

**Title of Grant:** Contract Grading: A Study of the Accuracy and Acceptance of an Alternative System for Writing Evaluation

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**Abstract:**

This study investigated whether contract grading can offer an accurate alternative to traditional letter grading in the teaching of English composition. Composition theory and research suggest that contract grading increases student learning. If this VCCS study demonstrates that contract grading accurately evaluates student performance, VCCS faculty may consider incorporating it into their writing pedagogies. In addition, this study will track the level of student acceptance of this unfamiliar system, and suggest methods to better facilitate its use by faculty.

**Actual Outcomes:**

Contract grading was indeed demonstrated to be an acceptable and accurate alternative to traditional letter grading. The differences between the recorded traditional letter grades and the final contract grades were inconsequential. The fact that this system yielded essentially the same grades as a traditional grading system enabled me to employ it and promote it with confidence, and encouraged others to explore options in alternative grading.

In addition, this study demonstrated that contract grading was widely, and for the most part, enthusiastically accepted by the majority of students. Their survey answers attested that contract grading was less stressful for them, and that the revision process helped them to improve their writing skills. Contract grading also enabled my students to write in a more relaxed atmosphere, increasing their confidence and encouraging them to take risks in their writing.

While, as previously reported in other studies, the more advanced students did indeed initially resist contract grading, this study enabled me to modify my explanation of the system so that students could more easily understand it. In later semesters, I learned to present the system in a different light, emphasizing that the initial results of this research had proved it to be both accurate and fair. I explained that with this system, no grades would be considered until the end of the semester, after they had had ample time to develop their writing. I also reassured the high achievers throughout the semester, and discussed their performance with them if they were concerned. The results of the survey indicated that the majority of advanced students did accept contract grading, once a more considered explanation and additional support were offered.

As a result of this study, I also learned that when a grade was no longer the primary objective, advanced students were more prone to assist less able students, since competition had been eliminated. A more pleasant workshop atmosphere was achieved, where collaborative learning could flourish, improving students' learning and retention.

An unexpected benefit was that contract grading was much less time consuming and stressful for me as an instructor. Because decisions are minimal (accept or revise, compared to thirteen levels of traditional evaluation), I could concentrate on aiding the students in revision and improvement instead of wrangling over numerical decisions. The extra time that I gained was spent on improving teaching strategies, interacting with students, and writing more detailed and useful suggestions on their papers.

In addition, the stack of student essays that awaited me at the end of the day was no longer a dreaded chore. Instead, I could look forward to enjoying my students' writing accomplishments, offering insight and assistance, and rediscovering what brought me to teaching in the first place. In this way, both my students and I profited from the adoption of contract grading.

This study not only helped me to improve the development of contract grading in my courses, it entirely changed my view of grading. I no longer see grades as necessary or desirable. In my opinion, the goal in classrooms should be learning and retention, not the acquisition of meaningless letters or numbers. I have realigned my own priorities in teaching, asking not, "What grade did this student earn?" but "What can I do to help this student improve his writing?"

This research on the accuracy and acceptance of contract grading has already convinced other faculty members to reconsider their own grading practices. Several instructors who attended the presentation sponsored by the Center for Teaching Excellence last spring later altered their own grading systems, reducing the amount of traditional grading and incorporating aspects of contract grading. A colleague recently requested copies from the presentation at the Peer Group Conference in order to distribute them to adjuncts struggling with grading issues. And the English faculty assessment committee at J. Sargeant Reynolds has expressed interest in exploring the benefits of contract grading.

Finally, since the course grade outcomes in contract grading do appear to match those of traditional grading, as this information is more widely disseminated, many faculty members may be persuaded to reconsider their current grading practices, and encouraged to investigate alternative systems. The impressive attendance at the contract grading presentation during the Peer Group Conference was not a testament to my abilities, but to the desperation of faculty members searching for a feasible alternative to traditional grading. Since research and theory suggest that traditional letter grades inhibit student learning and the development of writing skills, the incorporation of any alternative systems by faculty members will benefit not only the educators and the students, but the VCCS as well.

**Other Colleges:**

N/A

## **Discussion and Critique:**

The fact that alternative grading systems can yield the same final outcome as traditional systems should encourage educators to explore new options for grading in the future. The knowledge that advanced students initially reject contract grading may enable instructors to better prepare their explanation of this new system. It may further interest faculty members to learn that contract grading is not only accepted by most students, but that it also reduces grading stress for both the student and the instructor. The additional time savings should additionally intrigue educators.

As for the future, additional studies conducted by interested faculty members that compare other alternative systems to traditional grading might be enlightening, and might further advance the quality of instruction in the VCCS.

## **Evaluation:**

### METHODOLOGY

- 1) Nine classes containing a total of 188 students were studied over four semesters, from Summer 2007 to Summer 2008. The classes included three College Composition I and three College Composition II classes, Creative Writing I and II, American Literature I and an online College Composition II class.
- 2) For each student in the nine classes, a traditional letter grade was recorded for each major assignment, in addition to the accept / revise contract "grade."
- 3) At the end of each semester, the letter grades for the major assignments were averaged to obtain a final traditional grade for each student, which was then compared to the final contract grade, and any discrepancy was noted.
- 4) In addition, at the end of the semester most students completed surveys to assess their perceptions of and attitudes towards contract grading. The questions concerned their overall reactions, whether they found it to be more or less stressful, and the extent to which contract grading's emphasis on revision improved their learning and their writing abilities.
- 5) Student attitudinal ratings were compared to their final grades for the course to determine if a correlation existed between the students' ability and performance (e.g. "A" v. "C" students) and their perceptions of and attitudes towards contract grading. Written comments were also examined in order to develop instructional methods to facilitate student acceptance of this alternative grading system.

### RESULTS

#### The Accuracy of Contract Grading

Out of 188 students, thirty of the final grades awarded using the contract grading system differed slightly from those that would have been awarded in a traditional holistic system. However, eleven of the thirty received a C rather than an A or B because they did not elect to complete an additional essay in order to receive the higher grade.

The contract grades for the other nineteen were all within 3.8 points of the traditional grade that they would have received (e.g. 76.7%, or C, for the holistic grade, and 80%, or B, for the contract grade).

- Seven of the nineteen showed a final average between 89.1 and 89.7% in the contract grading system. They received A's. In a traditional system they may have received B's.
- Four of the nineteen showed a final average between 87.5 and 88.5% in the contract grading system. They also received A's.
- Five of the nineteen showed a final average between 77.2 and 78.2%. They received B's. In a traditional system they may have received C's.
- One of the nineteen showed a final average of 67.75%. This student received a C. In a traditional system he may have received a D.
- One of the nineteen showed a final average of 59.7%. This student received a D. In a traditional system he may have received an F.

While there was variance in these nineteen grades, it was minimal, less than one-half of a letter grade in all cases. Many of these grades might have been rounded up to a higher grade depending upon the individual instructor. In addition, in the traditionally graded system, the early, possibly lower scores earned by the students were averaged in with the later, hopefully higher scores. This could account for some of the variance. When these factors are taken into consideration, contract grading appears to be impressively accurate.

#### Students' Acceptance of Contract Grading

A survey was distributed on the last day of class, and 120 of the 188 students responded to the following questions: 1) What did you think of contract grading? 2) Did it cause you less stress because there were no grades on your papers, or more stress because you didn't know what to expect? and 3) Do you think having to revise assignments helped you to learn better writing skills, or was it just an annoyance?

In answer to the question, "What do you think of contract grading?"

- 82 students reported that they liked it.
- 13 students were not sure, or did not respond to the question.
- 25 students hated it.

In answer to the question, "Did it cause you less stress because there were no grades on your papers, or more stress because you didn't know what to expect?"

- 75 students said it was less stressful.

In answer to the question, "Do you think having to revise assignments helped you to learn better writing skills, or was it just an annoyance?"

- 70 students reported that it helped them to revise.

The following are quotes from the students who responded positively:

- o It gives you the opportunity to redo your work. Honestly, it did help my writing skills.
- o Revising taught me some grammatical mistakes I have been making for awhile.
- o I didn't stress out seeing what grade was on the paper.
- o It was easy to understand.
- o It focused on improving our work instead of just pumping it out.
- o It was laid back feeling ...a comfortable place to write.
- o I enjoyed its merits, especially since most of the top law schools have implemented similar grading methods.

It is interesting to note that all of the 25 students who hated the contract grading system were A or B+ level students. 23 of them said the system caused them more stress.

The following are some quotes from the students who hated the system:

- o To me it caused more stress.
- o I didn't know what to expect as a final grade.
- o It is unfair to A or B students because they are not graded on performance, only on an additional paper.
- o I miss seeing an A on my paper.
- o Hate it! I don't know how well I'm actually writing.

The first semester the contract grading system was used, more than 80% of the higher achieving students despised the system. In response to some of the reactions listed above, in subsequent semesters I more thoroughly explained contract grading, and pointed out that the early results of this study indicated that it was both fair and accurate. I also reassured the high achievers along the way, and discussed their performance with them if they were concerned. These semesters showed a much higher level of acceptance by the A level students.

A note about these results: Because not every student attended on the final day of class, not all the students completed the survey. In addition, some students that did complete the survey did not answer some of the questions. As a result, it is possible that even more students found contract grading to be less stressful and more beneficial.

## STATISTICS

In the original proposal, it was stated that an independent reader would assess a sample of essays to determine whether the reader's grades would approximate the traditional grades given to the students' assignments during the course of the study.

However, since one of the reasons for using contract grading is that grading composition is so subjective, it is unlikely that this approach would have proven anything but that the independent reader and I differed in our grading practices or opinions. It would not have shed light upon whether contract grades yield the same outcome as traditional grades.

Instead, I compared my grades from previous semesters, when traditional grading was used, to the contract grades given in the study. In order to form a more accurate comparison, only 111 and 112 classes were included. Here are the results.

(SEE TABLE 1, SENT IN AN EMAIL ATTACHMENT)

- 1) The difference between the number of A's and B's awarded appears to be minimal.
- 2) A much higher incidence of C's resulted during the contract grading semesters. These most likely were a consequence of students who chose not to complete an additional assignment to earn an A or B, and therefore received a C.
- 3) The incidence of D's and F's were substantially lower using contract grading. One explanation for this could be that the type of courses and the semesters in which the courses were taught varied from the traditional grading to the contract grading portion of the study.

For example, when I used traditional grading, all the courses I taught were at the John Tyler Chester campus. The student population there, in my experience, often yields lower overall grades than the Midlothian campus.

During the semesters using traditional grading, I taught five 111 classes, three of them in the fall. Using contract grading, I only taught two 111 classes, and no classes of any kind in the fall. Most instructors would agree that the Fall 111 classes have a significantly higher number of students who fail.

In addition, for the traditional grading semesters, I only taught one summer class. During contract grading, I taught three, one of which was an online class. The summer semester ordinarily includes a large influx of more dedicated students, many from four year colleges, and thus there are fewer low grades. In addition, online courses tend to quickly weed out the less able students, again resulting in fewer low grades.

The combination of these factors could account for the disparity in D's and F's.

- 4) Examining the grades given by other instructors at John Tyler over the same time period shows that the percentage of lower grades given in my classes is not out of the ordinary. From Fall 2005 to Summer 2008, D's and F's awarded by other instructors at John Tyler varied from 3.5 to 11% for D's, averaging

6.0%, and F's varied from 4.2 to 19.5%, averaging 8.9%. The D grades from my courses for that time period averaged 8.6%, and the F's, 9.4%. The disparity is not so great when averaged over a longer period of time.

5) The higher incidence of D's and F's may be coincidental, a factor of the particular makeup of the classes during those semesters. With so many variables in place for any class during any given semester, it is very hard to know.

There are doubtless weaknesses in the scientific validity of this study. The subjectivity of grading and the many variables involved in comparing different assignments, classes, and semesters makes a grading system difficult to study and report mathematically. Instructors routinely deal with a large number of factors when considering a final grade, from a student's attendance and participation to their effort and attitude, and not all of these factors are measurable. The final grade is a product of each instructor's individual instinct and sensibility, and obtaining true statistical accuracy does not seem possible.

However, I do not think that any weaknesses in this attempted control group verification invalidate the success of contract grading when it is examined student by student, comparing the traditional grades that would have been received to the contract grades that were received, as practiced in the original stage of this study.

#### **Dissemination:**

In Spring of 2008, I presented the initial findings from this study at a workshop sponsored by the Mid-Atlantic Center for Teaching Excellence, titled "Evaluating Student Texts," This workshop was held both at John Tyler Community College and J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College.

In October 2008, I presented findings from the completed study at the Peer Group Meeting in Richmond to VCCS English faculty members, with at least sixty attendees.

I plan to further research the use of contract grading in other disciplines, and apply to present this information, in addition to the findings from this study, at the AHSS Faculty & Research Symposium at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College in April, 2009.

I also plan to submit this information to Inquiry: The Journal of the Virginia Community Colleges.