

Schedule

Week	Topics and Readings (Listed below are the out-of-class readings. Omitted are shorter in-class readings, usually examples from different genres.)	Writing Assignments (Assignments are presented at some length in my chapter. In-class exercises are omitted.)
1-Phase 1	WR: "Rhetorical Situations, Ideal and Actual" Cain: Introduction (1-19)	1. Common topic, diverse texts 2. Your stake in this topic
2	WR: "Where Does Writing Come From?" Cain: Chapter 1 (19-33)	3. A class bibliography 4. Making our own data
3	WR: "Sources: Textual, Empirical, Experiential" Cain: Chapter 3 (71-96)	5. Presenting modest findings
4	WR: "Writing About Numbers" Cain: Chapter 7 (155-81)	6. Synthesizing data 7. Reader response
5	WR: "Writing About Reading" Cain: Chapter 10 (244-40), Conclusion (264-66)	8. Writer repurposing
6-Phase 2	WR: "Academic v. Popular, Scholars v. Journalists"	9. Extending a topic 10. Repurposing: Text to present
7	First 2 chapters of Assigned Book (see assignment 11)	11. Information for Decision 12. Choosing Topic B
8	WR: "Writing About Experience and Observation"	13. Once more to diversity 14. Academic to popular
9	WR: "Documenting Sources: Practices and Philosophies"	
10	WR: "Writing and Design"	15. Extending Topic B
11-Phase 3	WR: "Page and Screen"	
12	WR: "Elements of Style"	16. Your choice
13	WR: "Futures of Writing"	17. Repurposing once more
14-Phase 4	WR: "Making a Portfolio"	
15		18. Portfolio

## 4 A Grade-Less Writing Course That Focuses on Labor and Assessing

Asao B. Inoue

In this chapter, I argue that a productive way to design and teach a first-year writing course is to conceive of it as labor: to calculate course grades by labor completed and dispense almost completely with judgments of quality when producing course grades. This is my ideal writing course that would allow me to cultivate a more critical, democratic community. It shares responsibility and negotiates most of the work (as well as the terms by which that work is done) with students. Finally, it operates from an assumption about assessing writing (in all its forms) that allows students to democratically address difference and see acts of assessing as acts of reading, critical judgment, and writing. I hope to show how this kind of course can be just as rigorous and engaging as other courses that use quality judgments of student writing to grade students, and is perhaps more rigorous than courses that do not engage students more fully in the assessment technology of the course—that is, in the processes, products, discourses, expectations, judgments, and other structures that make up the assessment of student writing—the heart of any writing course.

A course like this is perhaps more responsive to diverse groups of students, students who come to our classrooms with various Englishes and who may have a wide variety of literacy competencies that may not match those the academy promotes. This course does not consider these other Englishes as signs of being "underprepared," "deficient," or "lacking." In fact, I believe that the academy needs courses like this to enlarge its boundaries and to do more than give students the "right to their own languages." Courses like this will allow the academy to incorporate more fully students' languages, create new ways of

thinking and communicating, expand its discourses, learn from and change because of its students, and change the destructive, white hegemony that has punished and shunned so many. My courses at Fresno State are filled with students of color. The majority are first generation, working-class Hmong American, Asian American, and Latino/a students who come with a variety of discourses and Englishes. Our first-year writing program uses a directed self-placement system, so my students choose their writing courses from essentially three options (Inoue, "Self-Assessment"). It is from this context that I offer my ideal first-year writing course.

Three questions organize and form the central, ongoing conversations of the course and identify tensions students and I continually explore. I use these questions to organize the course and this chapter. They are:

What is *labor* in our writing class?

How do we know how well we are doing if there are no *grades*?

What does *assessing* mean?

### WHAT IS LABOR?

When I say that the course is focused around "labor," I do not mean we will read texts about Marxist theory; although, I suppose that could happen. Instead, I mean that the writing and work of the course is conceived of as "labor," as opposed to being "work" or documents that are due. What's the difference? Work in a writing class can be thought of as items to turn in, documents to submit, and texts to read—this work can be easily thought of as things "of the mind" or tasks done at a desk that may seem purely intellectual. This can be off-putting to many students, who see intellectual activities as foreign, painful, or too difficult and mysterious for them to engage in, especially writing activities that may have been graded poorly in the past.

When I say "graded poorly," I mean this in three senses, all of which affect students' abilities to perform in the classroom and are the subject of class discussions. First, grading writing is hard to do well. Grading writing is often done in courses other than writing courses; thus, it is likely to be done poorly, since most teachers in other disciplines do not study the scholarship of writing assessment, composition theory, or response theory. While many of my colleagues in other disciplines respond to and evaluate student writing well, many students

still experience teachers who grade writing poorly, focus on error, do not respond to content or ideas, do not respond at all, evaluate first drafts as if they were final drafts, etc. Second, my students' written documents in school are often graded as poor writing. Students tell me this every semester, explaining almost unanimously that "they are not good readers or writers." Where else would they get these ideas about themselves? Third, my students' writing is often only graded, meaning that the only feedback they receive on their writing is a grade. To experience grading as the primary measure of how well one is developing as a writer is a poor way to understand one's writing and writing practices; it is a poor way to receive feedback.

Notice that all three of these "poor" ways of grading center on a document, a text written by a student. Typically, when teachers grade documents or provide feedback, we neglect the labor and effort that produced those documents. We may even emphasize that we do not, or cannot, evaluate or grade a paper based on "effort" or on how hard a student worked on it. I've said this myself in the past. However, this reason is a bit dishonest and not helpful to a student who not only works hard, but also works from an English that is not considered academic, or what we expect. In short, it ignores the student's labor and, in doing so, disrespects something fundamental about what the course asks of that student and how he or she experiences that work.

At a deeper level, the concept of "labor" is rarely thought of as work of the mind, and I want it to be. Labor is, of course, work and time put into something. It often signals the quantity of time and effort put into a project or an activity. I emphasize time the most in assignment instructions, as U.S. culture usually rewards and defines labor by the hour, and this paradigm of labor's rewards is familiar to my students (they usually work in labor economies). At some point, I want them to question this paradigm, question the idea that the rewards we get out of our labors correlate positively to the time and effort we put into them, that learning is a linear equation, and that more time spent on writing can always be apparent in the development and quality of drafts, or even writers. I do not think this is entirely true, but it is also not entirely false—it is more true than false. So, for the course's purposes, it is safe to say that writing well and producing effective documents take effort and time.

At an even deeper level still, the course's initial discussions use the concept of "labor" to describe and acknowledge the degree of effort ex-

pected in the class. When one labors hard, one is often in physical pain or discomfort. This means that just any labor will not do if our goal is to improve or build better practices. One cannot go through the motions in order to have time and effort produce good results. Labor is, by its nature, hard—dare I say “honest”—effort and work. So, labor is often uncomfortable and painful, but at some point, that discomfort gives way to pleasure in a job well done, in feelings of accomplishment, in satisfaction, success, pride, and growth. It signals the quality of work and effort put into something, and my students, many of whom come from families who are seasonal workers, laborers, or are folks whose family members do honorable, hard, sweaty work, understand and usually respect this kind of labor. The academy should, too. My students see—and feel—the value and honor in such labor, and I want to connect writing with that kind of hard, and sometimes painful and sweaty, doing of things, because it should be that kind of labor. The course engages students in discussions about working up a sweat and getting down to painful work that can and should hurt, much like exercising muscles and feeling pain, fatigue, and then soreness; but this labor makes us stronger and better in some way for doing it.

Finally, as a man, the concept of labor can have gender-bending qualities that are productive for my students and for me. If my students labor to birth essays, much like the labor of childbirth, then my role and the roles of my students are that of midwives. We help create the environment and conditions for successful laboring and creation, but we cannot create the writer's child, her essay. We can encourage, describe what is happening, ask questions, but mostly we watch and describe the labor process. Therefore, ongoing discussions, particularly around the reading of colleagues' writing and feedback, draw out the concept of child birthing. We are creating ideas and texts. We should take joy in them as part of us and also as creations that are separate from us. We should also enjoy and understand the process of creation. The process of laboring to give feedback (midwifery) should be as rewarding and painful, and as fundamental and necessary to our growth as writers and readers, as the process of writing itself.

The laboring I describe is a pattern of chronic or weekly labor that students and I design and engage in together. I, as the teacher, create the structure and categories of labor, but students and I develop what they mean and look like. Our labors could be any number of activities,

but the following ones are familiar, although my descriptions of them focus on laboring and time as their defining elements.

*Reading.* These activities occur between class sessions. In the beginning of the semester, I provide reading strategies that help students engage with the texts that either I or they choose. Later, students decide on their own strategies or invent them, and use the sources they have researched for their projects (See Project(ing), below). Every act of reading produces a posting on Blackboard (Bb), a list of items, a freewrite/quickwrite done during or after the reading, a focused paragraph response or summary, or an annotated passage from the reading. We define these activities, like all of the activities, in terms of the time spent on the activity and the kind of labor we expect to engage in. Instructions look and sound like process directions or procedures. We often talk about, reflect upon (see Reflecting, below), or debrief from these activities by discussing how it felt to read the texts, what we were thinking about in particular paragraphs, where folks got stuck, which parts were the most painful to get through and why, or what helped us do the work.

*Writing.* These activities happen at home, and produce documents that are used in class, in groups, or to begin discussions. Depending on what we agree upon or where we are in the semester, our writing activities invent, research, explore, draft, and revise students' semester-long projects. We decide together on the parameters of the labor to help students through writing processes, and much of the direction involves cues for timing (i.e., how much time to spend and what to do in each stage of laboring, how to do the labor, or how the labor should be focused). Again, the parameters look a lot like procedures. On average, we do one activity a week, and that activity may take a few hours to do, stretched over a few days. The emphasis is on writing as laboring, not as documents that are due with particular quality expectations—even though documents are produced and used in class and on Bb, and quality is discussed in class. The documents are simply the results of our labor. The bottom line is that discussions of quality are decoupled from grading and what the assignment is worth.

*Reflecting.* These are reading and writing activities done each week-end that are discussed in the first class session of the following week. Students read excerpts, and the class sometimes discusses them. Other

times we just listen. Reflecting is only used to show the good thinking and questioning happening in the class. At times, students respond to a prompt that asks them to do some metacognitive thinking (e.g., “What did you learn about ‘entering academic conversations’ from your group this week? How did it come to you? What rhetorical patterns did you find occurring in the most effective written feedback you received?”); at other times, students are free to reflect on anything that is on their minds, and that pertains to our class. This reflective labor is defined the same ways as are reading and writing labors. Students reflect in writing for a set period of time, usually twenty to thirty minutes, and then they spend twenty minutes or so reading others’ postings. Finally, they reply to at least three others with something substantive and meaningful.

*Assessing.* At around week six to eight, the writing groups move into full swing. Each week, students do the reading and writing labors (above) that work toward their projects (below). Assessment activities that I guide ask students to read and articulate judgments in a variety of ways. To guide assessing labors, there are two sets of collaboratively created expectations, or rubrics: (1) a set of project expectations (i.e., what they should demonstrate in a final draft of the project); and (2) labor expectations (i.e., what they should demonstrate in their labors in and out of class to produce the project). Most of the time, assessing means responding formatively, and the activities are structured so that all responses in a group are similar in format and focus, but are different in what they discuss. Students make no overt judgments of quality that sound final (e.g., “This is good,” “That is bad,” “I like X,” etc.); instead, they make what we call descriptive judgments that sound like observations (e.g., “This sentence is clear,” “I’m confused in paragraph four,” “The statement about Wilson feels judgmental,” etc.). These are still quality judgments. While these two kinds of judgments are similar, what I call “descriptive judgments” ask students to explain more, to support, and to reveal assumptions that create the judgment from reading the text in question, such as what constitutes a “clear” or “confusing” text. Following the descriptive judgments, students are asked to support their observations by pointing to their peer’s text, explaining why they see the text in that way, and identifying what assumptions they are making to get to the judgment. I ask them not to offer advice on how to revise anything, since writers must decide how to revise on their own after considering all assessments from their

peers. Telling someone what to do in a draft tends to prematurely stop the writer from reflecting on the meaning and value of a particular observation about that draft. I ask students to spend at least forty-five minutes to an hour on each assessment (including reading time). We have two mantras: (1) explain to the writer how you experienced his or her text, and why you experienced it in that way; and (2) remember that writers make decisions; they do not follow orders. Near the end of the semester, students write assessment letters to their group members, and their colleagues and I use these letters in final, one-on-one conferences. These letters address three evaluative questions, asking for evidence of each: (1) How would you describe your colleague as a learner and writer? (2) What did you learn from your colleague during this semester? (3) What do you think your colleague can still work on, learn, or continue to develop? I ask students to spend at least forty-five minutes to an hour writing each letter. Typically, each student writes three letters.

*Project(ing).* For students, these labors are the culmination of all their work in the course. Projects are often traditional-looking research papers, but sometimes students do YouTube video presentations, Web pages, reports, brochures, etc. All projects require the same amount of research and writing, since the course articulates expectations in terms of labor (time and intensity), not documents—that is, students must write and present that writing to their writing group each week, and that writing leads them to the finished product (the project), whatever it may be. Some may produce a twelve-page research paper, while others produce a five-minute video, or an eight-page brochure. In this environment, all labor in the class is the projection of the student’s chosen research topic/question, learning about writing, understanding and articulating of ideas, texts, and writing processes; and the enactment of his or her learning journey to exactly the place that he or she can achieve. My only limitation is that writers have an academic audience in mind and use academic sources to help them engage with their projects.

Most of the reading and writing activities, all of the prompts for the reflecting, and the instructions and processes for assessing and providing feedback in writing groups are contingent on what happens in the course, what students do and produce, and how they respond to previous work. Many class activities invent these assignments from patterns of need and from student reflections each week.

To illustrate the exact nature and amount of reading and writing in this course, consider a typical student, Maria Zepeda, from a recent course—a course I draw on throughout this chapter. (Both students cited in this chapter have given consent to use their names and their work). Maria is a Latina in her mid-twenties, who stated her project's research question as: "How are Mexicans portrayed in California media?" Her project was rhetorical and historical in nature, considering the history of immigration in California, the Bracero program during the 1940s to the 1960s, and contemporary news media's representations of Mexicans as laborers and immigrants in California. During the semester, her labor consisted of

- Researching and reading two academic journal articles, a documentary, two government documents, three academic sources from academic websites, and several news media clips on YouTube;
- Engaging in annotation and other reading activities using her researched sources;
- Drafting a three-page inquiry draft, a two-page annotated bibliography (using three sources), seven separate drafts (five of which were substantively different) of the paper for peer feedback, and a final draft of twelve, double-spaced pages;
- Providing peer feedback, through documents and dialogue a total of seven times for each of her three writing group members as well as for two external group members on a late draft (this incident is discussed below); and
- Writing several reflections on the parts of her project's process.

All of the above is in addition to weekly reflections and activities in and out of class that helped students understand elements of rhetoric or to think through their reading and writing practices. While we did not write labor journals, in an ideal course she would have done a labor journal where she would describe and reflect upon her reading and writing labors (discussed below).

How are labor expectations articulated? How do students know how much labor they must accomplish, and what that labor looks like on any given assignment? In the same course, after two weeks of activities, my students and I produced two rubrics: a project rubric explaining what they will demonstrate in proficient projects, and a writer's rubric explaining what they will do in order to produce those projects. The writer's rubric articulates each students' expected labor for activi-

ties related to the project in four areas: researching and reading, using rhetoric, laboring and showing effort, and giving and receiving feedback. Under the area of "labor and showing effort," students produced the following explanatory statements:

- Show through the writing that both time and effort were committed to the project;
- Produce work clearly and meaningfully (cut out filler information or repetitive parts);
- Submit all assignments on time; and
- Demonstrate interest in the chosen topic.

Arguably, these statements are just as vague as saying, "show labor and effort," but in on-going classroom discussions, activities, and reflections, we pointed out the good ways students had articulated and demonstrated these qualities. These statements of labor gained meaning contextually, and then changed. For instance, "interest" for some was seen in the way readers responded in writing to drafts, and then in the way they developed new ideas or new sources for writers through group dialogue. Early on, showing labor "through the writing" meant that effort in drafting produced very different drafts from one week to the next, with over half of the drafted material added or changed. Just a week or two later, several students identified drafts that got messier, uglier, or that "got all fucked up" as evidence of deep, sweaty, good labor. Most importantly, I did not encourage consensus on what appropriate labor should look like. Yes, the rubric was a guide for discussion and reflection, a focus point for us to reference, but I did not want a full consensus on its meaning. I wanted students to rearticulate and revise what productive labor looked like *in medias res* so that defining it would always be on the table, since labor was core to how their progress was conceived and because it needed continual redefining.

Some may question: Isn't this just another way of doing a 1970s-style, process-based writing course? Perhaps, at its face. I do argue for a process-style writing course, but given how assessment is configured in the course, it's not simply process. At a deeper, more significant level, defining the concept of "labor" as time, effort, intensity, and creation that describes the writing we do, how long we do it, the degree to which we suffer in it, and the products that come from it makes "labor" much more than simply process. In my ideal course, *writing is labor*—it is time and increased intensity. Time and intensity involve assessment and reflective practices that allow the writing to constantly evolve.

### HOW DO WE KNOW HOW WELL WE ARE DOING?

Questions of how course grades are decided, and the relationship of the quality of student writing to course grades, must be discussed carefully and often in a course like this one. Students need a clear sense of how well they are doing. Scholarship on grading is almost unanimous about the unreliability (inconsistency) and subjectivity (in the bad sense) of grades (Starch and Elliott; Bowman; Charnley; Dulek and Shelby; Elbow, "Taking Time"; and Tchudi), and just as much research shows how grades and other kinds of rewards and punishments demotivate and harm students, hampering their abilities to learn anything (Kohn, *Punished and Schools*; Elbow, "Ranking"; and Pulfrey, Buchs, and Butera). However, grades often work in concert with (or against) issues of language diversity and difference (e.g., class, gender, race, religious view, sexual orientation, ability, etc.). These very real and obvious differences show up in students' writing and in their feedback to each other, just as much as they do in a teacher's expectations and feedback. Knowing how well one is doing in a class is important, but as research suggests, letting a student know how well he or she is doing is not the same as giving grades or points. In fact, using grades based on judgments of quality (or comparisons to expected, dominant academic discourse) usually devalues the students' labor, and therefore devalues students' *writing* as experience.

The idea of writing as labor, while intuitive on some level, is not intuitive for many students when it is used to determine course grades or when helping students understand how well they are doing on a task or generally in the course. As Elbow has discussed in a similar way, most students are so conditioned to thinking in terms of documents, page counts, and grades that thinking in terms of labor, quantity, time, and how to do an activity can be disorienting and confusing without constant discussion in class ("Taking Time"; "Ranking").

For this reason, my ideal course starts by asking, "How well do grades explain our performances in writing?" This question is answered quickly, turning into a more productive question: "How do we know how well we are doing?" To answer this question, we look at examples of each assignment, talk about the signs of labor, time spent, effort, intensity, and difficulty that could be seen by length, how the text is put together, or what elements from other places and texts (preparation and research) were used to produce the text in front of us. It could be discussed at the sentence level, at places in the writing where the

writer gets tangled up, tries something that seems confusing, or opens up new ideas and questions things in the document.

To help us inquire about labor's time and intensity, we query writers in class, ask how they produced what we see, and build together labor practices that help students do the work of the course most effectively. These discussions may look at labor journals, weekly journals that document time spent on activities, and the level of intensity of that work. Each journal entry may: (1) document how much time was spent on an assignment; (2) describe the intensity of the work; or (3) reflect upon the writing produced by that session's time and intensity, connecting the labor to the expectations identified on the writer's rubric. In class, these journals give us ways to discuss how our particular kinds of labors and their contexts have consequences on the page or computer screen.

Most importantly, all effort and labor must be acceptable, as long as students continue to incorporate the practices of the course, improve and reflect meaningfully on their evolving labor, and listen to colleagues and to me when we ask them for more time or intensity in their work. So, discussing labor's effects is not about creating the linear and hierarchical equation, "more time and intensity equals better quality writing." Instead, I ask students to consider more time on and intensity in the labor of writing as an investment that produces different qualities in writing—lateral and non-hierarchical ones. There is no magic to getting students to do more work, no easy way to get them to spend more time or effort in writing, no creative assignment that produces labor-hungry students. I have found trusting students when they say they have done the work in the manner asked, and describing to them what I see as the effects of their labor in their written documents to be all I can and all I want to do.

If it is not already clear, this course uses a grading contract for a course grade of "B," similar to Peter Elbow's (see Elbow, "Taking Time"; Danielewicz and Elbow; and the Appendix). It articulates writing as labor, helping to begin discussions about grades, meaningful feedback, and how well one is doing in the course. The students and I negotiate the grading contract details in the ways that Shor explains his contract system, promoting a democratic culture in the classroom by providing students a way to help create the course (13-14). In another place, I've examined the ways that grading contracts at Fresno State help students of color, particularly Hmong students, who prefer

contracts over conventional grading systems more than all other racial formations (Inoue, "Grading Contracts"). In the same course, a female Hmong student, Amy Vang, offered this instructive response to a reflection activity that asked what she had learned so far in the course (it was about week thirteen in the semester):

This class is different. With this class I was able to write more freely because what is important in this class is the time and effort that we put into our project. I'm not a very good writer, so my biggest challenge at the beginning of the class was being afraid I wasn't going to meet the expectations of this class. I learned that when you're not judged by how good you can write, you're able to do more with your writing.

All the issues and themes I've discussed thus far show up in this excerpt. A focus on documents in Amy's past makes her feel like she is "not a very good writer." Her comparison is between our class and other courses that grade documents on quality, and she compares a class that allows Amy freedom to write (the current one) by acknowledging and valuing her labor and effort with other courses that do not allow her freedom because "time and effort" were not important in them, at least to the extent that they were not incorporated into the grading of those courses. Freedom, time, and effort are important elements in a writing course for Amy to "do more with [her] writing."

Seeing the contract graded class as one that offers "freedom to write" is a typical theme in end-of-semester, anonymous surveys by Hmong students in the first-year writing program (Inoue, "Grading Contracts" 88). No other racial formation articulates their courses in this way, and this is true for the course this student took. I cannot help but think of the well-known book of testimonies by Hmong refugees, *Hmong Means Free*, published in 1994 by Sucheng Chan. The book recounts several families fleeing oppression and massacre in Laos, and immigrating to the U.S. in 1976. Before coming to the U.S., the lack of freedom in the lives of Hmong punctuates their migration: They flee from the Yellow River Valley to the jungles of China, then to Indochina, and to northern Laos. Several groups have attempted to colonize them, including the Chinese, the French, and the Japanese. It appears that freedom to do anything—to live and prosper, let alone to write—is crucial to many Hmong's sense of well-being, learning, progress, and development.

Finally, I call your attention to the final sentence in the above reflection and its key adjective: "when you're not judged by how good you can write, you're able to do more with your writing." Though it may have been a verbal slip, the adjective "good," modifying the verb "write" in this case, typically modifies nouns. This linguistic slip (or is it?) suggests that using quality to judge how well a student is doing may not help him or her. However in this verbal slip, Amy teaches me something very important about this course and its assessment technology (i.e., the grading contract): Attention to quality, or how good one's documents are judged to be, in grading holds students like her back because judgments of quality restrict her—they keep her from being free, from doing, just as much as they restrict her writing and what she can/is able to say. Amy directly associates judgments of quality with a lack of freedom, and associates "time and effort" with the freedom to write and with the conditions that allow her "to do more" with her writing. Is this freedom a freedom of the mind, or of the body? Perhaps, to "write more freely" suggests a connection between how free our students really are to do the kind of laborious writing we ask and the things they feel they can or are able to say in that written act.

My past students' more positive feelings toward their grading contracts (Inoue, "Grading Contract") contrast with the student resistance that Spidell and Thelin document (40). The difference in racial formations that make up students at Fresno State with those of Spidell and Thelin's almost exclusively white student population explains many of the differences in students' acceptance of grading contracts. I also believe that asking students explicitly and continuously about how they know how well they are doing mitigates much resistance, as does the negotiated aspect of the grading contract. How well students are doing in the course and in their writing is a key factor of resistance in Spidell and Thelin's findings (40-42); yet, it's not a source of resistance in my classes. Spidell and Thelin's students suggest that they do not know how well they are doing in the class because they are accustomed to understanding their status in terms of a grade. This is not the case in my classes because we attend to this question explicitly and continuously. One could also argue that such differences in attitudes about grading contracts stem from fundamental differences in educational experiences with the grading of writing in previous, concurrent classrooms and between white students and students of color, who make up the majority of my students. Students of color do not

typically benefit from a grading technology that uses quality to determine grades because the measure of “good” quality usually conforms to a white, middle-class, academic discourse. Many working class and poor students of color do not enter college practicing such discourse.

#### WHAT DOES ASSESSING MEAN?

In the last, and perhaps most important element of my ideal course, the student and I jointly assess his or her work in conferences where we discuss grading and how we know how well we are doing. In the past, most students have been provided feedback that is attached to grades on their writing, but my course decouples grades from the assessment of writing. This is similar to what Elbow describes, but I take the assessment part further by making students the primary agents of assessment and by making it a defining process of the course (“Ranking” 196).

The driving engine in any writing course is its assessment mechanisms, its assessment technology (Inoue, “Technology”). I define assessment technologies as having seven components: power, parts, purposes, people, processes, products, and places. All writing assessments have these components, even if teachers and students do not pay much attention to or notice them. Put them together, and you have an assessment technology. In my course, students are a part of each element in the technology, and they discuss their roles in that technology. A big part of that technology is the grading contract that contextualizes all our work, but the contract really just sets up an environment that allows us to do the real work of assessment for the course. We spend time in weekly reflections thinking about our roles, duties, and work as readers, assessors, and as classroom citizens, each with a role in the course’s assessment technology, and in helping each other and ourselves understand how well we are doing. In other places, I discuss versions of this assessment-based pedagogy that focus on creating with students rubrics and assessment documents in cyclical, semester-long processes (Inoue, “Community-Based Assessment”) and ways to teach the rhetoric of assessment as the writing of the course (Inoue, “Teaching the Rhetoric”). What is important to understand in conceiving of the classroom environment as an assessment technology is that it reveals all the components of assessment that students and their labor need to be a part of, including: the design of activities, assessment

documents, codes and processes for assessing, power relationships created in and from assessments (and discussed when thinking about the construction of expertise), places of assessing, and the purposes of assessment activities.

To illustrate, consider a typical feedback session of a draft, one conducted in a writing group of four or five students. This is a typical activity in most writing courses—except, perhaps, that my students must be agents in the technology of feedback by creating a rubric that continually explains what those expectations mean, how they are seen in documents, and what labor is required to produce those results; owns the products of feedback (i.e., the written assessments to writers) and the processes that create and revise those products; negotiates power relations among one another through discussions of conflicting judgments by peers; and reflects on feedback activities, including how and why they came to the judgments they did on others’ drafts. To contextualize all this, nothing is graded, and I (the teacher) am not a voice in most feedback cycles. There is no anticipation of my judgments or of a grade that signifies completion, acceptance, or quality. They own most of the feedback.

As suggested in the previous Hmong student reflection, when grading systems based on judging and ranking the quality of writing are used in the classroom, teachers and students unwittingly become victims of larger societal structures like racism, sexism, and classism that use (often invisible) whiteness as the default yardstick by which to make judgments on student writing. Using quality as the calculus in determining course grades, or the value of any piece of writing, in a writing course means that some dominant discourse—usually a white, middle-class, academic one—is used to punish students for not being white, middle-class academics. Grades are the vehicle for this punishment, and grading, then, usually harms students of color more than their white counterparts. Really, grading harms everyone because grading writing by comparing it to some ideal, dominant, white, academic discourse means that we lose the ability to value any other discourse, regardless of what we say to the contrary. Subaltern and alternative discourses and perspectives are necessary to critically see the dominant one as such, and as contingent. In short, grading often is a racist project in the sense of being a “racial project” that promotes a racial hierarchy that upholds the status quo, as Omi and Winant define



it (55-56). This is also the status quo that writing teachers usually ask students to question in the name of being critical.

I'm not suggesting that I do not teach a white, middle-class academic discourse, or that our rubrics and expectations do not resemble that dominant discourse. They often do. I am saying that I try to teach that dominant discourse without using it as a cudgel to bludgeon students of color or other students because they are not white, middle-class academics. Rethinking grading practices and how assessment functions is the first step in this process, because it is through our assessment technologies that we promote, critique, or change those expectations and discourses. Our responses to each other may make judgments that compare a dominant discourse to what is presented in a student's writing, but if judgments of quality are not used to produce grades, and if grading is calculated by labor only (not quality), then writing assessment is not so easily made a racist project in the classroom. Hierarchies are less likely to be established in such a case because aspects of students' subjectivities, like their histories, cultures, and languages—things they have little control over—are not made a part of their graded success in the class.

Furthermore, learning something and being judged against some ideal of that something are completely different things. The first does not mean that we need to engage in the second, at least not initially. In fact, I find that my class's labors can be more rigorous and more engaging, especially when everyone (including me) stops trying to compare student documents to ideal documents, or those we think that a writer should strive to meet. When we stop trying to "correct" problems (from errors, to logic, to matters of content and convention), we free ourselves to better engage with the writer and his or her labor of writing and meaning-making. We can also begin on better footing in order to see dominant discourse as a set of conventions and behaviors, and compare those with those we use natively. That is, students can engage in more critical reading and judging because they are not using a false yardstick to judge themselves and their colleagues as deficient. This better honors the languages that students come into my classroom with. Reading to correct, or reading to compare to an ideal text in our heads, always means that readers (peers and myself) never really *read* each other as intellectuals, never respect the labor and effort that goes into drafting even a messy draft, never engage well with the writer as a thinker, never engage well with his or her ideas, and

certainly never critique the very discourse the writer is attempting to learn and perhaps change. What happens is that we read to look for deficits, not for differences.

Don't get me wrong: We always have ideal texts in our heads, and Richard Haswell's discussion of "prototype" and "exemplar" categorization strategies (246-47) used by writing placement readers can be instructive in designing activities and discussions that examine ideal texts assumed in student and teacher feedback. I'm simply saying that when labor is the goal, and not a particular kind of document, and when grades are decoupled from feedback, then ideal texts do not have to be the yardstick by which completion, success, or failure of an assignment is determined. Ideal texts cease to produce deficit and lack in students' labors and texts because they are no longer the ideal—there is no ideal, just difference. Beyond this, everyone has their own, idiosyncratic ideal text in mind when they read. Even if we believe we should judge students' writing to produce grades or a written evaluation of a student text, the ideal text we judge against is not static or the same across individuals; it is ideal texts that need to be a part of discussions of feedback.

Furthermore, many less experienced writers have difficulty making decisions once they receive contradictory feedback that is inevitably produced from peers. The default is always to listen to the teacher—the teacher gives the grade, and the teacher likely knows the yardstick (the ideal) better than anyone else. In short, the teacher's feedback and ideal text matters the most, but not in my course, since the teacher isn't grading and does not usually give feedback, giving students more agency and power in assessment. In conventional courses, difference created through discordant, peer judgments on a text are never really discussed or deployed to critique the dominant discourse or ideal texts of readers, such as the teacher's ideal text.

In my course, critique is more likely to happen, because dissonant feedback by peers is more clearly an opportunity to inquire about the ways each reader may have good cause to judge in the ways he or she has. Discussions in writing groups are not just about how successful readers feel a draft is, but about readers' assumptions that lead them to judgments. Perhaps there is a finer point here that is difficult to see: A judgment about a student text in my course is not an evaluation of it, at least not in the strictest sense of the term. Students in the course *assess*, but they do not *evaluate*. Assessing and evaluating are meaningful

because of their purposes, and since students determine purposes in my ideal course, evaluation does not function as it usually does. Conventional evaluation is not only linked to grading, but is defined by purposes that are dictated by a teacher. Usually, the purpose is clear: How good does your writing look? For my class, assessing demands that judgments are qualified and explained as contingent on a particular reader's perspective and values. That is why it is important to explain the assumptions that lead to judgments, and not to rationalize why a writer has not met a "standard" or has written something "bad" or "good." Assessment, then, is about establishing a dialogue over a text. Stephen Tchudi's description of the four levels of assessing (i.e., responding, assessing, evaluating, and grading) are helpful to me in explaining these reading activities (xii-xiii). He explains that institutional pressure increases as readers move away from responding to a text and toward other categories, with grading having the most institutional pressure. He says that the "degree of freedom" is reduced because codified value criteria become filters for judgments, limiting direction and movement of what a reader can say (xii). The bottom line is that assessing, in my course, is an inquiry into the grounds on which texts are judged and judgments are made, and are also a way to compare more fairly subaltern discourses and perspectives to the dominant one.

Through revisions and reflections, the assessments we do attempt to understand the ways that the dominant discourse, as a set of reading and writing practices and behaviors, is different from and similar to our own. This starts with how quality is understood and used—not used, or misused—for grades and for valuing writing. By not grading, the white, middle-class, academic discourse can be more safely and openly critiqued and challenged by students and me through the democratic processes of reading, judging, and feedback.

### THREE ASSUMPTIONS I STOPPED BELIEVING

Before I can even dream of a course like this one, I must give up some assumptions that may address criticisms. First, I stopped believing that grades are a good motivator for doing writing in a class; research on grades and motivation consistently tells us otherwise (Benware and Deci; Butler; Butler and Nisan; Grolnick and Ryan; Harter and Guzman; Hughes, Sullivan, and Mosley; Kage; Salili et al.). In fact, using grades to motivate or provide any kind of feedback is harm-

ful to students and their learning. Students may not know this, and likely have been tricked by the system into believing that grades help accurately identify something about their writing. In my course, students must confront this fact about grading and consider what alternatives might motivate them to do work. My hope is that the assessment processes and their own insights will motivate students to do work. Ultimately, only students can motivate themselves to do anything. They will do only what they are willing and able to do, only what they see as worth doing, and nothing more, but often much less if we (teachers) give them reason to. Grades are a good reason to do as little as possible in a writing class. Extra credit is more reason to do less.

Second, I started realizing that most students come to us with discourses worth studying and learning from, not ignoring or punishing. So, I stopped believing that my academic discourse held all the secrets to creativity, insight, critical thinking, explanation, and communication. My students' discourses are not signs of deficiency. They are signs of difference from us, from the academic ways we (academics) are accustomed to and come to expect of our students. Most of the time, my students do not speak my brand of the English language, just as I do not speak theirs. Since I am in power, speak the brand of English that is in power, and am institutionally sanctioned to make judgments on their written discourse, it is my responsibility to share that power, not to abuse it. I am responsible for finding ways to bring my students into the decision-making processes of the course, especially ones that determine the value and valuing of their literacies, and them as learners and people. This means that I cannot make all the decisions about what to expect in writing and from acts of writing in the class. My students should articulate with me the kind of discourse(s) worth journeying towards in the class, and how those journeys may look. It also means that I must help them see what they are really asking for when they reproduce dominant, academic discursive expectations (or when they do not).

Third and finally, I started believing that students can be motivated by learning itself, by the doing of writing as an activity worth engaging in because it intrinsically offers something to everyone. The documents and assignments by themselves are not worth doing, but the doing of those documents is worth quite a bit. Not all my students realize this, but more do than one would expect. We are all animals that use language to do all that we do, to define ourselves, to reflect

upon our work and lives, and to be and show who we are. When we cheapen the writing in our classes by bribing students with grades and extra credit, we tell them implicitly that the work we are asking of them is not worth doing on its own merits and that it needs a grade attached to it to be worth engaging in. When teachers are the only readers and judges in the assessment technology of a course, it sends other messages to students: Your judgments are not worth much. You don't know anything. You cannot offer anything meaningful to others. Your languages are irrelevant to our work. These are exactly the wrong messages to send, since their opposites are truer.

Grades are also a threat. They suggest, "If you don't do this writing, I'm gonna give you an 'F'" and "If you don't do it the way I want you to, then I'll mark you down." I refuse to threaten or bribe my students, but more importantly, I do not believe threats or bribes work to help students become better writers (however one wishes to define "better"), nor are they good motivators. Instead, I prefer to focus my energy on finding with them ways to make the labors of the class worth doing. It is harder work, but it is more rewarding. I learn more from my students in the process. They gain power in the construction of the class and in their labors, and they see the respect I give them by how I listen and respond and in how the class is run. In a recent course, many students used a reflection activity to criticize the drafting and revising process in their writing groups that they had been doing for several weeks.

"We cannot say anything else to the writers. We've seen their drafts so many times already," one student said.

"It all looks fine at this point," another told me. "Can we do something else?"

"What would you like to do instead?" I asked.

"Can we have others in the class read our papers?"

While a seemingly obvious and simple solution, I had not thought of it because I had not seen the problem from their perspectives. I was focused on constructing different ways for their groups to read and respond to each other; I had not considered that after three drafts, readers may have great difficulty saying anything new or significant to writers, regardless of the method of response. Additionally, that same day, a student came to me and asked that somehow we focus on criticizing drafts in feedback, and not just on explaining our reading experiences of drafts. Our instructions reflected these two ideas: feedback

to non-group members and discussing only criticisms (i.e., Elbovian, doubting-game stuff). Their feedback to writers outside their groups ended up being some of the most insightful and engaging feedback all semester.

My students discuss these three sets of assumptions about grades and the labor of assessing writing in the class with me—not all at once, but over the semester. I do not show them the research, but I do tell them about it. I do not threaten, tease, or belittle them for not seeing these issues the way I do (it has taken me quite a while to understand them in this way), but I do ask them for faith in the class, faith in this system, and faith in me. I ask them to go along with the course for a semester. I tell them that the more faith they have, the better they will do.

### CLOSING WORDS ABOUT WORKLOAD AND SUCCESS

Finally, the workload for the course is about the same as a conventionally run writing course, though perhaps a bit more. The nature of the work is, however, very different. Since I only read the writing, and do not grade or even respond to most of it, weekly work goes smoothly and quickly. Most weeks, a class of twenty-five or thirty students would take around three to four hours of reading, since I'm only looking for patterns of issues and examples to use in class discussions. During the weekend, reading reflections may take another hour or so; but, again, I am only looking for examples to show in class. The amount of work for students is demanding and relentless. Many students express concern in the middle of the semester about writing and other assignments due every week and every weekend, but few drop the course (maybe one a semester—maybe), and I rarely have students who do not meet the labor requirements of the course. Those who drop typically do so in the first week or two of class—on average this is one or two students. I think students stay in the class, despite its demanding labor, because they feel valued more in this environment, and because they would rather feel valued than do less work.

In end-of-semester course evaluations, over 60% of my students consistently say that they loved the grading contract. When asked what their attitudes were about grading before our class and after, the vast majority (over 90%, usually only one or two register a concern) say that they liked the contract and preferred it for our class. What is typically at issue for those who find trouble with the contract is the

extra work involved in getting an "A" for the class, since so much work is already asked of them. Interestingly, my grade distributions are not different from those in other English classes at Fresno State or in the College of Arts and Humanities. In the course discussed in this chapter, of the twenty-five students in the course, five received A's, eighteen received B's, one received a C, and one dropped the course midway through. That's typical.

Ultimately, I believe that writing courses, more than any other college courses, make an argument to students about their worth and their value as agents in society, in the institution, and in the classroom. How we argue their worth and value happens through how we value their labor—first and foremost—because the bottom line is this: No matter how we create a course, we always ask students to labor, to do work, and to take time and effort. There is no education any other way. Asking students to labor in a writing course, and then judging that labor on its quality, is not just unfair and dishonest—it can be racist. We know that students come to us from very different educational systems that do not equally prepare them. We know that we judge the quality of writing in most writing courses by a white, middle-class standard, one not native to poor, the working classes, or many students of color. We know that our students have no control over any of these factors in their lives, and yet we still say that judging writing quality, particularly for a course grade, is fair. My ideal course says that it is not fair, nor does it help students learn better reading and writing practices. My students deserve better.

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## Appendix 1: Course Syllabus

### FIRST-YEAR ENGLISH

California State University, Fresno  
Professor: Dr. Asao B. Inoue

#### Required Texts/Readings

- A good grammar handbook.
- Reserve about \$25-\$30 for copying throughout the semester. Instead of a textbook, there will be handouts, articles, and other texts that you'll be required to print and bring to class.

#### Description

Welcome to First-Year English, a writing course designed to fulfill the writing skills requirement for graduation. This course's readings and in-class discussions will involve the study of *rhetoric*, or the art of speaking/writing well, or the art of finding the available means of persuasion, or the practice of being a citizen (in ancient Greek and Roman cultures, but it equally applies to contemporary U.S. society). Our discussions about rhetoric and writing will help us design, investigate, draft, and revise individual projects. In the first few weeks of the semester, we'll design a good portion of the course (about 50%-75% of it), deciding on goals, methods, a major reading, and ground rules for conduct and behavior in our class. We'll also do lots of reading together, discuss rhetoric, and begin building some vocabulary for talking about our reading and writing practices. We'll do lots of writing.

By sometime around week 6, you'll decide on an academic inquiry that interests you (and perhaps that you think will benefit your colleagues in class). This inquiry may focus on the practices of language used in a community, say the language practices in Biology, or in your church, or some other group/community that you belong to (or seek to enter). Your inquiry might take on some other language-related topic that benefits in some way your peers in this class. Another way to think about this project is that it is one in which you ask a question about rhetoric, or about the language/literacy practices of a particular community. This course requires a lot from each student and asks that you also help your colleagues in a number of ways. Doing both of

these things ensures your success in class. Not doing one of them puts your success at risk.

**IMPORTANT:** By staying in this class and posting your work on Blackboard, you agree to allow me to use your written work for research purposes only in my own scholarly work in writing studies. Before any uses of your work, I will attempt to contact you, and I will *never* use your work for demeaning or derogatory purposes. All work will be used without identifying information associated to it (i.e., anonymously or with pseudonyms attached). If you do not wish me to use your work, please let me know before the end of the semester. At any time, you may ask me not to use your work in my research.

### Course Outcomes

Upon successful completion of this course, each student will produce:

- All assignment descriptions and expectations, which consist of the labor required, the products that that labor produces, how colleagues will read, judge, and produce feedback and assessments of the labor and the products of each assignment;
- An acceptable project that focuses on a question about rhetoric that is of interest to the writer, demonstrates a clear and appropriate purpose (audience benefit) for investigating the topic for the audience chosen, demonstrates a clear understanding of the main issues involved in the topic, and uses integrally appropriate academic research from the library (typically around 6–7 academic sources);
- Weekly reflections and activities that demonstrate an adequate understanding of all assigned readings, concepts, and issues, turned in on time and in the manner asked;
- Frequent colleague assessments (usually posted on Bb in document form) that apply the concepts and practices covered in the class and improve in effectiveness over the course of the semester;
- An acceptable end of semester letter of reflection that demonstrates a learner, reader, and writer who can assess his/her practices and applies the rhetorical concepts to his/her learning journey (in the course).

### Course Policies

In order to do well in this class, you should:

- Take full and active responsibility for your participation, writing, input in discussions, and progress in this course;
- Give courtesy and respect to everyone;
- Help colleagues in the fullest ways possible, which also means taking very seriously peer response and peer assessment activities;
- Participate daily in all in-class activities and conversations;
- Come to class each day and stay abreast of all assignments' criteria and follow them (see "Attendance" section below);
- Complete/Do all assignments as directed and in the spirit they are asked of you.

If you think you will have trouble complying with an assignment's criteria or any of the policies above, please talk to me in class, email, or call me (leave a voice mail) ASAP, and well before any due date. This does not guarantee an extension or changes, but advance notice helps us make better plans for your success.

### Attendance

As explained in our course grading contract, every absence after four will constitute a loss of a full letter grade for this course (see also the "Course Grade" section below). Please double-check your schedules and other activities this semester. If you cannot meet this requirement, you simply will not do well in this course.

### Plagiarism

Remember to always quote and cite your sources appropriately, even if they are unpublished or from friends or classmates. An unacknowledged paraphrase, a patchwork from several sources, as well as the submission of someone else's work (published or not), all constitute plagiarism in the eyes of the university and a failure of this course. Please ask questions if you're ever unsure BEFORE you turn in work. Ignorance IS NOT an acceptable excuse. The University's language on plagiarism and academic honesty is:

[A]cademic integrity is defined as "a commitment, even in the face of adversity, to five fundamental values: honesty, trust, fairness, respect, and responsibility. From these values flow principles of behavior that enable academic communities to translate ideals to action" . . . All members of the university

community are responsible for adhering to high standards of academic integrity, for actively ensuring that others uphold the Code, and for responding assertively to violations . . . Faculty are responsible for informing students of academic behaviors that are permissible and not permissible and for reporting violations of the code to the proper campus authorities . . . Students shall not give or receive unauthorized aid on examinations or other course work that is to be used by the instructor as the basis of grading. (CSU, Fresno Academic Policy Manual)

You may access a complete statement from: <http://www.csufresno.edu/studentaffairs/general/univhonor.shtml>.

### Disabilities

In all my preparations and planning, I strive to provide an encouraging and dynamic learning environment for all my students and as wide a variety of learning styles as I can. However, there may be better ways I can accommodate those who have special learning needs. Please see me immediately when and if you have trouble fully participating or engaging in the class's activities and work. Additionally, all reasonable accommodations will be available for students who have a documented disability verified through the university. For more information on the University's policy regarding services for students with disabilities see: [http://www.csufresno.edu/ssd/fac\\_staff/fac\\_staff\\_responsibilities.shtml](http://www.csufresno.edu/ssd/fac_staff/fac_staff_responsibilities.shtml).

### Course Grade

Your overall course grade is calculated using a grading contract (see the Grading Contract for specifics). If you do all that the contract asks, you will receive the appointed grade. We'll also have a final conference, in which we discuss your work, the final letter of reflection on your work, and your colleagues' assessments of your work. In the final conference, we will decide together how well you met the contract requirements.

**IMPORTANT:** We'll discuss and revise the grading contract during the first two weeks of class.

**You MUST attend and participate in at least 87.5% of the class sessions** (you may miss four class sessions without it affecting your course grade) and participate in a final conference with me (during finals week) in order for you to pass this course. Five absences means an automatic "C" course grade.

### Work of the Course

We will construct more detailed information on each assignment. The descriptions below are to give you a clear idea of how much work is expected of you, the general expectations from which we'll start, and the structure of work in the course.

**In-Class Activities, Daily Work, and Participation:** Most in-class work will be unannounced and deal with that day's readings or homework. We'll do individual freewrites, more structured writing, out-of-class assignments, group activities, and class discussion. When we read something together, part of your preparation for each class session will be to come with at least three questions and/or explorative ideas that help us discuss and think about the day's readings. Furthermore, you will also be asked to help define and create in-class activities and assignments. If you come in late to class or unprepared, you will not be allowed to make up any work missed. Often our in-class work leads up to or prepares us for the other work. *Save everything*.

I assess all in-class work the same. You may earn full credit (i.e., you've done the assignment according to its expectations), or no credit (i.e., you haven't met the expectations of the assignment).

**Weekly Reflections / Labor Journals** (total of around 14): By each Saturday you'll post on our Internet bulletin board (Blackboard) a reflection based on a prompt I'll provide for you. Each reflection should be about 1 page if it were printed (usually around 200–300 words). These will help us rethink our practices, ideas, and readings, revise our work, ask questions to each other, voice confusion or excitement, and theorize as a community of writers/scholars. You are required also to read and reply to at least 3 of your colleagues' postings each week in some meaningful and substantive way. These are crucial to our work in this course. We'll usually begin class each week by reading and discussing a few of these. Some weeks I'll also ask you to accompany your reflections with a labor journal entry. These entries are separate

from the reflection prompts and ask you to write about three things concerning another writing activity you did that week. Each entry will: (1) document how much time was spent on the assignment, (2) describe the intensity of the work, and (3) reflect upon how effective the activity's time and intensity was. Labor journal entries offer us ways to see, consider, and craft better labor so that we can improve our reading and writing practices.

We'll assess these documents the same way we do the in-class activities (#1 above). You get full or no credit for each reflection/labor journal entry.

**Responses/Assessments (total of around 8 formal and numerous less formal ones):** You'll respond to and assess various parts and drafts of colleagues' projects, as well as assess the learning journey of your colleagues and yourself at the end of the course. We'll discuss the guidelines for each of these responses/assessments in class. Some will be formal, structured, written responses or assessments, a few less formal. Each may have a different goal or focus, so expect to create guidelines for each response/assessment.

At the end of the semester, you'll also write a letter to each writing group member (and me) that discusses that colleague as a learner, reader, and writer. This letter, which we'll use in your colleague's end of semester conference with me, will include:

- A description of your colleague as a learner, quoting or citing his/her own letter, any document produced by your colleague, or any details you recall from exchanges, class discussion, or group work.
- A discussion of what you think you learned from your colleague, either in class generally, in reflections, in projects, group work, or responses to your work.
- A discussion of the areas of learning and development that you think your colleague could still work on and improve, or that she/he hasn't yet figured out.

The responses and assessments will be assessed much like in-class work and homework. You may earn full credit (i.e., you've done the response/assessment according to its expectations), or no credit (i.e., you haven't met expectations).

**Projects (total of 1 or 2):** You'll do one project during the semester in order to fulfill the grading contract for a "B." You may do a second special project in order to be considered for an "A" grade; however, just completing project 2 does not guarantee an "A." The same amount of labor is required for project 1 and project 2. Each project could be a traditional research paper, or something more creative (e.g., Web site, a report, a conference presentation for an academic organization, a YouTube video with a written component, etc.). Your second project could be a related empirical study, ethnographic study, or something that helps answer a question revealed in your first project. It could translate significantly project 1 for another purpose and another audience, but would need to add material, or significantly re-analyze the information in new ways. Project 2 may also be a reflective-rhetorical project that looks closely at some question that came up for you when you wrote and revised your project 1. Regardless of what form project 1 culminates in, all project 1s must meet the following criteria:

- Incorporate at least 4 appropriate academic sources and document their use appropriately;
- Focus on a single, significant problem or inquiry that has importance to the academic community of our class (and perhaps others in the larger Fresno community);
- Have a significant written component, which amounts to 8–10 pages in length, or 2,400–3,000 words (or other appropriate length to be determined in special cases).

Project 2 is special, and the exact guidelines will be determined based on what you choose to do, if you choose to do a project 2 (you do not have to). If you do, generally speaking, you'll be expected to produce a project that is approximately the same in labor and depth as project 1 (8–10 pages, with 4 sources, 1 question, etc.).

I'll provide responses to your projects throughout the process of drafting and revising. I will not, however, assess each draft or portion. Your colleagues will provide most of your feedback, but I will shape their feedback. I will read everything and use drafts and activities to form activities for the class.

**End of Semester Reflection Letter:** You'll write a letter (about 1–2 pages, or 300–600 words) to me and your colleagues in class that discusses what you've learned throughout the entire semester. This letter



will reflect upon your learning journey, the specifics, the readings, and the assignments, and assess your learning in the project(s), how much you've figured out, questions you've come to learn to ask now, and the development you see in your thinking and writing. Your letter should discuss the following things:

A description of yourself as a learner, both in the class generally and as a writer, quoting or citing from your own work in the class. You may ask: What was your journey from start to finish in the course like? How would you describe it? What are the main milestones or benchmarks of learning you passed?

A discussion of the areas of learning and development that you think you could still work on or improve, or that you haven't figured out yet. We all have places to improve upon, so it is not a weakness to say that you don't know things or that you are still confused about how to do something. In fact, it's normal and expected.

In your final conference with me, you'll read this letter to me, and we'll use it to help us understand what you've learned and how well you've performed in the class, according to our contract. If you do not do this assignment, you cannot pass this course.

### Course Schedule

Our course schedule may change as the semester develops. Below is a first draft that should give you a good blueprint of what to expect.

Developing the Course and Our Interests	
Week 1	Reading: TBA Introductions, syllabus, grading contract, curriculum.
Week 2	Reading: from Peter Elbow's <i>Writing Without Teachers</i> (chapters 4 and 5) Curriculum; what do we wish to accomplish and how do we wish to accomplish it? What responsibilities will be taken on? Labor: New version of the grading contract; assignment description for weekly reflections (how will we do them and what will we expect of each other in labor and products?).

Week 3	Reading: <i>Kairos</i> handout (mine): Stasis handout (mine) What's the relationship between thought and language? What is <i>kairos</i> and how can we use it in our reading of artifacts? What is <i>Stasis</i> theory and might it help us read texts? Create inquiry draft assignment. Labor: Example of text/artifact in which you see <i>kairos</i> . Assignment description for Inquiry draft.
Week 4	Reading: TBA What are logical appeals/proofs ( <i>logos</i> )? How can they help us read a text? Labor: <i>Logos</i> handout. Group <i>logos</i> handouts (revised from group work). Assignment description for annotated bibliography and proposal assignments.
Week 5	Reading: TBA What are ethical appeals/proofs ( <i>ethos</i> )? How can they help us read a text? Labor: Inquiry draft (1–2 pages) posted on Bb by Sun, at 9:00 AM. <i>Ethos</i> handout. Group <i>ethos</i> handouts.
Week 6	Research Projects Reading: Sample academic essay from your project; colleagues' annotated bibliographies. What are pathetic appeals/proofs ( <i>pathos</i> )? How can they help us read texts? Start creation of project rubric (expectations of documents) and writer's rubric (expectations of labor in writing). Labor: Annotated Bibliography #1 posted on Bb by class session on Monday. Annotated sample academic essay (from projects) for rubric building activity.
Week 7	Reading: Colleagues' project proposals. Project proposal feedback and assessment: rubric creation and begin testing rubrics. Labor: Project proposal posted on Bb by class session on Monday; formal assessment of group members' proposals posted by class session on Wednesday.
Week 8	Reading: Colleagues' drafts: sample academic article (from your project). Midterm conferences: what is judgment for a reader and how do we express it to writers? Finish testing rubrics. What goes into a literature review or a background section? Labor: 3–4 pages of background or literature review section of draft on Bb by Saturday at 1 PM. Assessments documents (feedback) due posted on Bb as a reply by class session. Annotated sample academic article (just background or literature review section).

Week 9	Reading: Colleagues' drafts; sample background sections from project drafts. Midterm course feedback; assessment of projects. Look again at the grading contract (how is it working?). How are we writing our background sections and literature reviews? Labor: Half-draft of project 1 posted on Bb by Saturday at 1 PM. Assessments documents (feedback) due posted on Bb as a reply by class session.
Week 10	Reading: Colleagues' drafts. Labor: Draft 1 of Research Project posted on Bb by class session on Monday; formal assessments of research projects posted on Bb by class session on Wednesday.
Week 11	Reading: Colleagues' drafts of project 1 and 2. Labor: (optional) Project 2 inquiry draft/proposal with bibliography due posted on Bb by class session on Mon.
Week 12	Reading: TBA
Week 13	Reading: Colleagues' drafts. Labor: Draft 2 of Research Project 1 posted on Bb by class session on Monday. If doing a Project 2, post on Bb by class session on Monday.
Week 14	Reading: TBA.
Week 15	Reading: TBA
Week 16	Reading: TBA Labor: post letter of reflection on Bb by class session on Monday; (optional) post project 2 final draft on Bb by class session on Wednesday.
Finals Week	Final letters of assessment of colleagues due by Tue, at 5:00 PM on Bb. Final on Wed, at 5:45-7:45 PM. Finish final conferences with me (30 mins.) this week.

## Appendix 2: Our Grading Contract for First-Year Writing

Dear Class:

In most learning situations in life outside of school, grades are never given. The learning that occurs in Kung Fu dojos, or cooking, dance, or yoga studios do not use any grading. Why? In these "studio" cases, it

seems meaningless to give students grades, and yet without any grades, those students get better at yoga, dance, and cooking. These studio learning situations should prompt us to ask some questions: Why are grades meaningless in those settings but seem so important in a school setting? How do grades affect learning in classrooms? What social dynamics does the presence of grades create? In both situations, instructors provide students/participants with evaluative feedback from time to time, pointing out where, say, they've done well and where the instructor suggests improvement. In the studio situation, many students help each other, even rely on each other for feedback.

Using conventional grading structures to compute course grades often leads students to think more about their grades than about their writing; to worry more about pleasing a teacher or fooling one than about figuring out what they really want to learn, or how they want to communicate something to someone for some purpose. Additionally, conventional grading may cause some students to be reluctant to take risks with their writing or ideas. It doesn't allow someone to fail at writing, which is important to do at times. For these reasons, I use a contract for grading in our class.

This contract is based on a simple principle and a few important assumptions, which are not typical in most classrooms. First, the principle: how much *labor* you do is more important to your learning and growth as a reader and writer than the quality of your writing. Our grading contract calculates grades by how much *labor* you do and the manner you do it in. The more you work, the better your grade—no matter what folks think of the product of your labor—but we assume that you'll be striving in your labors to improve, learn, and take risks. The other important assumption that this principle depends upon for success is that we must assume that all students will try their hardest, work their hardest, and not deceive anyone, when it comes to their labor. If we ask for an hour of writing at home, and someone says they did that and produced X, then we must believe them. This is a culture of trust. We must trust one another and know that deception and lying hurts mostly the liar and his/her learning and growth.

So if you're looking to game the system and do the least amount of work to get the highest possible course grade, this is NOT the class for you. You'll only be frustrated, even angry. Things will seem unfair at times. But if you wish to learn and improve yourself as a writer and reader, are willing to do a lot of work to reach those goals, accept the

idea that your labor will be rewarded and not the quality of your work (although we will discuss quality and it is important to your success, but not important to your course grade), then this is the class for you.

Finally, taking grades out of the class, I hope, will allow you freedom to take risks and really work hard. Do not be afraid to take risks in your writing and work. Failing or missing the mark is healthy for learners. Good, deep, important learning often happens because of failure—so it's really not failure at all. Failure really only happens in our class when you do not do the work, or do not labor in the ways we ask of you. Most importantly, what looks like failure in writing can show us our weaknesses, misunderstandings, and opportunities for growing and changing. Furthermore, since I won't grade anything, this allows you the chance to rely more authentically on your colleagues and your own assessment and revision advice. This will help you build strategies of self-assessment that function apart from a teacher's approval. I want you to learn to listen carefully to colleagues' differing judgments, assess the worth of those judgments for your work and its purposes, express why one idea is more workable and better than others, and most importantly, make informed, careful decisions in your writing that you can explain to others.

**The default grade, then, for the course is a "B."** In a nutshell, if you do all that is asked of you in the manner and spirit it is asked, if you work through the processes we establish and the work we assign ourselves during the semester, then you'll get a "B." If you miss class, turn in assignments late, or forget to do assignments, etc., your grade will be lower.

### "B" Grades

You are guaranteed a course grade of "B" if you meet all of the following conditions. Please note that in each item below, there are questions that I cannot decide alone, particularly questions of definition. The results/conclusions of our discussions will be put into this contract in the places below.

**Attendance/Participation.** You agree to attend and fully participate in at least 87.5% of our scheduled class sessions and their activities and assignments, which means you may miss (for whatever reason) 4 class sessions. For our class, attendance should equate to participation, so

we need to figure out together what "participation" means and when does someone not get credit for it?

**NOTE:** Assignments not turned in because of an absence, either ones assigned on the schedule or ones assigned on earlier days in class, will be late, missed, or ignored (depending on when you turn them in finally, see the guidelines #4, #5, and #6 below).

Any absence due to a university-sponsored group activity (e.g., sporting event, band, etc.) will not count against you, as stipulated by university policy, as long as the student has **FIRST** provided written documentation in the first 2 weeks of the semester of all absences. This same policy applies to students who have mandatory military-related absences (e.g., deployment, work, duty, etc.). Again, the student must provide written documentation, stating the days he/she will be absent. This will allow us to determine how he/she will meet assignments and our contract, despite being absent.

**Lateness.** You each agree to come on time or early to class. Five minutes past our start time is considered late. Walking into class late a few times in a semester is understandable, but when does lateness become a problem (for the class as a whole and/or for the individual)? As a rule of thumb, coming in late 4 or more times in a semester will constitute an absence.

**Sharing and Collaboration.** You agree to work cooperatively and collegially in groups. This may be the easiest of all our course expectations to figure out, but we should have some discussions on what we expect from each other.

**Late Assignments.** You will turn in properly and on time all essays, assessments, evaluations, portfolio evaluations, reflections, and other assignments. Because your colleagues in class depend on you to get your work done on time so that they can do theirs on time, all late assignments are just as bad as missed assignments. However, depending on what we agree to in the first week or two of the semester, you may turn in a late assignment or two (see the "Breakdown" table below). In order for an assignment to be considered a "late assignment," it **STILL** must be turned in, at least 2 days (48 hours) after its initial due date, and it should be complete and meet all the assignment's requirements (e.g., if an essay was due on Friday, Sept 20 at noon,

a late essay must be turned in by noon on Sunday, Sept 22). Please note that a late assignment may be due on a day when our class is not scheduled to meet.

**Missed Assignments.** A missed assignment is NOT one not turned in; it is one that has missed the guidelines for a late assignment somehow but is still complete and turned in at some point in the semester (e.g., after the 48 hours). Most missed assignments are those turned in after the 48 hour late turn in period (see #4 above). In order to meet our contract for a “B” grade, you cannot have any “missed assignments.” Please note that assignments *not turned in at all* are considered “Ignored Assignments” (see #6 below). A missed assignment is usually one turned in after the 48 hour “late” assignment deadline.

**Ignored Assignments.** Any assignments not done period, or “ignored,” for whatever reasons, are put in this category. One of these in the grade book means an automatic “D.” Two acquired gives you an “F.” Additionally, if any of the essays or portfolios become ignored assignments, it constitutes an automatic failure of the course.

**All work and writing needs to meet the following conditions:**

**Complete and On Time.** You agree to turn in on time and in the appropriate manner complete essays, writing, or assessments that meet all of our agreed upon expectations. (See #4 above for details on late assignments). This means that assignments are not just done but done in the spirit and manner asked. They must meet the expectations given in class or on handouts.

**Revisions.** When the job is to revise your thinking and work, you will reshape, extend, complicate, or substantially clarify your ideas—or relate your ideas to new things. You won’t just correct, edit, or touch up. Revisions must somehow respond to or consider seriously your colleagues’ (or teacher’s) assessments in order to be revisions.

**Copy Editing.** When the job is for the final publication of a draft, your work must be well copy edited—that is, free from most mistakes in spelling and grammar. It’s fine to get help in copy editing. (Copy editing doesn’t count on drafts before the final draft or portfolio.)

## “A” Grades

All grades in this course depend upon how much *labor* you do. If you do all that is asked of you in manner and spirit asked, and meet the guidelines in this contract, specifically the “Break-Down” section at the end of this contract, then you get a “B” course grade. Grades of “A,” however, depend on doing advanced projects for both project 1 and 2, which equates to about twice the work or length of the final project documents. Thus you earn a B if you put in good time and effort, do all the work, and do both projects in an acceptable fashion. But you earn an “A” if you do more work in the two projects—that is, do more in-depth projects (described on the project handout and in the syllabus).

While you do not have to worry about anyone’s judgments or standards of excellence to meet the grading contract, you are obligated to listen carefully to and address your colleagues’ and my concerns in all your work of the class. This means that when you receive feedback you’ll use that feedback to help you continually improve your writing. So while others’ judgments of your work are not important to your course grade, they are important to your learning and development.

## 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, not turn in things on time, turn in sloppy or rushed work, or show up without assignments. This much is nonnegotiable: you are not eligible for a grade of “B” unless you have attended at least 86% of the class sessions (see also #1 above) and met the guidelines above. And you can’t just turn in all the late work at the end of the semester. If you are missing classes and get behind in work, please stay in touch with me about your chances of passing the course.

## Break-Down

Below is a table that shows the main components that affect your successful compliance with our contract

Grade	# of Absences	# of Late Assigns.	# of Missed Assigns.	# of Ignored Assigns
A	4 or less	3	0	0
B	4 or less	3	0	0

Grade	# of Absences	of Late Assigns.	# of Missed Assigns.	# of Ignored Assigns
C	5	4	1	0
D	6	5	2	1
F	7	6 or more	2	2 or more

Plea. I (Asao), as the administrator of our contract, will decide in consultation with the student whether a plea is warranted in any case. The student must come to the teacher (Asao Inoue) as soon as possible, usually before the student is unable to meet the contract (before breaching the contract), in order that he/she and the teacher can make fair and equitable arrangements, ones that will be fair and equitable to all in the class and still meet the university's regulations on attendance, conduct, and workload in classes. You may use a plea for any reason, but only once in the semester. Please keep in mind that the contract is a public, social contract, one agreed upon through group discussion and negotiation, so my job is to make sure that whatever agreement we come to about a plea will not be unfair to others in class. The plea is NOT an "out clause" for anyone who happens to not fulfill the contract in some way; it is for rare and unusual circumstances out of the control of the student.

By staying in this course and attending class, you accept this contract and agree to abide by it. I also agree to abide by the contract, and administer it fairly and equitably (Asao).

Sincerely,  
Asao Inoue

## 5 A Guiding Question, Some Primary Research, and a Dash of Rhetorical Awareness

*Paula Mathien*

### NOT A HYPOTHETICAL EXERCISE . . .

John Trimbur once remarked that a single-course composition requirement is like an only child: too many hopes and dreams get pinned in one place. I find John's comment doubly relevant to my life, as a parent to one child and the director of a one-course composition program. On many days, I can nod my head in agreement with his assertion that with just one writing course, we inevitably try doing too much with too little. On other days, I marvel at the fun and challenge that comes from nurturing just one thing: to make that writing course, or her, the best it or she can be.

I smiled, then, when the editors of this collection sent the following question my way: "If you had the opportunity to teach a semester-long section of first-year composition at your university, and if you knew that course was the only first-year composition course the students in your class would take, what would you include in the course, and why?" I not only have the opportunity to teach such a course every year, but I also direct a writing program with dozens of full-time, part-time, and graduate instructors who teach a one-semester composition course—the only required university writing course. In this article, I discuss the specifics of some of the first-year writing courses I have taught in this setting, followed by how I structure the goals of the writing program to maintain coherence and individual pedagogical