century-long history of research and experimentation, focusing on the use of grading contracts in composition courses to increase grading consistency, incentivize more effective writing approaches, break down problematic classroom power dynamics, reward improvement, reduce race or gender bias, and encourage self-directed learning. Most scholarship on grading contracts in composition focuses on individual case studies of particular contract implementations, but recent turns toward more comparative, large-scale studies indicate the potential of the field to better understand the usefulness of grading contracts. Existing research demonstrates the promise of grading contracts to create more egalitarian classrooms in which students assume more ownership of their work, provided instructors embrace the opportunities for class discussion and negotiation that contracts afford. No contract is one-size-fits-all, so instructors can use the examples outlined in this history to craft grading contracts that make the most sense for their goals and instructional pedagogy.

Keywords: grading contracts, literature review, learning contracts, alternative approaches, grades

Composition instructors know student writing cannot be measured according to binaries like right and wrong or correct and incorrect. Binaries might make grading simpler, but they also make writing far less interesting. Writing instructors work inside a discipline that defies clear-cut assessment, full of ambiguities that push teachers to invent rubrics and craft grade justifications that attempt to break writing into easier-to-parse elements. Writing is a rhetorical act that depends on audience, context, purpose, and potentially innumerable aspects of the ecology surrounding any one particular writing assignment. A single grade hardly sums up the complicated mixture of strengths and weaknesses present in students' work, and if an instructor's goal is to teach invention, feedback, revision, and other process-oriented skills, grading one final product misses the point entirely. Grading has even been characterized as an act of violence (Lederman & Warwick, 2018), and writing instructors everywhere have witnessed the deep wounds and visceral reactions students experience after receiving grades the teacher had hoped would serve as motivators or indications of progress.

Faced with the complicated task of grading student writing, many composition instructors have turned away from traditional grading—defined in this article as a system in which the instructor gives most assignments numerical or letter grades and bases students' final grades on some weighted or unweighted average of those grades—and toward alternative assessment systems, such as portfolio assessment, the Learning Record (Syverson, 1995), and grading contracts. Writing instructors employ innumerable variations of these grading schemes in hopes of tackling key issues with traditional grading. For instance, researchers question the consistency of grades and their inability to accurately measure performance from class to class and student to student (Diederich et al., 1961; Elbow, 2006; Huot, 2002; C. Knapp, 2007; McNamara et al., 2010). Traditional grading also tends to incentivize the least productive kinds of work—bare-minimum, by-the-book writing—and discourage experimentation, increase anxiety, and demotivate writers (Kohn, 2013; Lederman & Warwick, 2018; Tchudi, 1997). This demotivating effect is particularly troublesome for students who make significant progress but still do not meet the White academic standard (Blackstock & Norris Exton, 2014; Massa, 1997). Moreover, traditional grading can unfairly penalize students from non-dominant discourse communities (Inoue, 2012a; Poe & Inoue, 2016) and reinforce teacher-student power dynamics that discourage creativity and questioning (Elbow, 1983; Potts, 2010; Rosenfeld, 2014).

This article looks, in particular, at grading contracts and their efficacy in college composition classes as they have been employed to address these issues over the past century. Grading contracts may be used to holistically assess work, assign grades, clearly outline the requirements to make certain grades, motivate students to take personal responsibility for their work, and/or foster democratic social engagement in the classroom (Brubaker, 2010, p. 265; Inoue, 2019, p. 92; Taylor, 1980, p. 28). Contracts can also help instructors untether narrative assessments of writing quality from a rigid number or letter grade (Inoue, 2012a, p. 80). Debate is frequent but scattered about whether a grading contract can help accomplish one or any of these goals. It is clear, for instance, that grading contracts generally do not reduce instructor workloads or eliminate student anxiety about grades (Farber, 1990; Inman & Powell, 2018; Inoue, 2014; Litterio, 2016; Rosenfeld, 2014; Spidell & Thelin, 2006). Still, those who use grading contracts tend to report successes, and many write articles presenting optimistic possibilities to other instructors.

Despite assertions about the efficacy of contracts in published scholarship, many composition teachers are hesitant to implement grading contracts because of misconceptions about how a grading contract must be deployed. Much of the literature around grading contracts promotes methodologies idiosyncratic to the writers of those articles (Brubaker, 2010; Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009; Inoue, 2019; Rosenfeld, 2014; Spidell & Thelin, 2006). These scholars likely do not intend that their model become the accepted standard for everyone, but it is easy to read the descriptions of their grading systems as prescriptions that seem lacking for many teachers. Of the instructors who have heard of grading contracts, many are skeptical of their fairness, specifically in their ability to assess the quality of student writing and not “merely” the completion of assignments (Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009; Reichert, 2003). Most teachers have only seen one or two models for a grading contract, which vary depending on the article or writing program

administrator that introduced them to the concept, and some teachers assume all grading contracts focus purely on completion, at the expense of quality (Reichert, 2003). They worry grading contracts emphasize parts of the class (e.g., attendance, on-time assignment completion, word counts) that are much less important than the primary task at hand: writing.

In reality, no single ideal grading contract exists. Teachers can take many approaches, some of which involve subjective assessments of student writing and others that emphasize completion or labor. In most cases, the teacher still assesses each piece of writing and gives students feedback on all aspects of their work, but the student's actual grade in the class may largely be determined by elements outside of the "quality" of their writing on their assignments. Contracts may be negotiated student-by-student or as a whole class, or the contract could be unilaterally enforced by the instructor.

Examples of all these variations exist in the history chronicled here. The chronological arrangement of this article is not intended to imply that newer interpretations of grading contracts are better than older versions. It is simply a mechanism for laying out the possibilities available, some or many of which could work or crash and burn depending on the instructor and the class. By reviewing the wide variety of approaches to grading contracts, instructors can interrogate their own grading practices and make conscious assessment choices that align with their pedagogical values.

1921-1960: Grading Contracts That Encourage Practical Conversations and Real-Life Responsibility

Some of the earliest published scholarship on grading contracts focuses on high school classes, in which contracts are intended to "produce situations and present problems similar to those of everyday life" (Frank, 1933, p. 556) and to encourage self-directed learning. These early articles apply grading contracts in many different sorts of classes and subjects, all typically listing out requirements to achieve a C, B, and A, but the requirements vary greatly between contracts. J. O. Frank's (1933) contract for high school chemistry, for instance, lists dozens of tasks and options students can take during a given course unit to earn C-, B-, or A-level credit. All objectives for the lower levels must be met before moving on to the requirements for higher grades. Many early contracts follow similar patterns. Some contracts list objectives students must meet or tasks they must do to earn marks at each grade level. Other contracts incorporate subjective, graded assessments of student work or grades on exams into the contract. For instance, Louise Fowler (1928), who calls her contract a "life-saver" for a college composition course, lists out requirements for each unit of her class, most of which include attaining a certain grade on an exam and meeting rubric-defined requirements for up to three *précis* essays, along with other assignments from which students can choose. Fowler places much emphasis on the burden of grading student writing and how her grading contract mitigates the grading load—if not in time, in mental effort or anguish. She also reports her grading contract encourages more self-directed learning and a lessening, in her perception, of instructor bias.

The major constant in the earliest publications on grading contracts is the emphasis on conversation in class about the contract. The introduction of the grading contract is, in and of itself, a learning opportunity for students, which can be particularly true in English or foreign language courses, in which students must understand the language of the contract and then use linguistic and rhetorical skill to discuss and negotiate portions of the contract. Early contracts do not all encourage negotiation, but they do all encourage extensive conversation about the contracts and what each student will do to fulfill its requirements. Without proper conversation and tailoring for a particular class or student, contracts fail (Guyles, 1931).

Pre-1960 articles on grading contracts are few and far between, and what does exist speaks mainly to high school teachers. But articles questioning the efficacy of grading written work in general are abundant, particularly in the 1940s and 1950s (Berg et al., 1945; Fletcher & Hildreth, 1949; Gladfelter, 1936; Hartson, 1930; McCullough & Flanagan, 1939; Traxler & Anderson, 1935). These ambivalent feelings about the assessment of writing performance echo larger concerns about grading, with Max Marshall (in a 1954 edition of *The Journal of Higher Education*) going as far as to say, "To impose an A-F or 0-100 system on a teacher whose primary interest is in the development of the whole student and who thus is unable to use it, is destructive demagoguery" (p. 267), a sentiment that gets repeated for decades in assessment scholarship. Traditional grading, for many instructors, does not emphasize the kind of work that deserves students' concentration. Grading contracts and the conversations around them help instructors ground their classes in real-life situations where students and teachers can voice what they feel is important to learn and how learning should be assessed.

1961-1970: Individualized Learning Contracts in Higher Education

In the late 1960s, the number of articles on grading contracts begins to increase in all subjects, with reasons for adopting grading contracts ranging from concerns about fairness to the need for individualized learning plans in many disciplines. By the end of the decade, the personalized student contract dominates the landscape, with the field of education leading the way. Still, examples of contracts pop up for all disciplines, including composition, although composition trails behind high school, athletics, and speech communication-related adoptions. In composition, scholars such as Peter Elbow express dissatisfaction with the ambiguity of grading policies in composition and begin to espouse a no-grade approach, which usually means a simple pass/fail policy combined with extensive narrative evaluation, often within a formal or informal contractual framework. In his 1968 article, "A Method for Teaching English," Elbow suggests instructors "depart from orthodox grading" and develop an approach for assessing writing collaboratively with their students (p. 125). In Elbow's model, students are active participants in the design of the entire curriculum, a

kind of involvement that mirrors student-centered grading contract development approaches.

Elbow's views are representative of most scholarship in favor of moving away from traditional grading (Mannello, 1964; Sparks, 1967), and his work is still part of the foundation of much work around grading contracts in composition. Elbow sees the classroom as a place of conversation, experimentation, and mutual negotiation between students and teachers. Elbow's earliest concepts of grading contracts are based on narrative evaluations of student work along with teachers and students explicitly negotiating the terms under which an individual student can pass the course or earn a particular grade. It is clear from his early work that Elbow's original intent is to move away from letter and number grading entirely (Elbow, 1968, p. 125). His desire to eliminate grades may be part of why grading contracts become, in composition at least, associated with gradeless assessment, even though many early grading contracts, more often called "learning contracts" until the later 1990s, include letter and number grades as part of the overall contractual agreement.

The term "learning contract" begins popping up in scholarship related to secondary school courses infrequently but with increasing regularity as the decade wears on (Eberle, 1969; Herman, 1963; Popham, 1969). In higher education contexts, the field of education picks up the term most rapidly (Dash, 1970; Downing, 1964; Galvin, 1970; Thompson, 1969), usually focusing on the development of contracts for individual students, not entire classes. These contracts involve varying degrees of negotiation—from no negotiation at all to extensive and ongoing discussions. Some learning contracts apply to a single class or course unit (Dash, 1970; Galvin, 1970) while others cover overall student performance at a particular institution (Downing, 1964).

For example, Edward Dash (1970) describes the contracts he uses in a junior-level educational psychology class to promote more active learning and self-efficacy in students. At the beginning of the semester, students choose an A, B, or C contract to sign, but they may later opt for a different contract as their understanding of the course requirements and their own capabilities become clearer. The contract lists the activities required to achieve the desired grade which, at the C level, amount to (a) an attendance requirement, (b) preparation and leadership of one class discussion, (c) one written observation report, (d) a group demonstration project, (e) one written paper on a topic of the student's choice, (f) the achievement of at least a C on two mid-term exams, and (g) no work that the instructor determines is below a D level. Dash's contract combines subjective and objective assessment, which is common in contracts in the 1970s. The instructor has quite a bit of leeway in determining what "D level" means. To make a B, that quality requirement is higher, and the student must complete more assignments. To make an A, the student must take a final exam and complete an individualized project. Dash outlines more specific expectations of each assignment in other documents, which the class discusses together along with the contract. As in earlier scholarship, Dash is most enamored with the quality of conversation the grading contract induces. He reports that a small minority of students resist the contract, and he deals with these concerns individually, commenting that some instructors may prefer creating individualized contracts to help address issues—both educational and emotional—specific to each student. Like many contracts in the 1960s, Dash mentions concerns about the meaning and fairness of grades, but his emphasis on the need for students to take more ownership of their work and to direct their own learning—what he calls a "philosophy of individual decision making"—is more pronounced than most and becomes the prevailing theme for much grading contract literature in decades to come.

1971-1990: Self-Directed Learning and a Focus on the Writing Process

Scholarship on learning contracts increases substantially during the 1970s and 1980s in a wide variety of disciplines, mostly centering around the encouragement of self-directed learning. Most contracts of the time are highly individualized, with each student negotiating with the instructor or even department advisor regarding their course requirements (Avakian, 1974; Barlow, 1974; Berte, 1975; Wald, 1978; Worby, 1977). For instance, R. M. Barlow (1974) details a four-phase negotiation process in which each individual student discusses their proposed objectives, the learning resources they plan to use, the activities they will be required to complete and how those activities accomplished the agreed-upon objectives, and the methods by which they will be assessed with the instructor during the fifth week of class. Each contract contains a clause that allows for renegotiation, but to emphasize the importance of the commitment, Barlow requires that each student obtain the dean's signature as a notarization of the agreement. Contracts of the 1970s emphasize a deep level of personal dedication, even when the contract is less individualized, like in Sara Hatham Stelzner's speech class (Stelzner, 1975), where the contract amounts to lists of A, B, and C requirements similar to Frank's 1933 high school chemistry contract. The themes of listing detailed requirements and engaging in individualized negotiations permeates grading contracts of the 1970s and 1980s.

By and large, instructors report success and often amazement at the ingenuity of their students under a contract system. But skeptical scholars question whether grading contracts put more emphasis on quantity of work rather than quality, with comparisons of contract and traditional grading sometimes giving traditional grading an edge (Eddy & Zimmerli, 1977; Riegler, 1978). These misgivings prove unconvincing for instructors in most disciplines, and even though the positive buzz about contracts is largely anecdotal and unsubstantiated by any rigorous comparative research, articles about alternative grading methods, learning contracts, and grading contracts sprout up throughout the 1970s and 1980s, primarily in scholarship around adult learning (Caffarella, 1983; Caffarella & Caffarella, 1986; Reinhart, 1977; Walker & Kennedy, 1977), business management (Polczynski & Shirland, 1977; Rushton, 1974), speech communication (Hassencahl, 1979; Sprague, 1971; Stelzner, 1975; Stern, 1972; Wolvin & Wolvin, 1975), health professions (Berte, 1975; Blankenship, 1977; Crancer et al., 1977; Reinhart, 1977), and physical education (Mundy, 1974;

O'Donnell, 1976; Ostrow, 1975; B. C. Smith & Lerch, 1972; Werner, 1974). Grading contracts remain very popular for high school classes (Taylor, 1980), but higher education definitely catches onto the idea. Science (Cunningham & Heimler, 1972; Heimler & Cunningham, 1972; Young, 1974), foreign language, remedial classes in all disciplines, and English classes also use them but publish slightly less frequently about them than education, physical education, and speech communication (Taylor, 1980). Grading contracts seem to appeal to educators teaching subjects that are difficult to assess on a linear scale or those who are interested in introducing a new assessment paradigm to students who need to take more ownership of their work or achieve individual goals. Fran Hassencahl (1979) helpfully outlines four basic ways to administer grading contracts: teacher-made/teacher-assigned, teacher-made/student-assigned (where a teacher makes multiple contracts for students to choose from), student-made/teacher-agreement, and student-made (where the teacher provides only minimal assistance). These administrative approaches indicate the wide-ranging options available to teachers and do not even touch on the variety of possibilities for the content of the contract. Rodney Riegle (1978), for instance, points out a minimum of 27 different contracts being used at the high school level alone.

In 1980, Hugh Taylor publishes a useful retrospective on the use of grading contracts in both secondary and higher education during the 1970s, which indicates that speech communication leads in adopting grading contracts while English composition lags behind. Nonetheless, a solid number of articles are published by compositionists focusing on the use of learning or grading contracts in college English (not usually composition) classes in the 1970s and 1980s (Beale & King, 1981; Birdsall, 1979; J. V. Knapp, 1976; Knowles, 1986; Leahy, 1980; Matulich, 1983; McCracken & Ashby, 1975; Nufrio, 1989; Shtogren, 1977; Wittig, 1974; Worby, 1977). Despite lowish publishing numbers, the authors of these articles mention growing use of grading contracts among their fellow writing instructors. John Knapp (1976), for instance, acknowledges that many of his composition colleagues are using grading contracts and goes on to describe a contract where letter/number grades are given to students, but only in the context of a one-on-one conference-style assessment with the individual student for each major assignment. In his contract, students are given the option of completing multiple drafts to earn different grades. Richard Leahy (1980) similarly uses conferences for assessment, but primarily *before* a student commences work. These articles, like most at this time, emphasize the power of the contract form to clarify expectations. Even if grades are eschewed in favor of “satisfactory” or “complete” grades, the contract—and student-teacher conversations about it—defines those terms more clearly than what many students have experienced before. The framework of the contract and its administration in class account for most of the benefits of using the contract, more so than simply eliminating grades or focusing on in-depth narrative assessment.

During this time, accounts of learning contracts are intensely practical. Contracts are designed to focus students on their personal goals for the class and the writing *process*, not the final grade. This reflects the field of composition's focus on writing process studies during that period (Emig, 1971; Flower & Hayes, 1977, 1981; Hayes & Flower, 1986). One of the most cited articles in future scholarship on grading contracts (owing in part to its memorable title)—“Avoiding Whadjaget with No-Grade, Graded Papers” (Birdsall, 1979)—accurately describes the experience of many a writing teacher longing for students to spend more time revising and less time comparing and disputing final grades. The article does not directly mention a grading contract but outlines such a clear system of recording only the completion of projects, giving students annotated checklists on what they could improve to achieve a higher grade, and having discussions about exactly what students must do in subsequent (optional) drafts to earn a desired grade that it serves as a contract template for many other instructors. Birdsall's (1979) article, like most articles on grading contracts in the 1970s and 1980s, focuses on the particulars of his system and only alludes to the idea that students have inherited society's (and secondary education's) obsession with quantitative ratings and systems of authority. Most articles in the 1980s avoid directly aligning grading contracts with attempts to subvert existing power structures, even though methods of that era—which typically involve huge amounts of time conferencing with students and involving students in the assessment process—seem aimed at doing exactly that.

Jerry Farber (1990), however, steps up at the end of the decade to explicitly promote grading contracts as one way to dismantle the power hierarchies that plague college writing classrooms. Building on his biting and influential exposition of secondary and higher education as the systematic enslavement of students to institutional authority in “The Student as Nigger” (Farber, 1968), Farber (1990) describes the liberating power of the grading contract he has used since the early 1970s, which spells out the core requirements for a C along with additional assignments students can choose to complete to earn a B or an A. His system is based on completion, not instructor assessments of quality. While admitting that his contract system requires more work for the teacher and does not completely solve the issue of student subjugation, Farber reports that he and his students feel freer to pursue activities and approaches that make more sense for individual students. In his classes, hardworking students can and do receive As without turning in “A-level” work, but for Farber, if grade inflation indicates that more students were engaged and proactive about learning, then he sees it as a badge of honor. Of course, not all instructors share Farber's attitude about grade inflation or his tenured status, but scholars in the 1990s adopt similar views that promote grading contracts as power disrupters, rather than only focusing on self-directed learning and attention to the writing process.

1991-2000: Contracts for Classroom Equality

In many ways, grading contracts straddle the line between neoliberal, positivist approaches to education and more emancipatory, qualitative, student-centered approaches. The idea of a “contract” in and of itself conjures business-centered, neoliberal associations, an infection of capitalist bureaucracy many fear in the humanities (Hawisher et al., 1996; F. Smith, 1988; Strickland,

2011). Business-like grading contracts appeal to institutional and student appetites for clearer rules, ever-more-granular categorization, and identity-reifying numerical assessments of value. Compositionists also express concerns about the historical and metaphorical role of contracts as tools of oppression (Lederman & Warwick, 2018). Despite these concerns, however, compositionists use grading contracts as instruments of emancipation, especially in the 1990s. Certainly, grading contracts in the 1990s serve a practical purpose, standardizing grading and fostering self-directed learning, but articles in the 1990s often use the language of social justice to promote grading contracts as a mechanism to free students from the tyranny of grades and give students a voice in the classroom.

In the early 1990s, articles typically embed mentions of grading inside larger arguments for teaching pedagogies that increase conversations between students and teachers and facilitate a non-oppressive classroom environment (Bizzell, 1991, 1992; Ericksen Hill, 1990; Lynch et al., 1997; Ryder, 1995; Sullivan & Qualley, 1994). The lack of focus on assessment does not go unnoticed as the years pass. In the forward of *The Theory and Practice of Grading Writing: Problems and Possibilities* (Zak & Weaver, 1998), Pat Belanoff (1998) claims compositionists have spent more time protecting our power as instructors and defending the legitimacy of our field's assessment standards rather than taking a hard look at our own research, which shows that we need to develop and test new grading methods to replace inconsistent and unreliable traditional grading schemes.

Scholars outside of composition also criticize conventional grading, and publications on learning contracts in other disciplines keep going strong throughout the decade (Anderson et al., 1996, 1998; Cristiano, 1993; Freie, 1992; McGarrell, 1996; Moore, 1993; Solomon, 1992; Stephenson & Laycock, 1993; Waddell & Stephens, 2000; Zarzeski, 1998). Composition instructors, in kind, take up grading contracts with an increasing amount of scholarship and theory (Allison et al., 1997; Elbow, 1993; Pounds, 1999; Radican, 1997; J. Smith, 1999; Tchudi, 1997; Zak & Weaver, 1998). Anecdotal evidence is still key to most arguments for grading contracts in the 1990s, but the justifications for using contracts extend beyond self-directed learning, the writing process, and the reliability of grading, to issues of power dynamics and the deeper psychological impacts of grading. With much assessment scholarship at the time advocating the removal of grading altogether, grading contracts are often seen as “an interim solution on the way toward the elimination of numerical and letter grades” (Shiffman, 1997, p. 67). Peter Elbow (1997b), in “Taking Time Out from Grading and Evaluating While Working in a Conventional System,” lauds grading contracts’ ability to give students more power in the classroom and to make the teacher’s power more transparent. Contracts do not create an entirely equal system or one that eschews traditional grades completely, but they are a step in the right direction. In the article, Elbow admits to the failure of a contract he created that *completely* eliminates the association of subjective quality assessments with the final letter grade. Instead, he advocates a contract that lays out specific requirements to earn a B and then leaves it up to the instructor to assign based on quality of work. He calls this sort of contract “impure” (Elbow, 1997b, p. 9), but for him, the important thing is not the elimination of subjective assessment from all grades but the shift in student focus from the attainment of one final grade to the process of understanding the teacher’s comments and suggestions for improvement. He likes that contracts force instructors to be incredibly clear with both themselves and students about exactly what is required to earn a particular grade, pulling back the curtain on grading and demystifying the role and intentions of the teacher.

Elbow’s ideas appeal to many instructors, including John Smith (1999), who builds on Elbow’s impure contract. Instead of subjectively determining who receives an A, though, Smith has students complete an extra writing project, which is similar to Farber’s (1990) approach. Smith (1999) reports that this “pure” contract system “does tend to reward students who are unspectacular but diligent,” but he sees this as in alignment with many other grading practices and reports that he does not encounter grade inflation. For Smith, to add quality assessment might undercut the goals of his contract—to clarify requirements and focus students on the experience of writing rather than a final grade.

As the century ends, it is increasingly clear that grading contracts tend to fall into one of three categories: quality-based (in which assignments or portfolios are assigned grades based on quality of the writing, even if the grade is simply “satisfactory” or “unsatisfactory”), labor-based (in which the focus of the contract is on the completion of objective criteria like word count, assignment count, deadlines, writing time, etc.), and hybrid (in which the instructor combines some amount of quality assessment with labor-focused assessment). Farber’s and Smith’s pure contracts are essentially labor-based, and Elbow’s impure contract is an oft-used template for hybrid contracts. These slightly different approaches show that even though grading contracts can elicit more student participation and more egalitarian classrooms, it is almost impossible to construct a contract that will completely deflate the influence of grades on student thinking or fit every class, student, teacher, or institution.

2001-2020: Mitigating Discrimination and Measuring the Success of Contracts

Tensions between egalitarian ideals and conventional institutional grading requirements continue into the 2000s, during which instructors increasingly adopt hybrid contracts that allow them to move away from grades while still operating in conventional institutional systems. In addition to the goals for contracts mentioned in previous decades—simplifying and standardizing grading, increasing self-directed learning, encouraging revision, and balancing power inequities—compositionists write much more personally about how contracts change who they are as teachers and how they address racial and gender discrimination. Scholars report that contracts encourage them to act as mentors and investigators of their students’ writing, instead of judges (Potts, 2010; Simon, 2013). Grading contracts provide teachers an opportunity not only to mitigate the influence of societal inequities in the classroom,

but also to lessen or redirect the impact of instructors' own conscious or subconscious biases (Inoue, 2019, pp. 161-162). Whereas extra-disciplinary rationales for grading contracts in the 2000s continue to center around self-directed and individualized learning (Borim Nejad et al., 2015; Boyer, 2003; Hassanpour et al., 2015; Molina et al., 2018; Sajadi et al., 2017), composition brings up issues of race, gender, power, and positionality when explaining their grading contract approaches (Inman & Powell, 2018; Inoue, 2012a; Lederman & Warwick, 2018; Poe & Inoue, 2016). For many compositionists, grading contracts are about more than practicality. They are a means to work toward social justice in the writing classroom.

Moreover, compositionists in the 2000s go further than grading contract scholars in prior decades to prove (or disprove) that grading contracts achieve their idealistic objectives. Before 2010, composition scholars almost exclusively use anecdotal evidence and pedagogical theory to argue for grading contracts. Even though many grading contracts focus on student self-assessment and reflection in class, less than a handful of pre-2010 articles (Spidell & Thelin, 2006; Worby, 1977)^[1] anonymously survey students about their experiences with the grading contract specifically. Scholars publishing more recently have gone to greater lengths to compare the results of contract grading with other grading approaches and to survey students about their experiences so the implementation of the grading contract can be more reliably measured and replicated (Blackstock & Norris Exton, 2014; Inman & Powell, 2018; Inoue, 2012a; Litterio, 2016; Potts, 2010; Villanueva, 2014). Recent studies compare the performance and reactions of students of different races using the same grading contract (Inoue, 2012a), individual responses from students using the same grading contract (Litterio, 2016; Potts, 2010; Spidell & Thelin, 2006; Villanueva, 2014), the grades students make under the grading contract versus the grades they would have made with traditional grading (Potts, 2010), and the performance of students in classes using contracts versus students in classes using conventional grading (Inman & Powell, 2018). This is still a very small number of articles.

As much as compositionists lament the unreliability of grading, writing studies scholars have only sporadically interrogated grading contracts or grading in general using replicable methods (Diederich et al., 1961; Durack, 1997; Inman & Powell, 2018). Most articles that attempt empirical comparisons of grading contracts are based on convenience samples of the author's own students and often amount to confined case studies or descriptions of the contracts used, but if the uptick in quantitative studies in the 2010s is any indication, the winds may be changing. The field is ready for more empirical inquiry into the efficacy of grading contracts, but student-centered studies are often complicated by strict institutional review board (IRB) policies that limit research on university students. Interinstitutional cooperation may be necessary to take grading contract research to another level in a way that will not jeopardize students' classroom experience or violate IRB policy.

Most of these comparative studies center around similar kinds of hybrid grading contracts, largely stemming from a more refined version of Elbow's 1997 model, which is explained in detail in Jane Danielewicz and Peter Elbow's (2009) "A Unilateral Grading Contract to Improve Learning and Teaching." Probably the most frequently cited model for grading contracts after 2010, "A Unilateral Grading Contract" addresses familiar concerns related to the standardization of assessment, teacher hesitancy to move away from usual grading approaches, and a desire to separate grades from other forms of assessment. In the article, Danielewicz and Elbow (2009) admit, "We wouldn't use grades at all if we were teaching outside institutions that require it," and the contract does manage to eliminate subjective judgments from grading up to a B (p. 247). With this contract, instructors do not give grades on individual assignments but instead focus on the creation of a final portfolio that will merit a B if all requirements have been met. The A grade is reserved for truly exceptional work, determined according to the teacher's subjective judgment. This combination of labor-based and quality assessment makes it a prime example of a hybrid contract. Some scholars adapt this model with a percentage-complete calculation to determine C, D, or F status (e.g., if less than 90% of the work is completed, the grade goes to a C, 80% to a D, and so on; Potts, 2010). Instructors can also choose to get away from subjective measures entirely by making the A a result of completing 100% of the work in the class.

The unilateral approach is a departure from most contracts proposed prior to the 2000s, which focus largely on individual and whole-class negotiation. Self-directed learning and individualization are perhaps *the* most essential qualities of early grading contracts, but the appeal of the unilateral model is clear: simpler administration while still getting students out of the conventional grading paradigm. A unilateral model may appeal to instructors with less experience in classroom negotiation and could be easier to implement department-wide (Inoue, 2012a). Because the Danielewicz and Elbow (2009) model is a hybrid model, which allows subjective assessments of quality determine who gets an A, it also appeals to instructors concerned about the potential for grading contracts to reward work that only barely meets requirements with inadequate emphasis on writing quality (Reichert, 2003; Shiffman, 1997). Danielewicz and Elbow argue that even though assessments of quality are part of the contract, the contract structure still frees them from the counterproductive system of grading instituted by the university, so they can focus on evaluating the nuances of student writing without the constraints of letter grades. To them, the contract successfully removes the influence of grades on their ability to mentor and coach. Glenda Potts (2010), who uses Danielewicz and Elbow's model in a five-semester study agrees, claiming "students concentrate more on their performance and less on obtaining a grade.... The teacher works *with* the student, becoming a collaborator rather than a judge" (pp. 33-34). Potts (2010) measures her results through student surveys, and although her research does not prove grading contracts lead to *improved* writing, it does: (a) highlight the arbitrary difference between grades of B and C, (b) show that grading contracts engender more positive emotions around writing for most students, and (c) confirm that contracts support a mentoring relationship between teacher and students.

Reviews of the Danielewicz and Elbow contract are not entirely positive, though. Importantly, A and B+ students in Potts's 2010 study report the highest amount of dissatisfaction with contract grading, which aligns with other research on grading contracts (Rosenfeld, 2014; Spidell & Thelin, 2006). Cathy Spidell and William H. Thelin (2006), Lisa Litterio (2016), and Joyce Inman and Rebecca Powell (2018) found more-than-moderate resistance to grading contracts among *all* students, regardless of performance level. Indeed, Inman and Powell observe that the desire for grades runs deep among instructors as well as students. Similar to most studies of grading contracts, students in contract-based classes at Inman and Powell's institution report satisfaction with grading contracts; they enjoy the freedom to work to their ability and the clear definition of course and assignment requirements. However, just as universally, the students report an intense longing for grades. Inman and Powell posit that this desire is based on students' need to understand both their progress and their identities, which have been systematically communicated to them with grades throughout their time in K-12 institutions. Grades are a language students have been taught to speak. And although students may, at some level, believe grades are unreliable or unfair, grades are tied to their identities, and the presence or removal of grades impacts students emotionally, socially, and academically.

Sadly, no research has been published that directly compares the *anxiety* students feel using a conventional system versus using a grading contract, and notably, Inman and Powell's (2018) findings are based on grading contract models that mostly remove grades from the picture. Although contemporary grading contracts have a bent toward gradelessness, grading contracts can just as easily include some kind of numerical grading to indicate progress (Fowler, 1928; J. V. Knapp, 1976; Zarzeski, 1998). Grading contracts that involve numerical assessment might have different goals from those that do not involve grades, such as bringing more variety into student work or enabling a more individualized program of learning (Zarzeski, 1998). As long as teachers understand the constraints and advantages of grades, those concerned about the anxiety provoked by removing grades altogether might consider building some kind of grading into their contract system.

The key to relieving much student anxiety, however, may be the inclusion of more student input when defining the terms of a contract, harkening back to the highly individualized contracts of the 1970s. Spidell and Thelin (2006) argue that more student contribution can counteract potential resistance/apprehension (pp. 4-48), pointing to Ira Shor's (1996) negotiated curriculum as laid out in *When Students Have Power: Negotiating Authority in a Critical Pedagogy*. Likewise, Litterio (2016) finds through surveys that even though students have difficulty "weaning" off of traditional grades, they enjoy having a voice in the assessment process. Litterio's (2016) contract defines performance like so: "To contract for a final grade of an A, students will have no more than three unexcused absences and will complete six assignments of 'excellent' quality and two presentations of 'excellent' quality." Requirements for the B are worded exactly the same, except "excellent" is swapped with "great." C swaps "excellent" for "good." Of course, what is the real difference between giving a student a score of 85 and a score of "great"? For Litterio, the difference is in the process of student discussion required to define, as a class, what "excellent," "great," and "good" mean. It is difficult to ascribe new meanings to a number from 0-100, but students have more flexibility when defining vague terms like "good" or "great." In a 2018 article outlining contracts for specific assignments or units within a larger course, Cruz Medina and Kenneth Walker see conversations *about* student grade anxieties as pathways to interrogate the systematic causes of that anxiety. The emotional reactions of students are never to be viewed negatively, but instead as kairotic sites for learning and self-investigation. Moreover, Asao Inoue's (2012b) data-driven research into student performance and feelings about grading contracts according to racial formations indicate that Black and Asian Pacific Americans are more likely to prefer grading contracts than White or Latinx students, even if they get a low final grade, complicating the idea that *all* students feel resistance to grading contracts or automatically label grading contracts as faulty if they receive a low grade. Resistance to contracts is personal and bound up in internalized ideas about identity and institutional authority. What is freeing for one student may be confounding to another. Scholarship indicates that contracts have the potential to provide the most benefit to all types of students when resistance is addressed directly in class discussion and when the terms of the contract are negotiated at length, rather than handed out unilaterally.

But debate exists about the level of negotiation that is appropriate or possible for an instructor to facilitate. In 2006, Peter Elbow responds to a 2004 article by Asao Inoue, where Inoue describes a process by which all students in a class work together to determine grading criteria. Elbow applauds Inoue's community-based approach but questions who might be marginalized in a full-class negotiation as opposed to each student deciding on their own terms. Of course, only three years after Elbow made those comments, he and Jane Danielewicz publish their unilateral model (Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009), which seems like a step even farther away from individualized contracts. These disagreements and changing approaches suggest that finding a system of assessment that will work for *every* student and *every* class is illusory. Instructors evolve their approaches over time. However, even if using a unilateral contract, it is clear that the grading contract should be a point of discussion and an opportunity to explore classroom dynamics and critical thinking, not only a grading mechanism.

A minority of writing teachers who use grading contracts completely divorce assessments of writing quality from the assignment of final grades. Instead of creating grading contracts based partially on completion and partially on subjective issues of quality (like Danielewicz and Elbow's [2009] hybrid contract), they give grades based entirely on student labor. Although writing quality remains the focus of all teacher-student assessment communications under a labor-based contract, judgments of writing quality do not factor into the student's final grade. Narrative evaluations are still an enormous part of a labor-based grading contract, so focus shifts away from rankings and guesses at instructor preference and toward discussions of assignment requirements and the feedback given by and to the instructor. The beauty of a fully labor-based contract is the psychological change such a huge step away from

subjective grading engenders in both students and teachers. This change can allow students to take more risks and can subvert problematic power dynamics (Farber, 1990; Inoue, 2019; Medina & Walker, 2018).

Inoue (2019), who uses a labor-based contract, explains that he has students keep a writing log, where they track the amount of time they spend writing. This is similar to early approaches to learning contracts (Frank, 1933). Other teachers use writing journals, checklists, and other tools for students and the teacher to keep track of how much writing each student is doing and how they feel about the work. In Inoue's model, a student can earn up to a B by following the letter of the contract (not dissimilar to Danielewicz and Elbow's [2009] hybrid contract), but whereas Danielewicz and Elbow reserve As for "exceptional work," Inoue requires that students complete additional assignments to achieve higher grades (like Farber's 1990 contract and J. Smith's 1999 contract). The absolute clarity about which grade the student is earning reportedly mitigates many of the concerns A and B+ students expressed in Potts's (2010) and Spidell and Thelin's (2006) studies of hybrid contracts. In theory, students know *exactly* what they need to do to earn higher grades. Labor-based contracts steer clear of ambiguous grades based on "quality," emphasizing practice and process, not perfection or outcomes.

However, other scholars worry about the complete divorce of quality from final grades. In "Practice Makes Perfect: Contracting Quantity *and* Quality," Nancy Reichert (2003) points out the importance of describing in the grading contract the elements of quality the instructor hopes to see—such as risk taking, critical thinking, and a compelling structure. Without these guideposts, a contract simply becomes a tool to help the instructor, not the student. Reichert applauds the emphasis on *practice* espoused in most labor-based contracts but has concerns about what instructors communicate to students when quality, though assessed and evaluated narratively, is not linked to the ultimate grade that student receives. Inman and Powell (2018) agree that to lose the language of grading may be a detriment to students. But perhaps, if instructors understand the language and power of grades along with the affordances and limitations of grading contracts, they can use them together to attain the same lofty goals.

Conclusion

Although concerns about the limitations of grading contracts are legitimate, the potential benefits of contracts are equally significant. The appendix lists some of the most useful composition-related resources mentioned in this article, categorized according to the issues each author aims to address: increasing grade consistency; promoting creativity, revision, and other more effective writing approaches; encouraging self-directed learning; rewarding progress (especially for students in basic writing classes); reducing power inequities; and mitigating race, class, and gender discrimination. Grading contracts have never been composition's go-to approach to attend to these concerns, but their increased adoption and the scholarship around their effectiveness indicate that instructors can use grading contracts to develop classes that achieve their pedagogical goals. From the earliest mentions of grading contracts in scholarship, instructors have been experimenting with creative approaches to productively and fairly engage with student work, recording their personal experiences with grading contracts and demonstrating that no one-size-fits-all contract exists. However, even scholars who lament the lack of success they had with their contracts or the increased anxiety felt by students acknowledge the conversations about assessment that happen during contract explanation and negotiation benefit individual students, the instructor, and the class power dynamic.

Instructors thinking about developing a grading contract for their classes have many examples from which to draw. Quality-based contracts, labor-based contracts, and hybrid contracts all have the potential to change the way students experience the class and use instructor assessment to take ownership of their work and improve their writing. Contracts can simplify and standardize grading but only in the sense that contracts outline very concrete criteria by which to assign grades. Clear-cut contractual requirements lead to more confidence in assigning grades but not less assessment time in total; any time saved in grading is typically spent on preparation, discussion, and increased narrative evaluation. Instructors need to make sure their goals for grading contracts extend beyond making life easier for themselves. The power of a contract is in its ability to change the balance of power in the classroom, give students a voice, and redirect students' attention to the elements of the work that need the most focus. The mere introduction of a grading approach that significantly differs from traditional approaches may throw students off balance just enough to send them tottering forward, into new ways of thinking and writing.

As a field, composition could use more comparative, large-scale studies of grading contracts. Most scholarship on grading contracts in composition focuses on individual case studies of particular contract implementations along with the occasional survey of students in those classes. This information is useful for instructors developing their own grading contracts, but it does not reveal much about how grading contracts impact students academically or emotionally compared to other grading schemes. More study will help determine whether assumed obstacles (e.g., student anxiety, low-quality work) are really obstacles at all.

As higher education faces a possible future in which self-directed, online classes dominate the teaching landscape, the utility of grading contracts to increase student ownership of work and set individualized goals should be a major consideration for composition instructors and first-year writing programs. Moreover, conversations around race and gender in the US continue to have central importance in our students' lives, and assessment methods that break down faulty power dynamics and mitigate instructor bias can be major assets in creating classroom environments that help the greatest number of students. Instructors need not fear that adopting a grading contract means giving up their high standards of quality or their emphasis on creative expression. A grading

contract can be whatever a teacher needs it to be, but as the scholarship outlined in this article shows, a contract might need a lot of time and incremental adjustments—along with dozens of conversations with students—before it can be trusted to do its best work.

Bio

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Appendix

Below, some of the most useful composition-related sources from this article are categorized according to the aims of the contracts they outline. The categories correspond to the concerns about grading as outlined in the introduction. Many of the articles below address issues in more than the category or categories to which they are assigned, but this list attempts to label each article according to its most relevant objectives. The articles are listed chronologically within each category. This compilation is not exhaustive, but it includes contract models and comparative study results that seem the most likely to help instructors craving templates on which to base their own grading contracts.

Increasing Grade Consistency

- “Life-Savers in Composition” (Fowler, 1928)
- “Varying Evaluative Criteria: A Factor in Differential Grading” (Dulek & Shelby, 1981)
- “Grading Student Writing: Making It Simpler, Fairer, Clearer” (Elbow, 1997a)
- “Taking Time Out from Grading and Evaluating While Working in a Conventional System” (Elbow, 1997b)
- “Differences of Opinion: An Exchange of Views” (Elbow & Bernard-Donals, 1998)
- “A Unilateral Grading Contract to Improve Learning and Teaching” (Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009)
- “A Simple Alternative to Grading” (Potts, 2010)
- “Contract Grading in a Technical Writing Classroom: A Case Study” (Litterio, 2016)

Promoting Creativity, Revision, and Other More Effective Writing Approaches

- “The Widow’s Walk: An Alternative for English 101-Creative Communications” (McCracken & Ashby, 1975)
- “Contract/Conference Evaluations of Freshman Composition” (J. V. Knapp, 1976)
- “Avoiding Whadjaget with No-Grade, Graded Papers” (Birdsall, 1979)
- “A Grading Contract That Works” (Beale & King, 1981)
- “Learning How to Teach: A Progress Report” (Farber, 1990)
- “Taking Time Out from Grading and Evaluating While Working in a Conventional System” (Elbow, 1997b)
- “Contracting English Composition: It Only Sounds Like an Illness” (J. Smith, 1999)
- “Practice Makes Perfect: Contracting Quantity and Quality” (Reichert, 2003)
- “Not Ready To Let Go: A Study of Resistance to Grading Contracts” (Spidell & Thelin, 2006)
- “A Grade-Less Writing Course that Focuses on Labor and Assessing” (Inoue, 2014)
- “Responding without Grading: One Teacher’s Experience” (Rosenfeld, 2014)
- “In the Absence of Grades: Dissonance and Desire in Course-Contract Classrooms” (Inman & Powell, 2018)

Encouraging Self-Directed Learning

- “Three Behavioral Approaches to the Teaching of College-Level Composition: Diagnostic Tests, Contracts, and Computer-Assisted Instruction” (Wittig, 1974)
- “Independent Learning: The Uses of the Contract in English” (Worby, 1977)
- “Confronting the Learning Contract” (Wald, 1978)

- “A Unilateral Grading Contract to Improve Learning and Teaching” (Danielewicz & Elbow, 2009)
- “Student-Created Contracts: Building Responsibility from the Bottom-Up” (Pounds, 1999)

Rewarding Progress (Includes Basic Writing Issues)

- “Individualize Your Instruction by Contract Teaching “ (Herman, 1963)
- “Writing Made Possible: A Contract Approach” (Leahy, 1980)
- “Do We Need a Single Standard of Value for Institutional Assessment? An Essay Response to Asao Inoue's ‘Community-Based Assessment Pedagogy’” (Elbow, 2006)
- “‘Space to Grow’: Grading Contracts for Basic Writers” (Blackstock & Norris Exton, 2014)
- “Impact of a Grade Contract Model in a Basic Writing College Composition Course: A Qualitative Multiple Case Study” (Villanueva, 2014)
- “In the Absence of Grades: Dissonance and Desire in Course-Contract Classrooms” (Inman & Powell, 2018)

Reducing Power Inequities

- “Three Behavioral Approaches to the Teaching of College-Level Composition: Diagnostic Tests, Contracts, and Computer-Assisted Instruction” (Wittig, 1974)
- “Learning How to Teach: A Progress Report” (Farber, 1990)
- *Writing from the Margins: Power and Pedagogy for Teachers of Composition* (Ericksen Hill, 1990)
- *Grading in the Post-Process Classroom: From Theory to Practice* (Allison et al., 1997)
- “Contract Grades: An Agreement Between Students and Their Teachers” (Radican, 1997)
- *The Theory and Practice of Grading Writing: Problems and Possibilities* (Zak & Weaver, 1998)
- “No More Lobbying, Bullying, or Crying: Why I Use a Grade Contract” (Bloom, 2004)
- “Community-Based Assessment Pedagogy” (Inoue, 2004)
- “Not Ready to Let Go: A Study of Resistance to Grading Contracts” (Spidell & Thelin, 2006)
- “Contract Grading in a Technical Writing Classroom: A Case Study” (Litterio, 2016)
- *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom* (Inoue, 2019)

Mitigating Race, Class, and Gender Discrimination

- *Writing from the Margins: Power and Pedagogy for Teachers of Composition* (Ericksen Hill, 1990)
- “Grading Student Writing: The Dilemma From a Feminist Perspective” (Shiffman, 1997)
- “Community-Based Assessment Pedagogy” (Inoue, 2004)
- “Do We Need a Single Standard of Value for Institutional Assessment? An Essay Response to Asao Inoue's ‘Community-Based Assessment Pedagogy’” (Elbow, 2006)
- “Grading Contracts: Assessing Their Effectiveness on Different Racial Formations” (Inoue, 2012a)
- “Racial Methodologies for Composition Studies: Reflecting on Theories of Race in Writing Assessment Research” (Inoue, 2012b)
- “A Grade-Less Writing Course that Focuses on Labor and Assessing” (Inoue, 2014)
- “Validating the Consequences of a Social Justice Pedagogy” (Medina & Walker, 2018)
- *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom* (Inoue, 2019)

[1] These are the only two articles I identified that attempt student surveys about grading contracts prior to 2010.