On Portfolio and Contract Grading

So, yes, let's talk about grades, since we all know that at the end of the day—that is, by the end of the semester—each of you will be getting one, and I will have to sit down and decide what it's going to be.

The good news (at least for me) is that we won't have to think much about grades before then. That's because, though I will always respond fully to your work, I won't be putting any grades on your writing—until you submit your final portfolio. I've settled on this grade-free policy not only because I dislike grading (which I do) but also because I'm convinced that the more we can push grades to the back of our minds the better we will function as a group of writers, the better I will be able to help and guide you as you take on new writing challenges, and the more you will ultimately develop as a writer.

Peter Elbow—the guru of free-writing—hands out a letter to his students each year in which he invites them to:

"Imagine that this weren't an official course for credit, but instead that you had all seen my advertisement in the paper and were freely coming to my home studio for a class in painting or cooking or computers (and paying me directly.) We would have classes or workshops or lessons, but there would be no official grading. Of course I'd give you evaluative feedback…pointing out the good things you do and the places where I see problems. And I'd give you suggestions for improving your work. But I wouldn't put grades on your individual paintings or omelets or give you an official grade for the course."

He then points out, "Notice how different the evaluative situation would be from what we have in this course—where many of you are *not* here by choice and I am obliged to give an official University grade." And he concludes, "But I believe that the home-studio situation is more conducive to learning."

The portfolio approach:

Well, I agree. When I grade every piece of your writing, I know I am inviting you to write while looking over your shoulder to see how you are doing in relation to others. I know I am encouraging you to regard what you've created as a static "product" to be submitted for judgment by me and ten put away as a failure or success. Ultimately—and this troubles me the most—I know I am asking you to think more about what **I** want you to write and less about what **you** want to say.

On the other hand, when I refrain from grading individual pieces of writing, and wait until your final portfolio is submitted to give you a grade, I know that I am encouraging you to loosen up. I am asking you to put my response in the context of the multiple responses that our class will be organized to give you. And I am acknowledging what should be obvious (but what's often, I'm afraid, obscured in the classroom setting)—that no one can stand as ultimate authority on the merits of someone else's words.

For me, the portfolio approach allows me to engage with your work with the respect and enthusiasm of a fellow writer, and it lets me try to offer you the kind of thoughtful and attentive response I would offer a peer.

But really most important is this: As you turn away from looking at your writing as a product, a vehicle for acquiring grades, you'll feel encouraged to take more risks and to think primarily about what you want to say, not what somebody else wants you to say. You will find yourself approaching your own words in a very different way—looking at your writing as a continuing enterprise, one which you are free to return to, revising with whatever new skills and perspective you will be acquiring along the way. Who knows, you may even begin to find yourself wanting to revisit your own work, to re-envision, to

reshape, and to clarify your work based on others' responses and your own fresh insights. This then will be our success.

So what perhaps is most valuable, and liberating, about the portfolio approach is that it encourages you to take risks, to forget about the high school mode of psyching the teacher out and to think, instead, about what you want to say.

Contract Grading:

But then, of course, there's always the "real world" to come back to—in this case the highly competitive real world of the elite academic institution in which we all are functioning. So, I do want to be as clear as possible from the beginning about the criteria on which your grade will ultimately be based. To this end, I've taken the policy that Peter Elbow first developed, what he calls "contract grading", and adapted it to our course. This is what I want to assure you: **You will be guaranteed a final grade of B or better if you meet a basic set of conditions** which in turn, I believe, will ensure that you grow significantly as a writer over the course of the semester. Most of these requirements are clearly outlined in the syllabus, but I will spell them out here to avoid confusion.

1) Don't miss more than two classes (or any conferences_. Most importantly, do not miss any peer review sessions.
2) Don't be habitually late, and remember that being more than ten minutes late twice will count as an absence.
3) Approach each assignment seriously and give each version you bring the full weight of your consideration. Do not bring things which are half (or less) considered because you know that you will be able to rewrite.
4) Bring in enough copies of assigned versions of your work on time and make them full versions and not drafts.
5) Engage with the readings assigned and consider them critically. Reference them in discussion.
6) Give full and thoughtful responses to your peers' writing.
7) Contribute regularly to class discussion, including giving leadership.
8) Make good use of revision. Use this opportunity to extend or clarify your thinking and reshape your writing.

Getting an A

At a less quantifiable level, this is what you might try to focus on in your own writing: For every paper, try looking for what you do not already know, deepening your thinking and beguiling the reader with logic and evidence, aiming towards fresh insight and extending your use of language in order to express what you have to say. Let your writing move somewhere, and press beyond what is too glib or easy. Strive for language that is both sophisticated and transparent.

The ability to work more and more consistently at this level might well be what distinguishes the fruits of your efforts as A level writing. But for this it would be difficult to provide a contract.