



**University of Michigan
Provost's Teaching
Innovation Prize**

2021 WINNER



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Creative Contracts: Incentivizing Engagement With “Writerly Behaviors”

Innovation Description

Contract grading can support a trusting classroom culture that enhances learning for everyone. A good contract makes a course’s design legible and logical to students—they understand each task to be clearly and convincingly connected to the course goals.

In designing a contract for a first-year writing requirement course for art and design students, Professor Shapiro emphasized experimenting with writing in support of creative practice. After identifying things that strong writers do, she created a menu of accessible and appealing Writerly Behaviors (WBs) that get students writing more, reading more, reflecting more, and experimenting with process. All students complete Read Like a Writer assignments, in-class exercises, and workshop activities, and they write 3 essays. For a better grade, students may also undertake process exercises, video-based activities and discussions, and reflections on their essays. For a top grade, students complete at least 6 additional WBs, such as spending 30 minutes making radical changes to a “final” essay draft, or translating an argument from an assigned reading into a meme, a 4-panel comic, or a haiku.

Since implementing the contract, Professor Shapiro’s interactions with students have been increasingly positive and productive. Students take greater responsibility for missed work and proactively suggest solutions to their own issues. Most importantly, students show increased willingness to take risks in their coursework, and increased awareness of the wide variety of behaviors they can perform to improve their writing. A contract design process can similarly benefit instructors of any course. If they clarify learning goals and assignments and swap in the disciplinary behaviors they want their students to perform, Writerly Behaviors can easily become Designerly Behaviors, or Things Anthropologists Do, or Habits of Natural Scientists.

Student Comments

With the grading contract it feels like you are building up to the desired grade, not constantly in an uphill battle trying to maintain a perfect grade.

Within the grading contract, mistakes felt far more minor. In moments that I wasn’t understanding something, there was more emphasis on asking: “how can I get to understand this” rather than “how will this hurt my grade?”

Each writerly behavior was creative and fun in its own way. Being able to draw made the assignment feel less like homework and more like a fun sketchbook activity.

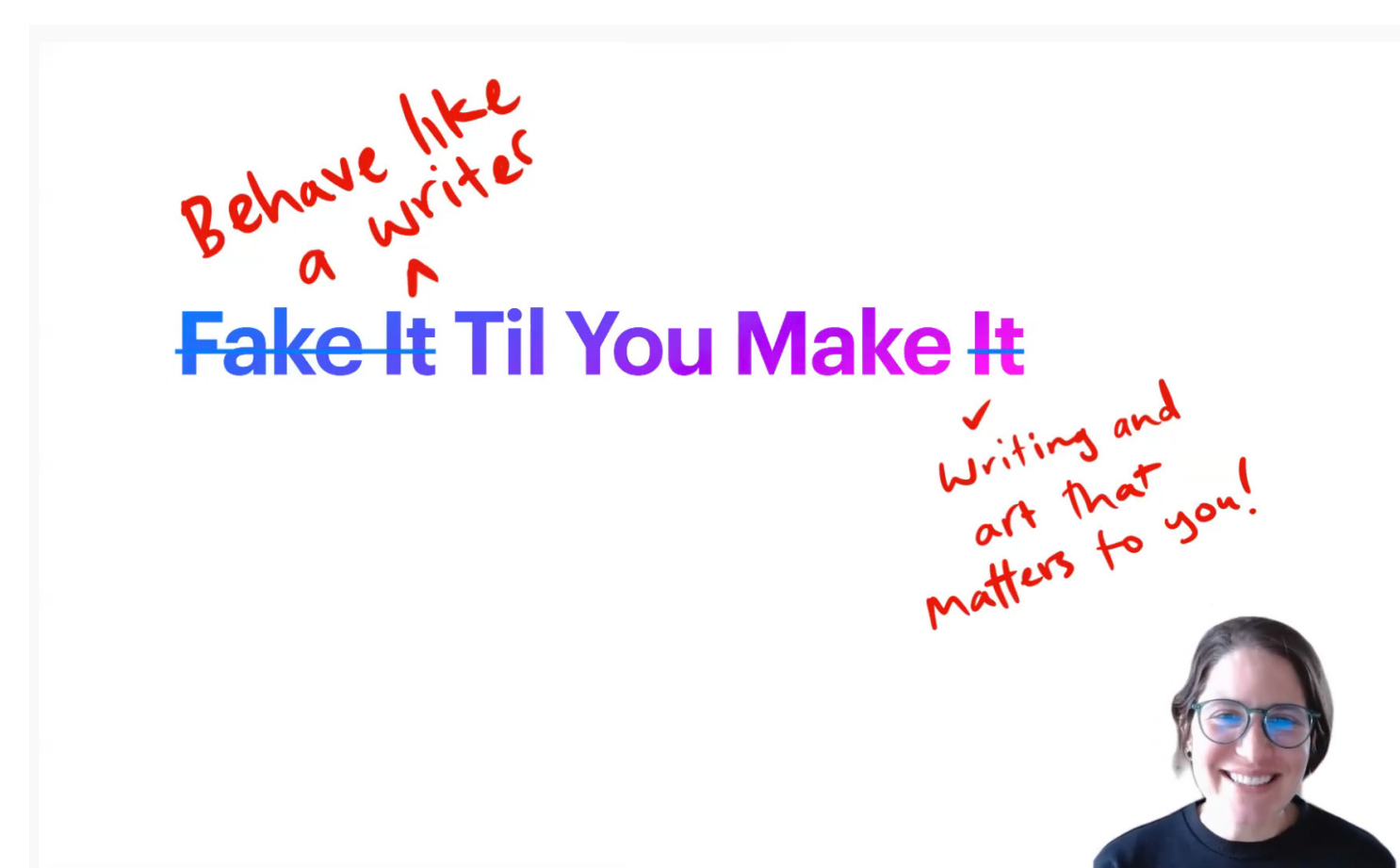
I ended up doing many more writerly behaviors than the required minimum just because I enjoyed them.

I chose to create a comic strip of one of my favorite poems and it completely changed the way I viewed writing. Rather than just reading words, I was seeing them. It made me grasp just how visual writing can be.

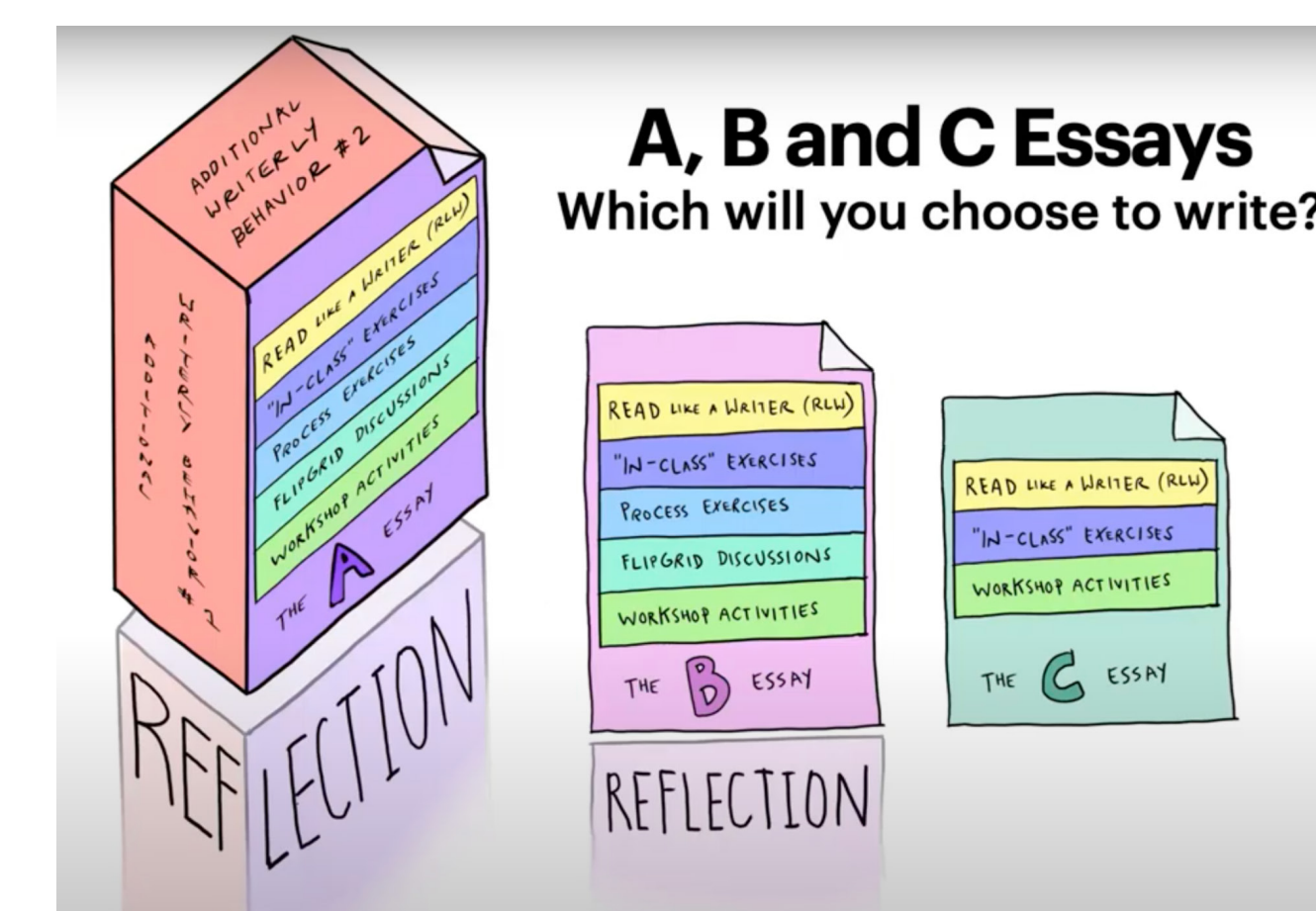
I was writing essays on topics that I was actually interested in and cared about while still implementing new writing techniques.

The class inspired me to focus on growth as a writer and to take risks. The grading contract allowed me to do those things without the fear of repercussions.

Examples of Teaching Innovation



Video introduction to the grading contract for ARTDES 129: *Matters of Taste*. The more you behave like a writer, the more your writing will improve.



Grades correspond to the depth of the process (quantity and range of writerly behaviors) that students undertake to develop flexible, creative approaches to writing.

Additional “Writerly Behaviors”

- Translate a reading into a meme, a 4-panel comic, and a haiku (to learn more about how its argument is structured)!
- Annotate another useful reading (to learn more about the genre of the essay you’ve been assigned)!
- Make a connection between a concept or process from this class to a studio class (can help you come up with inspiration for both classes)!
- Meet with the Stamps Librarian to ask a specific question about research!
- “Make a mess” by dismantling a final draft and starting over (to discover revision opportunities for THIS essay, and/or radical new approaches for the NEXT essay)!
- ...and more!

Some of the options for going beyond the Core WBs of Reading Like a Writer, Writing, and Talking to Other Writers