

October 1994

Moving Away From Grades: Using Point Systems and Contracts in the Language Arts Classroom

Lee Burton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj>

Recommended Citation

Burton, Lee (1994) "Moving Away From Grades: Using Point Systems and Contracts in the Language Arts Classroom," *Michigan Reading Journal*: Vol. 28: Iss. 1, Article 6.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/mrj/vol28/iss1/6>

This work is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Michigan Reading Journal by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Moving Away From Grades: Using Point Systems and Contracts in the Language Arts Classroom



ARTICLE BY **LEE BURTON**

A frustration shared by many teachers of language arts is grading, particularly when an instructional program contains many open ended activities. The problem arises not when grading work such as spelling, grammar or assignments for which the response is a correct or incorrect answer; it arises when the student product is a more thoughtful effort. This may include oral presentations, answers to interpretive questions, or written work of a creative or informational nature. It is in these instances that personal opinion becomes intertwined with empirical evaluation, when ranking of a student's creativity occurs, when the goal of inspiring and encouraging reticent students is often at odds with the process of grading.

Any teacher of writing who has wrestled with the problem of grades has probably experimented with a number of grading systems including those that treat mechanics and style separately. But a grade for creativity, no matter how it is done, can still be a hard pill for a student to swallow and, for the teacher, a hard pill to administer. Some may find that the focus correction technique advocated by John Collins and others provides an adequate alternative but this may not be a satisfactory solution for teachers who want to address a student's overall style of writing.

Among the difficult challenges faced by language arts teachers is creating enjoyable and successful writing experiences for students who may fear that their writing will be judged poorly. For some, a disappointing grade is another reminder that they can't write. In an

effort to undo the havoc with confidence sometimes inflicted by grades, I would provide, at great expenditure of time and effort, a fistful of encouraging comments about the strengths of the piece and progress that has been made. Then I discovered "points" from a high school colleague in a neighboring district. Doug Norton, a teacher in Howell, Michigan, uses a point system enthusiastically with regular, advanced placement and basic classes. He observed that, with his system, students do more writing and, as a result, make more progress.

The idea of evaluating student work using a point system was not novel, but Doug's system was, at least in my experience. My version of his system, developed with sixth-grade middle school students, is presented here. It is flexible, effective and flush with possibilities due to the subtle ways that it can be utilized. It has taken much anguish out of evaluation for me and proven that systems of evaluation and enthusiasm are not necessarily mutually exclusive commodities.

The point system is not the culmination of my search for an effective method of evaluation. The use of contracts is also presented here. For both systems, the final evaluation is a letter grade, a requirement in my district. This is not necessarily a drawback. Due to the nature of the point and contract systems, there is a genuine feeling among students and parents that grades were earned by each individual, not awarded by the teacher. This will become clear as the systems unfold below.

The Point System

At the beginning of each marking period, each student is provided with a point sheet which, in some ways, is similar to a syllabus. A sample is included here. The front of the sheet lists all work for the marking period. The back has a letter to parents explaining the system. The work that students are expected to do is divided into two categories: assignments and writers workshop. Assignments are worth a set number of points. Students can earn equal to or less than that number, but not more.

Writers workshop is free choice writing. A wall chart lists the genres of writing that can be done with the last choice being "other." Students earn points for their writing based on quality and quantity — up to 10 points a page for overall style and up to 5 points a page for mechanical considerations and neatness. Some students choose to write one long piece for writers workshop; others choose two or more shorter pieces.

Each marking period a number of points is designated as "full credit" for writers workshop. This is based on the amount of time allotted for writing and is attainable only if some work is done at home. Students may earn more than full credit if they do enough writing and, in my experience, many do. Points earned above full credit are extra credit and can be used to make up for points lost on assignments. It is also likely that extra credit points will be needed to earn the right to be on a contract, which will be discussed later.

On the sample point sheet there are 220 possible points for assignments and 70 designated as full credit for writers workshop. Grades are determined by applying a standard grading scale to the total of 290 points.

The assignments for a marking period could include any of the following: assigned writing that focuses on a specific skill, reading activities, grammar,

spelling, vocabulary studies, punctuation, journals, discussion activities or oral presentations. For writers workshop, a process approach (a la Calkins, 1986, *The Art of Teaching Writing*) is used. For each composition students pick focus areas and go through a process of drafting, conferencing and revising before completing a final draft. These are areas in which most of my students still require basic instruction.

The evaluation system for writing is explained in the letter to parents on the back of the point sheet. This is followed by a place for students to write goals for the marking period and a line for a parent signature. Students earn 10 points for the signature but the real purpose is to assure that parents will read the letter which explains the system and encourages their involvement.

System Flexibility and Focus

The emphasis in my language arts program on writing is by design and in response to what I feel is a need of sixth grade students in my district. While writing is emphasized, reading is not overlooked. Students participate in several reading activities including the Great Books Foundation program, reading logs (a home reading program), and speed reading (a non-evaluated activity). The emphasis on writing, it must be noted, is a choice, not a fixture. This flexible point system allows the teacher to hone in on any aspect of the language arts curriculum. The key is to select open-ended activities stressing the language skill or skills of your choice for the "workshop" portion of the point sheet for which an unlimited number of points can be earned.

Major Benefits

The most notable benefit to this system is that no student is barred from getting an A due to limited abilities. Any student can make up for lost points on

POINT SHEET

Name:

Hour:

Marking Period: 3

ASSIGNMENTS

WRITERS WORKSHOP

Full Credit — 70 Pts. Ends: Tues., March 22

JOURNALS (4 entries)

Points/Total

_____ entries x 10 pts./entry- _____

_____ / _____

GREAT BOOKS (10 pts/story)

_____ / _____

***Gaston _____

_____ / _____

***Spit Nolan _____

_____ / _____

***The Alligators _____

_____ / _____

BOOK LOG (2 Books- Due: Fri., Mar. 25)

_____ books x 40 pts./book- _____

_____ / _____

_____ / _____

TESTS/ASSIGNMENTS

Grammar Test (40) _____

_____ / _____

Setting Description (20) _____

_____ / _____

PARENT SIGNATURE (10) _____

(Due Friday, Feb. 4)

ASSIGNMENT TOTAL

(220 possible)

WORKSHOP TOTAL

(No limit on Writers Workshop)

GRAND TOTAL

(290 needed to earn contract)

Point Sheet Letter

Dear Parents,

Your child is participating in a Writers Workshop combined with a point system that leaves many choices in the hands of each student. Accompanying the freedom is increased responsibility which means that effort and long range planning become very important. The goal is to help students develop independence and an assertive attitude towards education so that they become actively involved in bringing ownership and meaning to their educational experience.

In our class, student work will be evaluated giving points rather than grades. All work will be divided into two categories: 1) Required Assignments — these will focus on specific skill areas. Each of these assignments will be worth a set number of points. 2) Writers Workshop — Writing for this will be self-selected by each student. Points earned will be based on quality and quantity of work. If a student earns more than 70 points for writing during the marking period, extra points can be used to make up for missed points on required assignments. Each student has a point sheet to keep track of their performance so that they may know how they are doing at all times.

The advantage of this system, as all my classes are aware, is that **each student can earn an "A" if he or she is willing to work for it** because extra points can always be earned in Writers Workshop. This means that **any student can be working on writing at home at any time**. Even though much time will be given in class for writing, it will be difficult for a student to meet the goal for Writers Workshop without doing some writing at home. I'd like to suggest that you talk to your children about this system and help them plan out their marking period. As all homework will be self-assigned, you might want to ask about plans for doing writing at home.

Here is how points are earned for writing in Writers Workshop:

OVERALL QUALITY — (style, clarity, description, etc.) up to 10 points a page

MECHANICS/NEATNESS — up to 5 points a page (This includes punctuation, capitalization, form, margins, paragraphing, appearance, spelling)

HEADING/JOURNEY SHEET — A heading which includes name and class period and a completed journey sheet are required for an evaluation and full credit. Rough copies of stories and conference sheets must also be turned in for full credit.

STUDENT GOALS _____

PARENT SIGNATURE _____

assignments by doing extra writing in order to earn whatever grade they want. The better the writing is, the less will be needed to earn the points desired. This system encourages writing which in turn brings progress. This belief allows me to be comfortable with what some may see as a problem with the system: the situation of a hard-working child with limited skills earning a high grade. Although I occasionally feel some consternation when a child who works hard but does not master certain skills earns an *A*, I find this more palatable than many situations I encounter with standard grading.

Besides creating an avenue for even the least able of students to do well, there are features to this system that provide opportunities to stretch the skills of the most talented of students, features such as free choice and long term planning. In addition, the process writing approach lets the teacher set individual writing goals that present real and appropriate challenges.

Another positive aspect of the point system is the relative ease with which points can be assigned for writing and other creative efforts as compared to grades. The difference between an *A*- and a *B*+ is great and can require much thought. But what is the difference between 30 and 34? The range of points that can be awarded is wider and has more divisions than grades, and there are no great leaps as there are between grades. Without these "gulfs" to worry about, points can be given with less concern.

The student reaction to points as opposed to grades is, I believe, a healthier one. Points are not nearly as imposing as grades and they bring a host of new dynamics into play. First, the student tends to focus more on the comments than on the points which, as teachers, is what we really want. Secondly, if the grade is low, the student may feel hurt and wonder if it is possible to bring the

grade up before report cards. With points, there is no low grade to average in, just a point tally that can be raised by doing more work. Students tend to quickly check out the points they earned, spend some time on the comments, and then update their tally. The reaction is not "What grade do I have now?" so much as it is "What do I need to do to get the grade I want?" The first is more fatalistic, as if the grade is out their hands. The second is more positive and helps the student take ownership of their achievements.

Another advantage comes from the ease with which the point system adapts to dealing with late work. When I evaluate a late paper, the earned point total is noted and crossed out and the "late" total is circled. A reduction in points seems fairer to students than a reduction in grade. An *A* paper does not really become a *B* paper because it came in late, but it can reasonably earn fewer points which the student knows can be made up.

This system — a combination of points, assignments and an open-ended workshop — can yield desirable results in regards to effort. If students are assigned a paper to write for which they will receive a grade or even a set maximum number of points, there is no incentive to do more than the minimum necessary to receive the highest mark. Although some students are of a character that will motivate them to produce a piece of work that is longer than necessary, others are not so driven. When points are awarded based on quality as well as length, a student will not face disincentives from the system itself. More effort — in the form of more pages of writing — will earn a greater number of points. There is much to hail about an evaluation system that does not hinder what we are trying to inspire.

"Playing with Points" — Additional Benefits of the System

As a teacher, my role involves building skills and confidence, helping students find pleasure and satisfaction in the activities we undertake, and urging students to take risks. This may require prodding a student to do something they do not want to do. This is where the point system admirably demonstrates the incisiveness of the interventions that are available.

Student "Jill" had penmanship that pained my eyes. Pleading and cajoling for neater work had gone for naught. As she was about to begin a final copy of a story last December, I brought by an evaluation sheet and asked how many bonus points it would take to get her to be neat. She said three extra points a page and I marked it down on the sheet. The paper came in a week later, much neater than anything previously turned in.

Student "Andy" loved stories with dragons, magicians and heroes. In our free choice writers workshop, I would not compel him to write a personal experience story, but I could bribe him. It cost ten points. He actually enjoyed it enough to do another.

Special education student "Brady" said there was no way he could think of enough ideas to write a story longer than a page. I pulled out two dollars and asked if this would help him jog his memory. It wasn't enough. His weekly allowance was enough to make me jealous. Then I offered up ten bonus points while showing him in my record book that he was really hurting in the point department. A bargain was struck.

Points are cheap ... and effective. I've used bonus points to stanch the flow of blood and guts by overindulging authors. I've levered students into attending more carefully to mechanics on final copies. I've tempted students to try genres of writing they had avoided by offering

bonus points as an incentive. Almost every student that needs prodding has a price, and often it's reasonable enough to pay. It's a secret weapon, and I wield it with a smile.

Contracts

About half way through the first marking period, after students fully understand the point system, I introduce contracts which become available for the second marking period. It is a system intended to develop independence, self-direction, and time management skills. A sample contract is provided here.

Students may choose to be on contract for a coming marking period if their point total for the present marking period equals or exceeds the number attained from adding the total possible for assignments to the full credit number for writers workshop. Once on contract, a student must fulfill the contract to again have that option for the next marking period. Students who do not earn the opportunity to be on contract for one marking period often make it a goal for the next. It is a pleasure to see the pursuit of achievement become a priority in the classroom.

Contracts Versus Point Sheets

A contract allows students to set many of their own goals for the marking period and affords a greater range of options in order to fulfill certain required obligations. Whenever possible, I try to create choices and differences that make the package enticing. Here are a few examples. When our class studied dialogue, point sheet students were required to do a short piece of writing that demonstrated mastery of paragraphing and punctuation for dialogue. Contract students could do the assignment *or* demonstrate mastery of dialogue in a composition for the writing portion of the contract. Point students must fill out a book log each marking period and get

CONTRACT

Name _____ Hour _____ Marking Period: 3

Required Assignments

1. Journals: Four Entries
2. Participation in Great Books
3. Score of 90% or Higher on Grammar Test
4. Evidence of ability to Write Using Good Setting Description

Self-Selected Goals

Reading (to be completed by Friday, March 25)

Writing (to be completed by Tuesday, March 22)

Signatories

I have discussed my goals for the marking period with my parents. I feel that the reading and writing activities I have selected represent a challenging course of work.

Student _____ Date _____

Parent _____ Date _____

Parent _____ Date _____

Contract Letter

Dear Parents,

I am pleased to tell you about an opportunity in which your child has chosen to participate for the coming marking period. It is an opportunity that is being offered for two reasons. First, my classes as a whole have shown such enthusiasm and responsibility that I am able to direct more of my attention to bringing new challenges to the classroom. Secondly, your child in particular is part of a group that has truly excelled in effort and desire for academic achievement.

As you may recall, at the beginning of the year, each of my students received a point sheet which parents signed that listed all activities for the coming marking period. The purpose of this was to help students become more independent and better at long term planning. This marking period your child will receive a contract that will list only a few required assignments. The rest of the contract will be filled out by each eligible student who elected to participate in this special program. The student will list reading and writing goals for the marking period including the minimum number of books that will be read and the types of writing that will be undertaken. After a parent signature is obtained, the contract will be presented to me for final approval. A student's enlistment in this program constitutes a commitment to a good effort on a challenging amount of work. It is expected that a student will do at least as much work as would be required by the point sheet.

Under this system, there will be no need for points. Evaluation will become strictly an academic discussion. This system places much of the responsibility for academic growth in the hands of the child. The writing of the contract brings ownership to the student, an important ingredient that spurs effort and interest. The contract will always be open for review and, if necessary, modification by mutual consent.

The possibilities for personal and academic growth in this program are virtually unlimited because learning takes place most freely when it is self-directed. A great sense of accomplishment awaits the child who succeeds in this program and I know that your child has the ability to do well. Please discuss this program at home so that you can provide assistance as needed and be familiar with your child's goals. As always, feel free to give me a call if you have any questions.

Thank you,

a signature verifying completion of the reading, all of which is done at home. Contract students just list their books on their contract. When students do a piece of writing, they attach a journey sheet that gives their name, the title and genre of the piece, and their focus areas. On the back is the evaluation form with spaces for points. Contract students have a shortened journey sheet. The space for evaluation is on the front and no space is provided for points. Forms for contract students are always of a different color than the corresponding forms for point students.

The Process

At the beginning of a marking period, students who earned the right to opt for a contract are given a copy of one. A letter on the back addressed to parents is an accolade of the child's effort, responsibility and achievement and an explanation of the system. On the front is a list of requirements for the marking period and a place for students to enter the work they are selecting. This is followed by the student's signature and a parent signature. The latter helps assure that the letter and contract will be read. I find that the parent and child usually discuss the contract and the selected goals before signing. This is bound to be a healthy discussion, one which allows the parent into the developing academic world of the child.

After obtaining a parent signature, the student and I have a conference so that I can explain the required assignments and ask if a challenging course of work has been selected. During these conferences, I often prod them into doing extra reading or urge them to take on certain challenges in their writing. Contracts should involve more work as well as more freedom. After signing the contract I make a copy for myself and return the original to the student.

It is important to explain procedures

for modifying a contract. Students are told to come to me before deadlines are imminent and explain what they want altered and why. Sometimes students just change their minds about the type of writing they want to do. Other times students set goals that are difficult to meet and adjustments become necessary. Students are told that I am more concerned with quality than quantity. With the handling of the contract, my concerns are with process, responsibility and time management.

The Final Grade for Contract Students

The obligation of a student who elects to be on a contract is to promise that a good effort will be made on all work and that a challenging course of work was selected. Once a student is on contract, there are no more points for assignments except for tests where a minimum score is required. Evaluation of assignments becomes strictly analysis and does not require ranking.

At the end of a marking period I confer again with each of the contract students to decide whether all obligations were met. If so, an A is earned. If not, I ask the student what grade they feel was earned, and we hold a discussion taking both of our perspectives into account. I have found that these discussions, handled tactfully, always led to the student selecting a grade that we each felt was fair and representative. My experience is that students are usually harder graders than I am.

When there is concern or doubt over the grade to be earned on the contract, I sometimes ask students to talk it over with their parents. This has led to interesting discussions both at home (according to parent reports) and at school. Some actual samplings: "My mother told me that a contract is a contract. If I signed my name to it and didn't do it then I don't deserve an A. This is hard

for me because I always get A's but I guess I didn't earn one this time." Or, "I talked with my parents and told them that I didn't get as much writing done as I thought I would but that I worked my hardest to do a good job on what I did get done. It just took longer than I thought. My parents felt that if I really did work hard then I lived up to the contract and so I think that I deserve the A." Conversations at home that lead to statements like these are priceless. They develop a true parent-child partnership in education.

Contracts may not be for everyone. Although third marking period is likely to bring an increase in contract users over second marking period, some will lose the privilege or choose to return to points.

The key elements for contracts are self-direction and self-assessment. In the months since completing the first draft of this paper, I have tried using these two elements with whole classes in varying formats designed by students and have found the results worthy of pursuit.

Record Keeping

To facilitate record keeping, I highlight the lines of students on contract in my record book. This is of great help. As writing is the focus of my curriculum, I keep accurate track of the work being done. Below is what my records show for a piece of writing. This type of record keeping has proven simple and effective.

3/7	4	1-1/2	A- B-	12
-----	---	-------	----------	----

The first box is for the date a piece of work was turned in. The second box indicates the genre of writing. (I keep a key taped inside my record book.) The length of the piece of writing is indicated in the third box. The fourth box contains the grade that I would have assigned although students never see this. This helps keep me aware of individual skill levels. A split grade is used only when the mechanics and overall quality of writing are at distinctly different levels. The last box contains the number of points received except that points are not determined for contract students. Taken together, a detailed picture can be assembled of what and how a child is doing.

Conclusion

The language arts are not a science. Although right and wrong are often part of an English class, the culminating skills are of a less exact nature. There is, no doubt, an artistry to the language arts. Achievement can come without limit, and it can come even without mastery — if the curriculum allows and evaluation does not impede. The systems described here help make these goals possible.

Lee Burton has been a Hartland educator for 17 years, where he currently teaches middle school language arts. He has served as the MRA Conference Evaluation Chair and helps with the publications of the Livingston County Reading Council.