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Intro: Some Thoughts on Assessing Writing & Course Grades

Just to get this out of the way, I admit that I was one of those writing instructors who really focused on grammar and style when I first started teaching. (The word you’re looking for is “pedant.”) I used to have to read every student essay twice because the first time, all I did was mark grammar and style, and by the time I was done “reading,” I had no idea what the paper actually said. So I would read it again for content.

Not only is that approach to student writing not time efficient; it’s silly. We write to communicate, and policing the way someone communicates rather than trying to understand and respond to what they have to say is nutso. It’s harmful to students who don’t write Standard Edited American English, and it unfairly privileges writers in that idiom who may not actually have much to say. It fetishizes style and syntactical correctness at the expense of substance, as in analysis and argument.

I think our job is to use writing to help students learn and to recognize what students have learned through their writing. Insofar as we are going to measure anything in composition/writing course, it should be student learning, not the perfection, stylistic or otherwise, of a final product.

When we make the final draft what counts, most of us are doing at least one of three really problematic things:

- 1) Privileging the students with privilege, as in basically rewarding them for their prior training (before they even showed up in our classrooms) and not focusing on their learning in our course;
- 2) Punishing students who don’t write as we do, who differ from our own tastes/aesthetics, proclivities, communities, etc.; and
- 3) Prioritizing the perfection (or lack thereof) of a single piece of writing, when we all know that writing is developmental and recursive, and that the students who truly engage in the struggle to learn and deploy new concepts, terminology, and different disciplinary methodologies often have their syntax fall apart for a bit. Learning/writing is not perfectly linear.

In my experience, sustained community and interest (the interest of that community and of other readers) matters a lot more for writing development than grades do, and grades can shut down a promising writer. At the very least, if you want your classroom to truly be inclusive, focus on supporting your students’ writing endeavors more than on assessing them. I admit that I’m not completely there: I still grade final drafts of writing projects (partly because I think students should “know where they stand,” and partly because I need another year to move beyond this ingrained focus on product), but I do disaggregate them from course grades. I use a grade contract that is my best attempt to get at student learning during the course, which I think we should care a lot more about than whether any one piece of writing meets our (often idiosyncratic even when not pedantic) standards.

All that said, I think criteria are crucial to writing courses, whether they are discipline- or course-specific or

focused on single assignment. It is our job to guide and support students, not to shut them down as learners. In that vein, whether we're formally grading a writing project or not, we should clarify the values we're looking for in a given writing project, preferably together (instructor + students). Too many writing instructors use problematic "piecemeal" rubrics that isolate particular components or aspects of a piece of writing. What follows is a discussion of piecemeal v. holistic rubrics; a sample of a rubric that began as "piecemeal" but morphed into a holistic one; and the grade contract I currently use. None of these documents is specific to multilingual or translingual students, but all of them (I hope!) prevent a "[Standard Edited American] English-only" focus and prioritize what students have to say over how, exactly, they say it.

On Student-Centered Holistic Scoring

"Holistic Scoring" is a way of assessing an essay or other piece of writing as whole. It can be performed by teachers, students, graders, and test scorers, etc. Essentially, holistic scoring involves three steps: (1) acquainting readers with the rubric they will use to assess a writing assignment; (2) practicing implementing the rubric accurately by assessing and discussing sample papers together; and (3) using the rubric to assess a group of papers.

I should begin by saying that writing rubrics can be terrible. A really vague rubric, or one that focuses too much on relatively unimportant aspects of a piece of writing, is worse than no rubric at all. In your history as a student or a teacher, you have likely seen a rubric like this one used to assess a writing assignment:

Criterion & Points Possible	Points Earned	Grade
Title and title page (5)	0	
Introduction with Thesis (10)	10	
Organization (20)	15	
Required # of Sources and Documentation in APA style (15)	10	
Synthesis and Analysis of Research (30)	30	
Conclusion (5)	0	
Formatting (5)	2	
Grammar/Clarity of Prose (10)	5	
TOTAL (out of 100):	72	C

Let's say the rubric above was for a research paper. Clearly, this student's paper wasn't perfect. The student forgot to make up a title and title page and to write a conclusion (or maybe they ran out of time), and they probably didn't pay close attention to formatting guidelines. In terms of grammar, they may not have made time to proofread themselves or to trade papers with a classmate and proofread each other's. Or English might be their second (or third!) language. Or/and their English might not be SEAE.

What did the student do well? They aced the introduction and thesis, and they were able to read, synthesize, and analyze their research. Those parts of the paper—digesting research, finding patterns in it, and drawing their own conclusions—are probably intellectually the most challenging parts of this assignment. But the student still gets a C based on this assessment rubric.

To be fair, the way the student seems to have neglected parts of this assignment means that their paper

probably doesn't deserve an A. But a low C? And when another student could do a really bad job of synthesizing and analyzing their research and get a better grade?

These kinds of piecemeal grading rubrics usually aren't able to recognize that a piece of writing is more than the sum of its parts. But a good holistic rubric does just that: it makes judgments about what a piece of writing as a whole needs to accomplish to be successful, or outstanding, or not-quite-there-yet-but-promising, or pretty weak, etc. Holistic rubrics can help a community of writers learn what a successful piece of writing actually does (as opposed to just what shortcomings it might be penalized for) and demystify writing expectations.

Look back at the piecemeal rubric on the previous page. Let's say it was written to assess an assignment that asked students to write a research paper on the emergence of ISIS in Syria, Iraq, and in global media forums. Here's what the description of a 5-point (out of 6) paper in a holistic rubric might read:

A 5-point paper will...

- *clearly introduce ISIS as a political and cultural entity, provide an overview of aspects of its emergence addressed in the scholarly research literature, and succinctly present different hypotheses about its rise to power;*
- *organize its discussion around competing theories (though those theories may overlap in part), presenting and analyzing each theory;*
- *reference 5-7 scholarly sources and include at least three others in its bibliography;*
- *be generally well written, with few surface errors, and correctly documented according to APA style guidelines*

One obvious difference between this portion of a holistic rubric and the other rubric is its focus on actual content: it is clearly oriented around what this particular piece of writing needs to accomplish to be successful. This description also highlights the main purpose of the paper rather than dwell excessively on generic issues of correctness like formatting or grammar.

We probably should devote time to co-generating rubrics with students. We can at least design rubrics that make the goals of an assignment and our expectations for students' writing transparent, and then recognize that as early scholars and members of the academic community, students have a stake in the assessment of their own and of others' work.

Five Reasons to Use Holistic Scoring:

1. It forces readers (who may also be the writers!) to recognize and use shared criteria to evaluate writing; it helps readers and writers internalize communal values for writing.
2. It can make visible values that cut across writing assignments in particular genres and disciplines as well as criteria specific to a single assignment.
3. It helps us recognize what a piece of writing accomplishes, not simply what about it needs correction.
4. It recognizes that a piece of writing is more than the sum of its parts.
5. It is less subjective than assessment by a single individual.

Challenges in Using Holistic Scoring:

1. It requires clear criteria for success and clear communication of those criteria to assessors.
2. It requires some prep time and training: assessors need to practice using holistic scoring rubrics on sample papers and then norming their scores.
3. It probably works best in a context where writers have already had opportunities for feedback and revision; it does not allow for extensive commenting.

Some Basics About My Approach to Holistic Scoring:

1. I use a 6-point rubric. This helps prevent students from equating scores with letter grades (A, B, C, D, F)
2. The top half of the rubric (4-6) suggest mastery, the bottom half (1-3) non-mastery.
3. To assuage grade anxiety, I promise students that any paper that scores in the top half (4 or above) will receive at least a B-.
4. While there may be some verbatim overlap in parts with other rubrics, I use a paper-specific rubric for each major paper.
5. The Process: Students write pre-determined code names or numbers they have selected on their final drafts. On the day those are due, each student reads and scores two drafts according to the rubric for that assignment. I give the first readers stickers to cover their scores so that they will not influence second readers' judgments. I collect the papers and record the scores. It's acceptable to differ by one (so, for example, a paper might receive a 4/5). If the difference is greater than 1, I score the paper. I try to let students see their scores at the end of class, but I take the papers home to read them before returning them.

Sample piecemeal rubric for a 10-12 page research paper on the globalization of a transnational corporation (TNC).

GEOG/SIS 123 Research Paper and Section Participation – Grade Components Guide

The paper and section participation part of the grade in 123 are together worth 40%. In the interests of preparing your final paper please consider the following break-down of points as a guide for making sure you have covered all the key components.	Points out of 40 for component parts
Organization: This paper has an interesting, detailed title which includes a time period. This paper is organized into coherent sections , which have descriptive titles and begin with a brief overview of what the section covers.	2
This paper has an introduction that does the following: -introduces the TNC and its 'big story' of global development -sets up research questions/foci -has a thesis statement/main argument -provides a ROADMAP to the reader of how the paper is structured	2
Research Questions: This paper poses questions that probe deeper into some aspect/effect of the company's globalization in addition to -Where did the TNC globalize? -Why did the TNC globalize? -When did the TNC globalize? -How did the TNC globalize?	2 each 8 total
Analysis: This paper goes beyond descriptive reporting on the TNC and provides an analytical and/or critical account of the TNC's globalization,	6
Conclusion: This paper has a conclusion that does the following: -reiterates the main finding/argument -discusses the broader implications of the research (So what? Why should we care?)	2
Map: This paper includes at least one map that tells the story of the TNC's global spread. -The map includes aspects of production and retail (as applicable). -The map is referenced as a figure somewhere in the text.	5
Writing: -Writing is coherent and succinct – focused, flowing well from sentence to sentence and paragraph to paragraph, and following a definite structure. There are few or no grammatical or surface errors (spelling, punctuation, etc.)	3
Citations: This paper: -has a consistent citation format and proper citations. -has an alphabetized, consistent bibliography. -engages and cites at least 2 academic sources.	2
Research Initiative	5
Section Participation Contributions	5
TOTAL POINTS	40

The preceding rubric was converted to a holistic rubric for 1) ease/speed of grading; and 2) fairness, in the sense that the holistic rubric evaluates the writing as a whole, rather than itemizing components and pretending that a piece of writing is simply the sum of its parts, independently (piecemeal) assessed.

The following standards explain the characteristics of **outstanding**, **excellent**, **generally effective**, **adequate**, and **inadequate** research papers so that you can understand the assessment of your work in relation to that of your peers. Please note that the descriptions for each standard describe a representative paper: not every paper in a given category will display *every* characteristic of the standard.

Outstanding (32-35 points) TNC research papers will convey a compelling story or analytical perspective on a TNC's globalization and successfully connect that story to larger stories or analytical frameworks of globalization, or situate it in comparative context with other TNCs' globalizing trajectories. Papers in this category will effectively integrate and document research from a variety of sources as well as demonstrate the writer's mastery of key concepts and insights from lecture, section, readings, and other course materials. Outstanding papers will articulate clear stakes (reasons to care, broader implications) for their research in the conclusion and will model clear, intelligent prose with no or virtually no surface errors.

Excellent (29 - 32 points) TNC research papers will convey a compelling story or analytical perspective on a TNC's globalization that is supported by clearly documented research from a variety of sources. Excellent papers will take up research questions beyond when, where, why, and how a TNC has globalized and skillfully deploy concepts and insights from lecture, section, readings, and other course materials. The organization of these papers will facilitate the story or analytical perspective the writer aims to communicate. Papers in this category will be written in clear, cogent prose with few or no minor surface errors.

Generally effective (25 - 28 points) TNC research papers will clearly explain when, where, why, and how a TNC has globalized and provide an analytical perspective on the TNC's globalization. Effective papers will integrate and document research sources (at least two of which are academic) and deploy concepts from lecture, section, readings, and other course materials. Papers in this category will be clearly organized, but their sections may not work together to provide a compelling story or in-depth analysis of the TNC's globalization. These papers, overall, will clearly communicate ideas and information, but they may suffer from syntactical or mechanical errors and stylistic flaws.

Adequate (20 - 25 points) TNC research papers will explain when, where, why, and how a TNC globalized but may provide more description than analysis. Adequate papers will show evidence of research but may not incorporate sources effectively, or they may rely too heavily on the TNC's own website for information. Papers in this category will likely struggle with deploying concepts and insights from lecture, section, readings, and other course materials. The prose may be difficult for readers to navigate in places.

Inadequate (0-19 points) TNC research papers will suffer from at least one of the following weaknesses: failure to explain when/where/why/how a TNC has globalized; failure to incorporate research or to document sources; or failure to meet or nearly meet the length requirement.

This is my grade contract for English 298 (Winter 2018), a writing seminar linked to LSJ 200 (“Introduction to Law, Societies, and Justice”). I allow students to write their own contracts (which I have to approve) for grades in between these options.

Evaluation: Contract Grading

I have found that conventional grading often leads my students to think more about grades than about writing; to worry more about pleasing me or psyching me out than about figuring out what you really want to say or how you want to say it; to be reluctant to take risks with your writing. Grading even makes some students feel they are working against me. Therefore I am using a contract system for grading in this course. –Writing Studies Scholar Peter Elbow

The advantage of contract grading is that you, the student, decide how much work you wish to do this semester; if you complete that work on time and satisfactorily, you will receive the grade for which you contracted. This means planning ahead, thinking about all of your obligations and responsibilities this semester and also determining what grade you want or need in this course. The advantage of contract grading to the professor is no whining, no special pleading, on the students part. If you complete the work you contracted for, you get the grade. Done. I respect the student who only needs a C, who has other obligations that preclude doing all of the requirements to earn an A in the course, and who contracts for the C and carries out the contract perfectly. (This is another one of those major life skills: taking responsibility for your own workflow.) -- CUNY Professor Cathy Davidson

In this course we will use a system of evaluation called “contract grading.” In a nutshell, that means I specify what you have to do to earn a particular course grade, and you decide what you’re willing and able to do and then sign up for the contract that works best for you. There are no surprises: if you fulfill the obligations of your contract, you get the grade you signed up for.

Grade contracts aren’t new. I used them in grad school (way back in the early 2000s!) to respond to first-year students’ grade anxiety. Basically, the contract I used guaranteed students a minimum grade of “B” if they did the work specified in the contract. But now I use grade contracts for another reason: I would like the final course grade to reflect your *learning* and *work* rather than just my evaluation of your finals drafts of writing projects. I’m guessing that we’ve all been in classes where someone comes to class already writing well and basically slacks off because they’re confident that they can pull a “B,” or even an “A-,” not because they’ve learned much, but just because they’ve had a lot of practice writing mediocre-to-pretty-decent essays, and they know that’s what they will be graded on. And we’ve all seen—or been!—the student who comes to class curious, puts in the work, and gets a lower grade because they took risks in their writing, or because they came into the class with less developed reading/writing abilities.

I think a course grade should reflect your learning and work in a course, not what you were already able to do when you entered the course.

In this class, I will assess your final essays, but that score or assessment will pretty much have nothing to do with your course grade. I think you should know where a particular piece of writing stands in relation to others’ writing and our writing criteria, but I think your course grade should reflect your learning and work. So you’ll see that revision matters a lot.

You may renegotiate this contract if necessary ONCE during the quarter. Renegotiation requires a meeting with me during office hours.

REQUIREMENTS FOR A GRADE OF A (4.0):

1. Participate with good faith and generosity in all classroom discussions, activities, and workshopping of writing. You may miss one class session, but no more.

2. Complete all informal writing/pre-writing (the exercises) on time and bring them with you to class, since we use the writing in class.
3. Submit substantive and complete rough drafts on time.
4. Complete “A-level” (see sample) peer reviews of your classmates’ drafts and fully participate in three “major-paper” conferences.
5. Submit finals drafts of the three major papers on time.
6. Submit a full reflection of at least 250 words with each final draft that tells me how the drafting, peer reviewing, conferencing, and revising process went for you and explains the major revisions you made (from your rough draft to your final draft). The account of your revising should address my comments and those of your classmates on your rough draft, and the paper itself should (of course!) evidence your revisions.
7. Complete the midterm evaluation with sincere self-reflection.
8. Attend at least three LSJ-related related colloquia, lectures, or talks, and for each event you attend, submit a paragraph summarizing the event and reflecting on what you took away from it. (If you’re not sure an event is ‘LSJ related,’ just check with me.) UW’s Simpson Center for the Humanities sponsors a lot of relevant talks. Check out their list of events at <https://simpsoncenter.org/> And of course check out the events LSJ is hosting at <https://lsj.washington.edu/> *NOTE: You may substitute one writing center visit (written up) for a talk or colloquium.*
9. Come to my office hours at least twice. At least one of those visits should be substantive. (If my office hours don’t work with your schedule, we can make appointments outside them.) Please note that coming to my office hours to renegotiate your contract won’t count as one of these visits.
10. Submit two metacognitive reflections on yourself as a learner in this pair of linked courses. These reflections are an opportunity for you to take stock of what you are learning, how you are learning it, what you find more or less interesting, and what you think you might do with your learning going forward (at UW or outside the university.) Basically, I want to know how your intellectual life is going. Each reflection should be 400 words or longer. (Due dates: Monday, February 5th & Friday, March 2nd.)

CONTRACT FOR A GRADE OF A (4.0) IN ENGLISH 298

To earn an A (4.0), complete requirements 1-10.

CONTRACT: By signing this contract for a grade of “A” in English 298, I agree to all of the terms above.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Co-signed by instructor Carrie Matthews:

Date:

CONTRACT FOR A GRADE OF A- (3.5) IN ENGLISH 298

To earn an A- (3.5), complete requirements 1-10 with this “wobble room”: you may miss one pre-writing or informal writing assignment; you have to attend only two LSJ-related related colloquia, lectures, or talk; and you may also miss up to two class sessions.

CONTRACT: By signing this contract for a grade of A- in English 298, I agree to all of the terms above.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Co-signed by instructor Carrie Matthews:

Date:

CONTRACT FOR A GRADE OF B (3.0) IN ENGLISH 298

To earn a B (3.0), complete all requirements except #8 (attending talks) and #10 (the metacognitive reflections) with this wobble room: you may miss two pre-writing or informal writing assignments; your reflections accompanying final drafts may be as short as one paragraph; and your peer reviews, while they should be complete, may not be as full or detailed. (They may not be “A-level.”) You may miss up to two class sessions.

CONTRACT: By signing this contract for a grade of “B” in English 298, I agree to all of the terms above.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Co-signed by instructor Carrie Matthews:

Date:

CONTRACT FOR A GRADE OF C (2.0) IN ENGLISH 298

To earn a “C” (2.0), submit rough and final drafts of each major paper, write a reflection of at least one paragraph to accompany each final draft, submit assigned peer reviews on time, and show up and participate in major-paper conferences.

CONTRACT: By signing this contract for a grade of “C” in English 298, I agree to all of the terms above.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Co-signed by instructor Carrie Matthews:

Date:

A NOTE ON GRADES BELOW 2.0

The instructor reserves the right to award a grade below a 2.0 to anyone who fails to meet a contractual obligation in a systematic way. A 1.0 grade denotes some minimal fulfilling of the contract. A grade of 0.6 is absence of enough satisfactory work, as contracted, to warrant passing of the course. These grades signal a breakdown of the contractual relationship implied by signing any of the contracts above.