

# The Anti-Racist Classroom

## THINKING ABOUT ASSESSMENT: CONTRACT GRADING

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## What is assessment?

As an instructor of record, one of your dubious duties is assessment. Assessment refers to the technologies and practices that you, as an instructor, use to evaluate and grade student writing.

## What are the difficulties?

Deciding how to assess student writing can be fraught. Because our students come from a variety of backgrounds, overly-standardized assessment can be brutally unfair to students and can fail to evaluate student writing (student learning) effectively.

If your assessment technique does not permit for a range of student expression, it risks reifying a dominant grammar (usually Standard American English) over other grammars.

How does requiring students to use SAE reinforce racist educational structures?

Read more:

Young, Vershawn Ashanti. "Nah, We Straight': An Argument Against Code Switching." JAC, vol. 29, no. 1/2, 2009, pp. 49-76.

## Questions to consider:

- How will you measure learning when students are entering your class with different education experiences?
- How do you account for different Englishes within your classroom?
- How will your assessment take into account linguistic or expressive differences among your students?

## Assessment option: contract grading

There are many ways to address assessment equity in your class. One option is contract grading. In this assessment model, students and teachers agree that a certain amount of work completed and submitted within certain parameters (e.g. completeness, timeliness) will produce a corresponding grade.

### Pros:

- De-centers teacher authority from assessment. Even the most well-intentioned instructors carry with them biases and blindspots which can be harmful to students.
- Allows instructors to be equitable. Every student signs the same contract. Beyond that, each student is evaluated according to their learning (instead of their existing educational privilege!).

### Cons:

- Some students actively want grades to be part of the feedback they receive throughout the semester.
- The range of student writing that receives a high grade can be confusing for other instructors or administrators trying to use data to evaluate a program.

# Approaches to contract grading

There are a wide variety of contract grading implementations. Choose what's right for you and your students!

- Some instructors like **Isabel Moreno-Lopez** negotiate individualized grading contracts with students at the beginning of the semester as part of a critical pedagogy that seeks to decenter instructor authority. Read more about her approach in her article: “Sharing Power with Students: The Critical Language Classroom.” *Radical Pedagogy*, vol. 7, no. 2, Fall 2005.
- **Peter Elbow and Jane Danielwicz** offer an even simpler approach to contract grading in which every student is given the same criteria to accomplish a "B" in the course. They still reserve "A" grades for work they deem high-quality, though they acknowledge the difficulty of judging "quality" impartially. They wrote it all down for you, too!: “A Unilateral Grading Contract to Improve Learning and Teaching.” *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 61, no. 2, 2009, p. 244.

**MORE READING!** This book (available online as a PDF) contains sample grading contracts to inspire your own assessment techniques!

Inoue, Asao B. *Labor-Based Grading Contracts: Building Equity and Inclusion in the Compassionate Writing Classroom*. The WAC Clearinghouse, 2019.