



How to: Increase Motivation: Learning Contracts

Description. A learning contract is a voluntary, student-completed document that outlines actions the learner promises to take in a course to achieve academic success. This contract is signed by the student, the instructor, and (optionally) the parent. Benefits of all such contracts, however, are that they provide academic structure and support, motivate struggling learners by having them pledge publicly to engage in specific, positive study and learning behaviors, and serve as a vehicle to bring teachers and students to agreement on what course goals are important and how to achieve them (Frank & Scharff, 2013). **NOTE:** See the learning contract appearing later in this document as an example of how these contracts can be formatted.

Procedure: The learning contract is typically completed in a meeting between the student and instructor. (In middle and high schools, the parent may also be a participant.) While there are many possible variations on the learning contract, they often contain these components (Frank & Scharff, 2013; Greenwood & McCabe, 2008):

- *Statement of Purpose.* The contract opens with a statement presenting a rationale for why the contract is being implemented. A sample statement might be: *I am taking part in this learning contract because I want to improve my grades and pass this course.*

- *Student Actions.* The contract lists any actions that the student is pledging to complete to ensure success in the course. Suitable targets for learning contract items might include attendance, class participation, completion of classwork or homework, seeking of instructor help, etc. See Figure 1 for a listing of sample actions that might be written into a learning contract.

<p>Figure 1: Sample Student Learning Contract Items</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendance. <i>I will attend at least 80 percent of class sessions.</i> • Course Participation. <i>I will contribute at least one comment to every in-class discussion.</i> • Readings. <i>I will complete all assigned readings.</i> • Study/Assignments. <i>I will spend a minimum of 1 hour per day reviewing notes and working on assignments.</i> • Course Help. <i>I will attend instructor office hours at least once per week.</i> • Group Project. <i>I will communicate at least weekly with peers in my work group (face-to-face or electronically) about our shared course project.</i>

- *Teacher Actions.* The learning contract can be strengthened by adding a section detailing those actions that the instructor agrees to undertake to support the student. For example, the contract might state that the instructor will respond within 24 hours to course questions emailed by the student or will check weekly and alert the student to any missing course work. Listing teacher responsibilities on the contract emphasizes that success in the course is a shared endeavor and can prod the student to take advantage of instructor supports that might otherwise be overlooked.

- *Sign-Off.* Both student and teacher sign the learning contract. If the parent is participating in the development of the contract, he or she also signs the contract. Because this document is a kind of 'promissory contract' (Rousseau & Parks, 1993), the student signature in particular indicates a voluntary acceptance of the learning contract and a public pledge to follow through on its terms.

Tips for Use. Here are additional ideas for using learning contracts:



- *Contracts and Whole-Group instruction.* If a number of students in a class would benefit from learning contracts as a motivational tool, teachers can incorporate them into whole-group instruction. For example, an instructor may write a series of learning-contract goals on the board (similar to the list appearing in Figure 1) and direct each student to select 3 or 4 to include in his or her own contract. The teacher would collect copies of all learning contracts and hold every student accountable for their use.
- *Contracts & Enrichment.* Learning contracts can also be a convenient way to document individualized plans for enriched instructional activities. Advanced students can fill out contracts detailing their ambitious, self-directed learning goals; these contracts can also describe extra credit or other forms of recognition that students will earn for these enrichment activities.

References

- Frank, T., & Scharff, L. F. V. (2013). Learning contracts in undergraduate courses: Impacts on student behaviors and academic performance. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 13*(4), 36-53.
- Greenwood, S. C., & McCabe, P. P. (2008). How learning contracts motivate students. *Middle School Journal, 39*(5), 13-22.
- Rousseau, D. M., & Parks, J. M. (1993). The contracts of individuals and organizations. *Research in Organizational Behavior, 15*, 1-43.

Name:

Teacher:

Class/Course:

Date:

Student Responsibilities-----

1

2

3

4

Teacher Responsibilities-----

Length of Contract-----

Sign-Offs-----

Name: Troy Blue

Teacher: Mr. Smith

Class/Course: Algebra I

Date: 16 November 2015

Troy Blue's Learning Contract

I am taking part in this learning contract because the strategies listed here will help me to learn the material and perform well in this course.

Student Responsibilities-----

I have chosen to complete the following actions:

- 1 I will be on-time for class.
- 2 I will turn in at least 80% of assigned homework, with all work completed.
- 3 I will spend a minimum of 1 hour per day reviewing notes and working on assignments.
- 4 I will check in with the instructor during his free period at least once per week and bring any questions from current work.

Teacher Responsibilities-----

My teacher will help me to achieve success in this course through these actions/supports:

1. Answer questions and offer help during weekly free-period check-ins.
2. Remind Troy weekly about any missing assignments.
3. Supply review copy of class notes each period.

Length of Contract-----

The terms of this contract will continue until:

My Algebra course grade rises to 75 or higher.

Sign-Offs-----

Mr. Frank Smith

Troy Blue

Diane Blue

Mr. Smith
Teacher

Troy Blue
Student

Diane Blue
Parent