

Course Contract Grading and Detailed Rubrics to
Increase Transparency
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Rationale:

This document explains two complementary tools for assessing assignments: contract grading (and modified versions that are compatible with grading in Webcourses) and detailed rubrics.

In a contract-graded course, the final course letter grade is generally determined by the number of assignments completed (that meet clear criteria) rather than a letter graded evaluation of each individual assignment. On each assignment, students earn grades of Complete/Incomplete/Resubmit/Missing or can earn a small number of points based on whether they have met clear criteria. In evaluating creative work, particularly, this allows an instructor to shift their focus from determining an appropriate letter grade to providing detailed, qualitative comments.

These tools address some of the challenges involved in the subjective nature of grading creative assignments, while giving students room to try out new approaches in their creative work without worrying that their grades will suffer. Transparent evaluation can also help first-generation and non-traditional college students succeed, by clearly communicating the instructor's expectations.

Description:

When working on the syllabus:

Create assignments with the grading contract in mind and work on both course documents together. To be fair to the students, the contract must be given out to them at the time of the syllabus, and if it needs to be altered later on, it should be done only in ways that would benefit their grades or allow for make-up opportunities.

When creating the contract, consider what you would deem exceptional, excellent, good, satisfactory, and unsatisfactory performance toward the course learning objectives, in order to determine the requirements for each letter grade. Plus and minus grades would fall between performance for two letter grades.

Determine whether it is feasible to contract grade all students (if the class is under 20, it could be), or if it would be better to essentially translate the contract to a simple point system (classes over 20 students).

If a contract, a table with letter grade at the top and lists of assignment requirements should be clearly listed in ways that correspond directly with assignments in the syllabus. If using a point system, it may take more time to decide the value of each assignment and how to distribute the points. Grading in Canvas is not very compatible with contract grading, so if the course has

20 or more students, a simple point system will allow you to record the points earned on the completion of each assignment.

Start of Term:

Explain the grading methods clearly, especially if for online courses. In my Experimental Cinema class, I give them the chance to discuss the contract and to suggest changes, and I remain open to modifying the contract with their input, within the first couple of weeks.

Mid-term:

Meet with students individually to discuss their progress toward meeting the requirements of particular letter grades. Discuss options for make-up assignments, if you don't want to close students out of a higher grade in the course because of some missed homework assignments.

If using a point-based system, it helps to make assignments worth a small number of points and to list clear requirements and expectations and/or to provide a detailed rubric. I use 2 points for Complete; 1 point for Incomplete; 0 for Missing. The final project in the course is worth 6 points, with each point earned in various categories in a very detailed rubric. This corresponds closely to the amount of effort and thought that the student puts into the assignment, and with detailed rubrics, I have found that students are much more likely to meet my expectations and the course objectives. Ideally, an assignment and a rubric together will strike a balance of open-endedness and clear communication of expectations and learning objectives, even if the expectation is that students expand on a topic in an open-ended, critical, and creative manner. It promotes transparency and allows students to do solid, excellent work. When combined with giving students flexibility in choosing their research topic, it engages them more deeply in the course work.

End of Term:

If using a contract (without a point system), each students' work needs to be evaluated according to the criteria in the contract, which should be explained in writing.

Appraisal:

I taught 53 undergraduates with this method in Fall 2020, and the response has been positive. In my film production course, all students who completed surveys stated that they preferred contract grading in that course. Several stated that it allowed them to think and work more creatively without the constraints of trying to earn a certain grade on a project. In the other course I taught (with a point-based system), I received a few messages from students who expressed appreciation for the course layout. Grading for the course went more smoothly than usual. The grade distribution seemed quite appropriate.

A potential weakness is that, for students who are highly motivated by earning letter grades on individual assignments, this could perhaps lead them making creative work that simply meets the requirements. Any assignments that allow resubmission also require the instructor to quickly provide comments on how the student can improve their work.

References:

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