

## A CONTRACT FOR A FINAL GRADE OF B IN FIRST YEAR WRITING

Peter Elbow

[A version I often used and invited UMass instructors to use or imitate or adjust.]

To students in my first year writing course,

Imagine that this weren't an official course for credit at UMass, but instead that you had all seen my advertisement in the paper and were freely coming to my home studio for a class in painting or cooking. We would have classes or workshops or lessons, but there would be no official grading. Of course I'd give you evaluative feedback now and then, pointing out where you've done well and where I could suggest an improvement. But I wouldn't put grades on your individual paintings or omelets or give you an official grade for the course.

I believe that home-studio situation is more conducive to learning than the one we have in this course--where many of you are *not* here by choice and I am obliged to give an official University grade. Therefore, I will try to *approximate* the evaluative conditions of a home studio course. That is, I will try to create a *culture of support*: a culture where you and I function as allies rather than adversaries and where you cooperate with classmates rather than compete with them.

Conventional grading often leads 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; sometimes even to feel you are working *against* me or having to hide part of yourselves from me. I taught for nine years at Evergreen State College where no grades were given--just written evaluations. The system worked fine and was a benefit for both teaching and learning.

For these reasons, I am using a kind of contract for grading. I will give you plenty of feedback on much of your writing. But I will not put grades on your papers and my comments will have no effect on your final grade for the course--up to the grade of B.

### **You are guaranteed a final grade of B if you meet the following conditions:**

- (1) Attendance. Don't miss more than one week's worth of classes. (If you miss class, you still need to do the assignment.)
- (2) Lateness. Don't be habitually late. (If you are late or miss a class, you still responsible to find out what assignments were made.)
- (3) Late assignments. Don't have more than one late major assignment and one late smaller assignment.
- (4) Journals. Keep up your journal assignments.
- (5) Sharing and responding. Work cooperatively in groups. Be willing to share some of your writing, to listen supportively to the writing of others and, when called for, give full and thoughtful responses.
- (6) Major assignments need to meet the following conditions:
  - Process*. Always include process letter, all previous notes and drafts, and all feedback you got.

- Revisions*. When the assignment is to revise, don't just correct or touch up. Your revision needs to reshape or extend or complicate or substantially clarify your ideas--or relate your ideas to new things. Revisions don't have to be better, but they must be different.
- Copy editing*. When the assignment is for the final publication draft, your paper must be well copy edited--that is, free from virtually all mistakes in spelling and grammar. It's fine to get help in copy editing. (Copy editing doesn't count on early and mid-process drafts.)
- Perplexity*. For every paper, you need to find some genuine question or perplexity. That is, don't just tell four obvious reasons why dishonesty is bad or why democracy is good. Root your paper in a felt *question* about honesty or democracy--a problem or an itch that itches *you*. (By the way, this is a crucial skill to learn for success in college: how to find a question that interests you--even in a boring assignment.)
- Thinking*. Having found a perplexity, then use your paper to do some *figuring-out*. Make some intellectual gears turn. Thus your paper needs to *move* or *go somewhere*--needs to have a line of thinking.
- Don't let these last two conditions bother you. I don't ask that your essays always be tidy, well organized, and perfectly unified. I care more about working through the question than about finding a neat answer. It's okay if your essays have some loose ends, some signs of struggle--especially in early drafts. But lack of unity or neatness needs to reflect *effort*, not lack of effort.

### **Getting an A/B or A**

As you see, the grade of B depends on *behaviors*. Grades of A or A/B, however, depend on *quality*. Thus you earn a B if you put in good time and effort; I will push you all to get a B. But to get an A or A/B, you have to make your time and effort pay off into writing of genuine excellence (and also meet the conditions for a B). Notice that for grades up to B, you don't have to worry about my judgment or my standards of excellence; for higher grades you do. But we'll have class discussions about excellence in writing and usually we can reach fairly good agreement. Your mid-semester and final portfolios will play a big role in decisions about excellence.

### **Knowing where you stand**

This system is better than regular grading for giving you a clear idea of what your final grade looks like at any moment. For whenever I give you feedback on any major assignment, I will tell you clearly if you have somehow failed to satisfy the contract for a B. I will also tell you if I judge your draft to be genuinely excellent and thus to exceed the contract for a B. As for absences and lateness, you'll have to keep track of them, but you can check with me any time.

### **Grades lower than B**

I hope no one will aim for lower grades. The quickest way to slide to a C, D, or F is to miss classes and show up without assignments. *This much is nonnegotiable: you are not eligible for a passing grade of D unless you have attended at least 11 of the 14 weeks worth of classes, and completed 90% of the assignments. And you can't just turn in all the late work at the end.* If you are missing classes and behind in work, please stay in touch with me about your chances of passing the course.