**Grading Contract[[1]](#footnote-1)\***

As composition theorist Peter Elbow has written in a number of places (see especially his “Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking”[[2]](#footnote-2)\*\*), grades are a surprisingly crude way of measuring or producing learning: they reduce complex phenomena to a single letter or number, and thus obscure the differences between, say, proofreading skills and ability to support an argument. Some teachers might try to get around this by assigning percentages of their grades to particular skill-sets, but I find I can’t know, in advance, what any one of you will need to work on: I want to be free to give more targeted feedback, and set more targeted goals, than any pre-set percentage allows me to do. As I see it, each of you is here to become better than yourself, not better than anyone else. Grades distract from that, and distract from the particular reactions and suggestions that can help you improve.

So to shift our attention away from grading – and therefore toward thoughtful assessment – I’m going to do several things. First, I’ll put the put the bulk of your final grade into process and participation: *concrete, observable behaviors*, not subjective judgments of quality. No matter where you start out, this playing field is level. Second, for each major unit of the course, we’ll work as a class to develop the *baseline criteria* needed to demonstrate competency (not necessarily excellence) in that unit. **If you participate consistently at this minimum level, I’ll guarantee that your minimum grade for the course is a B.** Your grade can go up from there for excellent work, toward which we’ll set flexible and optional *aspirational criteria* within each unit – one of which will always be trying something new or risky, even if it doesn’t pay off.

Lastly, I’ll keep the final tally of those criteria open *until the end of the semester*, as measured in a final portfolio. My goal is to help you develop competencies for which it may take several failures to reach success, and I don’t want to penalize you by over-weighting an early project for lacking some skill you attained later on.

I hope you take this as an opportunity to explore, to experiment, and to trust that you will learn something in the process: even if you try a new move and fail, you can (in the words of Samuel Beckett) "fail better" next time, without being penalized.

***Please initial each item to signal you've read it, and sign at the very end.*** Students who have not turned in a signed contract by the end of the fourth class may not remain in the course.

**To earn a B for this course, you must:**

1. Engage actively during every class period, and use class time productively. Everyone has an off day from time to time, but for nearly every class meeting, to the best of your ability, your brain should be working for the full 75 minutes. This means you must also be consistently prepared for class: read, annotate, and bring any required readings, and bring your notebook and whatever drafts, files, or research you'll need. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_
2. Participate actively during every workshop, and push yourself to provide your class- and group-mates with consistently thorough, thoughtful, helpful feedback. You should help your group-mates to become better composers throughout the course. Taking their work seriously enough to think hard about how it can be improved is crucial for your success, and theirs, in this course. Note that this is not just about praise or criticism: ask questions, make connections, explore possibilities. Open space for them to do or say more. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_
3. Work with your group-mates to complete group assignments and exercises, to the satisfaction of everyone in the group. Divide group assignments and time fairly, and complete, on time, all the work you take on. Note that this also means demanding satisfaction *from* your group mates: if one of you is slacking off, the whole group suffers. Let that person know. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_
4. For every assignment, produce a substantial, thoughtful product that follows the guidelines in the prompt – including deadlines. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_
5. Complete all assigned readings attentively enough that you could provide examples of key concepts; you may wish to mark up the readings or take notes as you go. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_
6. Participate in discussion of baseline criteria for each major project, so that you are confident you can meet those criteria in the time allotted. Then make sure you meet them. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_
7. Use the feedback provided by your instructor and your classmates to improve your projects. You don't have to make every change suggested, of course, because your work is yours, and after all, audiences will sometimes disagree. But you must take all feedback seriously, and your drafts (or reflections; see next bullet) should show evidence that you’ve carefully considered your respondents’ suggestions: if a reader is confused or has an objection, don't ignore it, but instead try to clear up the confusion or incorporate and respond to the objection. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_
8. When turning in revisions (as well as for any earlier draft on which it feels appropriate to you), attach a brief note reflecting on what in particular you were trying to achieve in that draft. e.g., Were there particular comments you were responding to? A layout or genre feature you were trying to emulate? You can also use this note to acknowledge suggestions you consciously decided not to take, explaining your reasons. (This may, in fact, help you to discover your reasons.) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_
9. Proofread final drafts to eliminate surface errors and typos to the best of your ability. Use your style guides (see the Resources page on the course website) and talk to classmates, me, or a Writing Center Consultant if you have questions. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_
10. Attend all scheduled conferences with me or your Writing Center Consultant (if applicable), and come prepared to use the conference time productively. **If I indicate in feedback that I would like you to schedule an appointment to talk with me, do so within the week.** A missed conference counts as 2/3 of an absence (see #13). \_\_\_\_\_\_\_
11. Avoid plagiarism by (a) taking careful notes to help you distinguish between your own ideas and language and those you have borrowed from sources; (b) being generous about attributing ideas and acknowledging those whose work has influenced your own, i.e. by attempting to cite all sources correctly, even in first drafts; (c) mastering citation conventions and citing all sources correctly in all final drafts; and (d) never attempting to disguise another’s work as your own, never purchasing someone else’s writing services online for course credit, and never engaging in any other act of academic dishonesty.

This is a collaborative class, in which we offer each other suggestions and constructive criticism. But we do so to clarify the expression of *original ideas* – never to substitute someone else's ideas for our own, or to impose our ideas on someone else. If you feel you’re making a Fair Use of someone else’s intellectual property, include a rationale for that use in the reflection that accompanies your drafts (see #8). \_\_\_\_\_\_\_

1. Show respect for your classmates and your instructor. This includes taking each others’ ideas seriously; using language that honors others’ racial, ethnic, religious, political, economic, sexual, and gender identifications or positions; and refraining from distracting behaviors, such as gossiping, reading the *Pitt News*, or using electronic devices for non-class-related activities. Ensure that your cell phone doesn't ring during class. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_
2. Be consistently on time for class, and be absent very rarely. Each missed class is equivalent to three “absence tokens,” and vice versa; coming late to class earns one absence token, and missing more than 20 minutes of class earns two absence tokens (though you're still always welcome to come in, quietly). Twelve absence tokens throughout the semester, nine during any one unit, or completely missing a peer review workshop is a major breach of contract (see next section). Having more than six absence-equivalents (¼ of the classes for the term) could be grounds for failure, given the hands-on nature of the course. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_
3. Submit a complete, revised portfolio that meets all outlined requirements by the due date. The portfolio for this class will consist of three major projects (featuring sound, image, and web design), at least one with revision history and a selection of feedback; a collaborative project to which you have contributed significantly; and a reflective introduction. Details to follow, closer to the deadline. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_

If you fulfill all of these expectations, you are guaranteed a grade of at least a B overall. I will do my best to keep you informed and afloat with regard to your successful participation. If you're ever in doubt about your contractual status, feel free to email me and/or drop by my office hours.

**Grades Below a B:**

If you break the contract, your contracted grade for the course will be lowered as follows:

* For minor breaches (e.g. missing or not bringing in a short homework exercise, missing less than one sixth of the baseline criteria, or persistently distracting groupmates from the task): in each Unit, I will permit you one “Mulligan” – one minor misstep that will not break the contract. But two minor breaches during any Unit will lower your minimum grade by ⅓ of a letter, i.e. to a B–; another breach in the same unit or two minor breaches during the next Unit, and your minimum grade will be lowered further to a C+, and so on. These lowered minimum grades can still be improved by an exceptionally strong portfolio. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* For major breaches (e.g. turning in nothing for a major deadline, failing to participate in peer review, or failing to acknowledge direct revision-suggestions in all subsequent drafts and reflections): no Mulligans; your minimum grade will immediately be lowered to a B– after the first major breach, C+ after the second, and so on. These lowered grades can still be improved by an exceptionally strong portfolio. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* For the final portfolio: each day it is late, the minimum grade drops ⅔ of a letter. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* The attendance policy is outlined above, in item #13 (though see also #10). \_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* A minimum grade falling below a C-minus is grounds for failing the course. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Again, I will do my best to keep you informed and afloat with regard to behaviors that threaten to break the contract: my goal is to keep everyone engaged, active, and learning. If you are ever in doubt about your contractual status, feel free to send me an email or drop by my office hours.

**Grades Above a B:**

There are two ways to earn a grade above a B: by demonstrating Excellence and Quality in your final *products*, and by demonstrating ambition in your *process* by meeting aspirational criteria. The best portfolios will likely involve both. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_

While the former terms are, unavoidably, rather fuzzy, in my defense I can say only this: First, most grades in writing, even digital writing, are somewhat subjective – and at least by using the contract above I'm doing my best to limit and control the arbitrariness of such judgment. Second, I promise to do my very best to articulate, in particular instances, what I think would most help the piece in question achieve Excellence and Quality. One of the characteristics of such work is that it tends to stand out as its own self, original and often surprising, and it is therefore far harder to give guidance in general terms.

The aspirational criteria we will develop collaboratively as a class, with some new goals for each unit, as they should vary with the genres and tools at hand. *To earn a grade above a B for ambitious process, you must make the case in your project reflections (or final-portfolio reflection) for how you have met the aspirational criteria.* \_\_\_\_\_\_\_

If your work is trending towards a better-than-B portfolio, I will do my best to let you know where you've leveled up over that line, so you can try to recapture and consolidate whatever was working so well. (Don't worry, I'll keep giving suggestions for where you can improve, as well, because I believe that even the best of us can.)

Once more, should you ever find yourself in doubt about your contractual status – whether your work is satisfactory for a B, unsatisfactory for a B, or excelling beyond the B-level, please feel free to send me an email, drop by my office hours, or even to set up a conference at a better time.

**Please sign below.**

**I, the undersigned, have read and understood the above contract to be the grading policy for Benjamin Miller’s section of Composing Digital Media.**

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date

name (in your most legible print)

signature

1. \* This grading contract, including some of the language, has been adapted from Danielewicz, Jane and Peter Elbow. "A Unilateral Grading Contract to Improve Learning and Teaching." *College Composition and Communication* 61.2 (December 2009): 244-268, as well as the online appendix to that article (see their note 1); and from Reilly, Colleen A., and Anthony T. Atkins. “Rewarding Risk: Designing Aspirational Assessment Processes for Digital Writing Projects.” *Digital Writing: Assessment and Evaluation*, edited by Heidi McKee and Dànielle Nicole DeVoss, Computers and Composition Digital Press, 2013, http://ccdigitalpress.org/dwae/04\_reilly.html. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. \*\* Elbow, Peter. “Ranking, Evaluating, and Liking: Sorting out Three Forms of Judgment.” *College English* 55.2 (1993): 187-206. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)