Journal of Response to Writing

Volume 8 | Issue 2

Article 5

December 2022

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Klotz, Sarah and Reardon, Kristina (2022) "Crafting a Writing Response Community Through Contract Grading," *Journal of Response to Writing*: Vol. 8: Iss. 2, Article 5.
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/journalrw/vol8/iss2/5

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JOURNAL OF RESPONSE TO WRITING

Crafting a Writing Response Community Through Contract Grading

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Abstract: As labor-based grading contracts gain momentum in first-year writing classrooms, new kinds of response to writing take center stage. We explore how session notes composed by embedded peer tutors and students become rich tools in a writing process and create a gateway to the writing center for first-year students. By reading session notes in conversation with students' reflective writing, we put forward three key findings: Students articulate a relationship between building confidence in their writing and their willingness to seek, receive, and value feedback; students discuss how the labor required for an A pushed them to access and learn about resources outside of the classroom; and students interact with the writing center during their first semester of college, building long-term relationships with peers and with the writing center (including becoming staff members) beyond first-year writing.

Keywords: labor-based grading contracts, writing response community, first-year writing, embedded tutors, writing centers

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As contract grading takes on new importance in college writing classrooms, the ways that faculty respond to writing are shifting. In an engagement-based assessment system like contract grading, a professor's responses need not be the central concern for student writers as they revise their work. This shift encourages students to seek out different sources for feedback. In this paper, we focus on feedback from embedded peer writing fellows (WFs) for a first-year writing (FYW) course in which students could only earn an A if they regularly sought feedback from WFs outside of the classroom. We are Sarah Klotz, the professor teaching the courses, and Kristina Reardon, the previous associate director of the Center for Writing at the College of the Holy Cross, who as such trained and managed the WFs in 2020–2021.

This study followed 24 students across two sections of FYW held in fall 2020. Each section of 12 students had a dedicated WF and to earn credit, students could meet with either of them, or any writing center tutor who was available, at a time of their choosing. (The center was open 6 days a week; most days it was open from 10 a.m. until 10 p.m., and students could also negotiate a mutually convenient time with their WF if needed.) While online writing courses were virtually unheard of at our private liberal arts college prior to 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic shifted our semester to be entirely remote. We share the context of the pandemic because it demanded greater attention to inequities in accessing the writing center. At our college, FYW is not required for a degree, and students self-select into the course; in our experience, it often serves students from marginalized or under-resourced backgrounds who enroll in FYW after attending the college summer bridge program. Embedding WFs in FYW thus serves as an equity practice, directing resources to those students experiencing the most need (particularly as they joined class during the pandemic from their homes across the country). WFs attended class once a week and built relationships with students in digital breakout rooms before students began attending tutoring sessions outside of class.

To understand how students interacted with WFs and how these interactions affected their relationship with response to their writing, we

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explore session notes: documents of 100–300 words addressed to a student, containing a summary of issues discussed in a peer-tutoring session, as well as a short revision plan that the student articulates at the end of the meeting.[1] While WFs write the notes, students contribute to their content through collaborative goal-setting conversations. Notes are shared with the professor by the writing center only at a student's request. At the end of the semester, the professor redistributed to students copies of the session notes she had received via email for use during the final reflective essay.[2] Students were prompted to reconsider session notes as they wrote about their engagement and learning throughout the course. In what follows, we show how creating an intentional relationship between peer tutors and first-year students in the grading contract encourages writers to gain experience with feedback and become empowered agents in a community of learning.

Context

Contract grading has a long history in composition studies and has seen growing interest following Asao Inoue's (2015) book, *Antiracist Writing Assessment Ecologies*. For instance, the most recent edition of Bean and Melzer's (2021) *Engaging Ideas*, long used in faculty training for writing across the curriculum (WAC) courses, contains substantial information on contract grading as a form of holistic assessment that, coupled with end-of-semester portfolios, "shift[s] more of the emphasis of evaluation to students' labor and processes" (p. 347). Elbow (1968), an early developer of contract grading, argued for an approach in which students are involved in both curriculum development and assessment practices. Cowan (2020) provided deep history and context for contract grading, but for our purposes here, it is best understood as a form of assessment that moves away from having a teacher determine the quality of student writing and instead rewards student labor and engagement in a writing process. Most recently, Carillo (2021) has pointed out how labor-based

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[1] A description of session notes can be found in Appendix B.

[2] The prompt for the final reflective essay can also be found in Appendix C for reference.

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grading contracts can center normative, neurotypical students when they fail to take into account that one's willingness to labor is not always accompanied by one's ability to do so "for reasons of disability, class position, and other embodied and social positionalities that intersect with racial formation" (p. 13).

We enter this ongoing conversation with an engagement-based grading contract that gives value to feedback-seeking practices. Further, we aim to connect these conversations about engagement-based grading to parallel conversations about the role of WFs in students' writing processes. We have seen many grading contracts that emphasize peer review (Bean & Melzer, 2021) but few articles that theorize the role of peer writing support outside the classroom. While our model draws substantially on Inoue's (2015) labor-based approach, we emphasize "engagement" rather than time laboring on a task so that students can build a feedback-seeking process that works best for their own needs. Below, we join in dialogue on the value we find in engagement-based grading as a way to build an intentional relationship between peer tutors and first-year writers.

Sarah Klotz (SK): Engagement-based grading allows me to depart from traditional grading systems that tend to value writing *products* and instead award students' labor as they develop a rich and rewarding writing *process*. I also understand that the cultural capital provided by an A is very powerful, and I do not want to bar any students from accessing that asset based on writing products alone. For this reason, my grading contract privileges engaging in parts of the writing process that are often invisible or undervalued. Additionally, I believe that knowing and using campus resources is important, particularly for first-generation college students who may not know what these resources are or that they can access them free of charge. To get an A in FYW, students must seek feedback from peer tutors and work with research librarians, both crucial parts of the literacy ecology at our college. The next grade down, a B, does not require any of this extra engagement. Readers can find the full contract in Appendix A for reference.

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Kristina Reardon (KR): While there has been considerable pushback against required appointments in the writing center community over the years (perhaps deriving from North's (1984) warning that students see required appointments as "a kind of detention" [p. 440]), we see the role of required appointments differently in the context of the embedded-WFs model working alongside engagement-based contract grading. As long as an instructor frames a WF session as an opportunity rather than a punishment (Wells, 2016), long-term community building and positive associations with the writing center can result (Clark, 1985; Gordon, 2008). And while required appointments may easily overwhelm a writing center's capacity in a general writing center context, they work differently with embedded WFs, a process in which the writing center resources of time and funding are intentionally allocated. Students and WFs negotiate meetings at mutually convenient times outside the writing center schedule. And because all embedded WFs *also* work as general tutors in the writing center, the potential for long-term relationships beyond FYW is possible. Thus, forging intentional partnerships with students through a semester-long, embedded WFs program introduces students to the larger ecology of writing support at our college in a targeted way.

SK: Creating a partnership with the writing center has allowed me to advance engagement-based assessment in new directions. This FYW course has embedded tutors that attend some class sessions and develop relationships with the students. I find that this model provides contextualized feedback because the WFs are aware of the assignments and the general approach of the course. They also have a mentee relationship with me, the professor, which provides another form of instruction for advanced students serving as WFs for my class. Ultimately, first-year students receive multiple forms of feedback in an iterative pattern: first they write a draft for peer feedback, then they revise that draft for professor feedback, and often they bring a third draft to work on with a WF as they prepare for a final draft that will be published in their portfolio. Students can meet with WFs at any time in their process, but they frequently choose to work through professor feedback in conversation with a WF. The effect of this iterative process is to practice what we preach as writing teachers: there are multiple authentic audiences for the piece of writing, with the professor serving as only one of them. Each of these audiences responds to the writing, and then the student makes strategic decisions about how to revise their work based on those responses.

KR: I see the values Sarah outlined as important not just in the classroom but in conversations regarding the writing center as well. In training, all tutors and WFs are coached to build relationships, stress process-based steps, let students lead sessions, practice active listening, and draft session notes as emails to students to continue the relationship and augment the writing process. For this reason, allocating resources to pair a tutor with each section of FYW aligned with the overall mission of the writing center (a mission that the student tutors themselves drafted in a collaborative process). While each class was assigned one fellow, the WFs also collaborated with each other. Students could book appointments with other tutors on the general writing center schedule if they preferred or if their WF's schedule did not match theirs. While this openness in booking appointments may seem antithetical to the relationship building that the embedded-WF program stresses, the decision was motivated by practicality: with students in multiple time zones online during a pandemic, we pivoted to make things work in ways that optimized agency and choice for students above all.

Discussion

This IRB-approved study represents 24 students in two sections of FYW held in fall 2020. Of the 24 students, 22 (92%) completed end-of-semester portfolios with reflections, which we analyzed. Further, 19 students (79%) opted to work with a WF, with an average 2.2 meetings each. We found that students aiming for an A in the course met with WFs and other tutors, and those meetings guided their revision work. Most of the session notes (74%) included detailed or specific language in the revision

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plan about making significant changes beyond proofreading. Students often worked with the WFs later in their writing process, and many mentioned as part of their reflective writing the feedback they received in session notes. Among the 20 students who mentioned a WF in their final cover letter, 15 (75%) used language indicating that the WF was helpful in their writing process. And 6 (30%) wrote effusively about the support and relationship they built with their WF. All of these findings suggest that a contract requiring students to get feedback multiple times throughout the semester as part of an A level of engagement leads to a stronger writing process with iterative feedback loops built in. The most important finding was not so much about students doing better writing but about students building a better set of revision and feedback-seeking practices that may transfer to other classes.

Three specific findings surfaced when we analyzed reflective cover letters in conjunction with session notes. First, students articulated a relationship between building confidence in their writing and their willingness to seek, receive, and value feedback. Second, students discussed how the labor required for an A pushed them to access and learn about resources outside the classroom. Third, some students interacted with the writing center during their first 2 semesters of college, indicating that they can build long-term relationships with peers and with the writing center (including becoming staff members) beyond FYW. When we read students' own words, we can clearly see that an intentional relationship between the FYW classroom and the writing center can lead to an intellectually rich set of responses to student writing.

Several students articulated a relationship between writerly confidence and a disposition toward valuing feedback. One student we will call John wrote:

> I learned that writing cannot improve overnight, and that getting feedback from others can only elevate the essay. . . Professor K introduced me to the writing center, helped me accept constructive criticism, and encouraged me to maintain

> confidence while trusting the writing process. I entered this course with a false hope that I excelled in writing, having shockingly received an English award at graduation. The feedback from my first paper overwhelmed and disillusioned me, but the resources of Professor K, the peer editors, and the writing center brought me hope, despite the frustration. Fortunately, this class made my writing journey manageable, enabling me to regain my confidence.

From John's words, we note a sense of perfectionism that can often keep first-year writers from working with feedback to improve their writing. Many of our students have been accustomed to achieving high levels of writing success prior to college, and it can be a blow to their confidence when they receive feedback on how to improve their writing in the college context. Dweck (2008) referred to this phenomenon as a fixed mindset and suggested that students will choose easier tasks in which they know they will excel in order to avoid losing the label of "smart" that they have become attached to. Of course, a fixed mindset is anathema to the deep revision work that accompanies a strong writing process. One benefit of engagement-based grading is the requirement that students complete work with a de-emphasis on a grade or a label of success determined by the teacher. In our model, work with WFs becomes more valuable than white-knuckling it through a paper that may traditionally be awarded with a high or low grade, depending on the professor's preference.

Another student, whom we will call Lin, echoed John's language of how confidence can be an impediment to seeking feedback. In her reflective cover letter, she said that building confidence was a main reason she signed up for FYW. For her, meetings with WFs were instrumental in building that confidence. Lin wrote that she was "apprehensive" meeting with WFs at first because she did not want someone else to see her work; however, once she made a few appointments, she found them comforting because "it made clear to [her] that [she] did not have to go through the writing process alone." Two other students, whom we will call Kelly and Kasey, also suggested that they began the course struggling to deal with

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feedback, but the required work for an A helped them learn how to engage with feedback in intentional and meaningful ways. Kelly wrote that she had to "build stamina" for receiving feedback on writing, and Kasey wrote that "[his] confidence has been supported and tested throughout the revision process. It continues to make [him] more accepting of constructive criticism and viewing failures as the power to grow in [his] writing style." Interestingly, these students all view feedback in a challenging, even negative light, yet they also reported that the feedback loops rewarded by the grading contract pushed them to engage in this challenge, ultimately resulting in higher confidence in their writing and a sense that seeking feedback from an audience is crucial to good writing.

Our second finding is that the labor required for an A pushed students to access and learn about resources outside of the classroom. A number of students came to the class with no awareness of what a writing center was—or how that resource might be helpful to them. This shows that encouraging and rewarding students for working with their resources can be a powerful tool to demystify the norms of the university, particularly for first-generation college students and historically underrepresented groups. One student, whom we will call Liz, mentioned that working with WFs was something specific to college writing that she had never done before. She described feedback from peer tutors as an inherent aspect of college writing, suggesting that the class normalized this practice for her early in her college career. Another student, whom we will call Kim, dedicated a whole paragraph of her cover letter to how the class helped her engage with resources at Holy Cross. She suggested that her WF served as "another set of eyes and someone who had vast experience with writing at Holy Cross." In this sense, we can see WFs as context-specific experts, valuable audience members, and mentors for first-year writers. Another student, whom we will call Natalia, mentioned that the class helped her access and use resources for writing, including WFs and research librarians. She wrote, "Seeking out resources such as help from the research librarian and our WF also proved to be really beneficial and empowering.

I became more comfortable asking for help during the writing process and seeking advice from those more knowledgeable." These students' experiences suggest that an engagement-based grading contract and an intentional relationship with the writing center can demystify the hidden curriculum (Gable, 2021) of the university for students. They come to value the process of seeking help from a very early stage in their college careers.

We draw our third finding—that students can build long-term relationships with peers and with the writing center, including becoming staff members—from two sources: (a) a survey that was part of a larger study of WFs in 2020–2021 and (b) usage statistics provided by the current writing center director more than a year after the course was completed. Of the survey respondents, 19 students had course-embedded WFs in a range of classes, including this one in 2020–2021. Approximately 90% of these students reported that working with a WF made them more likely than not to book an appointment with the writing center in the future. This broader view of students' reactions to working with WFs allows us to see the potential impact of WFs more generally. Looking specifically at usage statistics regarding the students across both sections of this FYW class, seven (37%) of the students who opted to meet with WFs went on to use their fellow or another writing tutor for work in another class that year or beyond. The courses in which they sought writing support included philosophy, history, and education, among others. Perhaps more importantly, two of those who booked appointments with WFs in the fall were themselves hired as tutors at the writing center after a campus-wide hiring process.

While they may at first seem modest, we see these statistics about usage outside of the FYW classroom as noteworthy during an online pandemic semester. Overall usage of peer tutors decreased during the pandemic year, dropping nearly 20% overall from the previous year. And while usage among second- and third-year students increased compared to the previous year, usage was down about 20% among first-year students, who booked 180 fewer appointments than the previous year. From this vantage point, the appointments the students in FYW booked during and after the class feel particularly important. We see a promising potential link between the inclusion of a WF in a class and students' use of peer tutoring; in their end-of-semester reflections, students seemed to value the peer relationships that were stressed and rewarded through the grading contract. While many students used language indicating they viewed their WF as a peer with specialized knowledge, they did not seem to see the appointments as remedial. We hypothesize that the value placed on feedback-seeking experiences in the grading contract led some students to continue seeking feedback from peer tutors for courses they took during and after FYW, and a couple even felt empowered to apply to become tutors themselves.

Suggestions

Students' end-of-semester reflections reveal that they saw feedback from peers as a crucial step in the writing process. While not all students used tutoring beyond their FYW class, around one third booked other writing center appointments. To support students' long-term use of resources like the writing center, we propose that the WF appointments required for an A should not be limited to working on assignments for the FYW class alone. Credit could be offered for one or more appointments with WFs for classes *other* than FYW to make clear to students that working with peers on writing projects is valuable in classes beyond FYW. This is just one way that instructors and those who hire and support WFs can build intentional synchronicity into students' broader writing-feedback ecology in the classroom, the writing center, and beyond.

At the same time, we acknowledge that there are contexts in which WF programs may not be available or may be limited by local financial exigencies. Further, WFs may be supported in some places by other entities, such as FYW or WAC programs. Like Holly-Wells and Jamieson (2014), we see part of the solution as moving from "silos to synergies"

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(p. 87) in ways that make sense locally. We suggest collaborative work between instructors and the writing center (or FYW or WAC) director to find solutions to support students' use of campus writing resources. Ultimately, we do not want students to experience siloed writing-feedback ecologies (which may seem disconnected to the novice) but rather aim to help students see and understand the writing resources available to them across campus. As we have previously noted, over the last several decades, required appointments at the writing center have been found to be beneficial to students when framed in a pedagogically appropriate way (Clark, 1985; Gordon, 2008; Wells, 2016). We argue our version of engagement-based grading (which rewards but does not require visits) follows this directive.

Yet we know that even if pedagogical concerns are assuaged, some writing center directors may worry they do not have the capacity to meet overall student need during busy fall semesters or when budgets are tight. We acknowledge this real concern but have found in our context that careful planning can mitigate capacity issues. For example, the majority of students using the writing center at Holy Cross are first-year students; from 2019 to 2022, first-year students booked between 62–64% of all writing center appointments. Meanwhile, during that same period, 30–40% of total writing center appointments were for Montserrat (the first-year seminar program on campus) or English classes, such as FYW. Carving out space for WFs to meet with students in FYW, then, was less an issue of developing more capacity and more an issue of rearranging how appointments with a key constituency were scheduled. In our model, WFs attended class 1 hour per week. When multiplied by the number of weeks in a college's semester, this arrangement only adds a dozen or so extra hours of pay per fellow. We value this piece of the WF experience, as did 79% of survey respondents who had WFs in a range of courses, including FYW.

But even without the class-attendance piece, writing centers might think creatively about how to accommodate FYW appointments for specific classes that mention sessions at the writing center on their grading contracts. WFs can offer students in their classes the first chance at booking their weekly appointments, and if students do not use them, appointments can be opened up to the whole campus. This minimizes empty shifts and preserves capacity. And if many students want to book appointments the week a paper is due, WFs can work extra hours as needed and simply work fewer hours the following week to preserve a budgetary equilibrium. If WFs are pressed for time or the budget is strained, shorter appointments may be offered, or WFs may hold appointments with pairs, facilitating a peer-review conversation in addition to offering feedback. Overall, shifting some tutoring hours to WF appointments made sense in our context from both a pedagogical and budgetary perspective, given that first-year students likely would have used the percentage of appointments allocated to the FYW class anyway.

Ultimately, we found our collaboration (i.e., as faculty and writing center associate director) to be mutually beneficial, as we both advocate for strong, multistep writing processes that involve peer review. Providing credit for both (a) meetings with WFs on writing assignments beyond the FYW course and (b) writing center meetings outside of a WF program has the potential to empower students to seek feedback on writing assignments long term. By giving credit in engagement-based grading contracts to students for seeking feedback on writing within and beyond the scope of FYW, we can help students draw meaningful connections in their writing across the disciplines. Similarly, by giving credit to students for independently organizing their own feedback-seeking habits with a peer writing tutor outside of a WF context, we can help students develop strong writing habits that persist beyond the FYW course. In this way, the grading contract values and rewards the type of collaborative, reflective behaviors and habits that professional and scholarly writers regularly use and which might not be intuitive to college writers in their first year. Further, giving this type of credit would also provide a space for students to begin to self-advocate in the writing process beyond FYW, which only lasts 1 semester; students must negotiate responses to their writing and their writerly identities for many years after it.

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Appendix A

English 110 Grading Contract

We will use a method called contract grading. This means your final grade in the course is determined by how fully you engage with the opportunities to read, analyze, and write. To receive the grade listed on the left in the table below, you must do *all* of the items listed in that row; failing to complete the requirements in any category will drop you to the next row. No matter how strong you find your early essay drafts to be, you will need to revise them based on peer and instructor feedback to succeed in your final portfolio.

Grade	Portfolio	Presentation	Additional requirements
A	Cover letter; essays 1, 2, 3 *with substantial revisions*	Yes	1. Complete 95% of activities 2. At least one visit to office hours 3. One research librarian session 4. 3 peer review sessions 5. 3 Writing Fellow consultations
B	Cover letter; essays 1, 2, 3 *with substantial revisions*	Yes	Complete 85% of informal writing activities
C	Cover letter; essays 1, 2, 3 *with substantial revisions*	--	--

***Receiving a D or F in English 110 is not considered passing**

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 other labor assigned

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that meet all of our agreed-upon expectations. This means you will be honest about completing labor that asks particular time commitments of you (for example, "write for 20 minutes" etc.).

- **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 will not just correct or touch up. Revisions must somehow respond to or consider seriously your colleagues' assessments in order to be revisions.
- **Copy editing**: When the job is for the final publication of a draft, your work must be copy edited—that is, you must spend significant time in your labor process to look just at spelling and grammar. It's fine to get help in copy editing. (Copy editing does not count on drafts before the final portfolio or first drafts.)[3]

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[3] We are grateful to Inoue (2015) for the specific language on what revision looks like in a labor-based grading system.

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Appendix B

Session Notes

Tutors and fellows are trained to work with students during a semester-long upper-level English course, Composition Theory and Pedagogy. They receive ongoing training in monthly staff meetings and reviews with the directors. In the course, as well as in meetings and reviews, the 200- to 300-word session notes that tutors author postsession are used as a key document for reflection on tutoring praxis, and faculty who receive notes have reported using them to shape conversations about revision with their students or to adjust classroom lesson plans on writing. However, the primary audience is the student—and as such, fellows are instructed to write the notes directly to students, treating faculty and writing center audiences as secondary, the equivalent of a CC on an email.

Previous research into session notes has revealed that students consult the notes postsession as they continue revising their drafts (Bugdal et al., 2016). As such, all tutors and fellows are instructed to include a summary of what was discussed to help students remember key points. More importantly, however, they are instructed to also include a revision plan consisting of a few actionable items. Both the summary and the revision plan are discussed with the student in the final minutes of the session. In this way, though the fellow writes the note, the student is meant to have a hand in shaping the content. The fellow is instructed to record the student's own ideas for revision as a reminder, and fellows are told *not* to come up with new ideas postsession. Tutors and fellows are also told to include relationship-building gestures, including friendly greetings and invitations to make future appointments.

Appendix C

Final Portfolio: Reflective Cover Letter Prompt

In place of a final exam, you will write a cover letter for your portfolio where you describe and reflect on the writing you present in final draft form. Your reflection should detail what and how you have learned throughout the semester. Revisit the many pieces of writing, both formal and informal, that you have worked on. Your session notes from working with writing fellows, proposals, drafts with your professor's comments, and final-draft cover letters should give you ample information to make detailed observations about your work throughout the semester.

The resulting reflection will be informed by all of the evidence we have generated and collected throughout the writing process.

GUIDELINES

This final reflection should be 3–4 pages (double spaced). Support all claims with examples.[4]

SECTIONS

1. What I hoped to do (What were my expectations, what were my original plans, what skills did I hope to develop?)
2. What I did (What I wrote, what steps I took to complete the tasks, what went right, what went wrong.)
3. What I learned (What I'd do differently next time, what I will do again, what I won't do again, what feedback was particularly useful.)
4. Goals for my writing (What skills I want to develop, what habits I want to change or adopt, what information I still need to learn, what types

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[4] We are grateful to the first-year writing program directors at Michigan State University, Julie Lindquist and Bump Halbritter, for much of the wording in the cover-letter prompt. In particular, their use of the language of argument and evidence in reflective writing has been instrumental to Sarah's own development of labor-based grading. For more, see Halbritter and Lindquist (2018).

Klotz, S., Reardon, K.. (2022). Crafting a Writing Response Community Through Contract Grading. *Journal of Response to Writing*, 8(2), 106–126.

of writing I want to try). In other words, what is my plan for my continuing writing development?

READINGS

Your body of work over the course of the semester, including essay drafts, comments from peers and your professor on your drafts, session notes, etc.

Klotz, S., Reardon, K.. (2022). Crafting a Writing Response Community Through Contract Grading. *Journal of Response to Writing*, 8(2), 106–126.