
Reframing Grading, Rethinking Rigor

ABSTRACT The author describes and presents her model of contract grading, a teaching strategy and practice that shifts student learning and pedagogy away from carceral and colonialist learning methods. The article provides a brief explanation of the value of this technique for teachers and students, and offers concrete assessment tools. **KEYWORDS** abolition, contract grading, pedagogy

Curatorial Statement

I have recently made the transition from nine years teaching at Salem State University, a regional comprehensive university and the most racially diverse public university in Massachusetts, to Dartmouth College. At Salem State, I have successfully used contract grading in my courses, and it is a key part of my pedagogy. Contract grading, also called “specifications grading,”¹ is an approach to grading that moves away from conventional forms of assessment that assign letter grades based on an arbitrary conception of merit and toward student ownership of their learning.

In the most basic form—which I have successfully been using since 2016—students are provided with a list (or contract) of what they must complete in a course to receive an A, B, C, and so forth. Students are then able to choose the grade they want to receive in the course by deciding which categories of activities they wish to complete. All assessments are graded on a “complete” or “incomplete” basis. In my use of contract grading, I walk students through exemplars of assignments so they can understand what is expected of them for “completion.” Students also have the opportunity for a revision of an assignment on which they received an “incomplete.” All assignments are tied to course objectives, so I do not assess students on anything I have not explicitly taught them.

In my teaching, I have seen nothing but benefits from contract grading. Rather than spending time deliberating on how to assign letter grades, I can focus entirely on giving students feedback. Contract grading also (with coaxing) urges students to shift their thinking away from letter grades and toward the content of their learning. Among the affordances that Linda Nilson identifies for this approach to grading are maintaining high

1. Linda Nilson, *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time* (Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2015).

standards, emphasizing student outcomes, motivating students to learn, giving students useful feedback, and saving faculty time.²

Using contract grading has, for me, been a way to move beyond carceral and colonialist pedagogical practices. Unlike student-centered approaches premised on extending faculty labor, it has lessened my labor by eliminating time spent on grading in favor of feedback. Rather than employing an assessment system that presumes a base level of “preparedness,” my approach to contract grading does not penalize students for not coming to class prepared to meet some arbitrary notion of “rigor.” Rather, it starts where they are and emphasizes identifying their areas of strength, allowing both my students and me to put our efforts toward their areas for growth. It also creates space for students to experiment and take risks that they may not otherwise with the threat of a “bad grade” hanging over them.

While reviewing the academic policies at Dartmouth, I began to wonder how my approach to assessment would fit with the culture of grading at the college. This is an environment in which the “standards” for letter grades are laid out and in which some conventional notion of “rigor” is promoted through practices such as putting the average of all grades in a specific course *on the transcript* and by allowing faculty to issue commendations for exceptional merit that appear on the transcript as well. How could I adapt my approach to teaching to work within this culture without sacrificing my own values as an instructor?

Here, I share the evaluation criteria that I have designed, with explanatory annotations. By sharing this, I aim to demonstrate that even in environments where instructors may not have latitude to embrace an approach such as contract grading, it’s possible to adapt a grading policy to fit one’s pedagogical goals.

A syllabus excerpt follows. In the footnotes, the author provides additional comments and reflections on several aspects of her course design and intentions.

Evaluation Criteria

I will provide rubrics³ for all assignments, and you will be asked to submit a self-assessment using the rubric for each assignment.⁴ I will take your self-assessment into account when assigning grades.

The rubrics will be based on the following evaluation criteria, as appropriate to the assignment: (1) originality, (2) creativity, (3) analysis, (4) synthesis, (5) oral critical expression, (6) written critical expression, and (7) independence.⁵ Feedback on your

2. Nilson, *Specifications Grading*, 129–131.

3. While I generally find rubrics to be insufficient for capturing learning, it’s clear that I need to be able to document student progress. However, by using rubrics for self-assessment, I’m able to meet my goal of student ownership over their learning.

4. In place of the choice of activities in contract grading, I emphasize self-assessment as the basis of all grading in the course to push students toward greater agency in their own learning.

5. These are assessment criteria stated in Dartmouth policies.

assignments from me will identify your strengths and your areas for growth based on these seven criteria (as applicable to the assignment). We will have the opportunity to discuss these at our individual conference.⁶

Grades on individual assignments will reflect a ratio of strengths to growth areas (based on the evaluation criteria above), with “plus” or “minus” indicating slightly higher or lower performance. They correspond to the schema below:

Grade	Description	Ratio of Strengths to Growth Areas ⁷
A	Distinguished Performance	Strengths: 6 Growth Areas: 1
B	Highly Effective Performance	Strengths: 5 Growth Areas: 2
C	Fully Successful Performance	Strengths: 4 Growth Areas: 3
D	Partially Successful Performance	Strengths: 3 Growth Areas: 4
E	Minimally Successful Performance	Strengths: 2 or fewer Growth Areas: 5 or more

Computation of Final Grades

Final grades will be calculated using the assignment group weights below. Please note that I have provided a range because I take a strengths-based approach to grading. During our individual conference, we will discuss your strengths and areas for growth, you will be able to set the weight for each assignment group, and we will discuss how to strengthen your areas for growth. If you wish, you may change the assignment weight once more, prior to submission of your final project and reflection.⁸ Assignment weights cannot be changed after submission of the final project and reflection. In instances where you show an upward trajectory of growth that is not reflected in the average grades in each assignment group, I reserve the right to adjust your final grade upward to recognize that growth.⁹

6. Rather than framing assessment as meeting an arbitrary standard, the emphasis on “strengths” and “growth areas” acknowledges that we all have aspects of our work in which we excel and ones where we might concentrate our efforts for leveling up our knowledge.

7. By situating grades as a ratio of strengths to growth areas, this grading system acknowledges that it’s unrealistic to excel in every area we wish to master—and that room for improvement is not only an expected but also a welcome outcome.

8. By opting for a grading range, rather than predetermined set of assignment weights, this evaluation system empowers students to assess where they would like to place their effort and/or to place greater weight on their areas of strength.

9. In my experience with contract grading combined with self-assessment, students often assess their work more punitively than I do. As a result, I always reserve the right to give them a higher grade than they would give themselves. No one ever complains about getting a higher grade.

Assignment Group	Weight Range
Class Questions	10-15%
Leading Discussion	10-15%
Digital Project Review Presentation	10-15%
Autoethnography	15-20%
Final Project	25-30%
Final Presentation	10-15%
Final Reflection	20-25%

Assignment Revision

One revision will be accepted for the autoethnography assignment only. The grade on the revision will replace the original grade.¹⁰

10. All assignments that can feasibly be revised (i.e., not presentations or a final project) are eligible for revision. In this example, there is only one such assignment.