

CONTRACT PLAN

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1. Core Definition

The **Contract Plan**, often termed a behavior contract or contingency contract, represents a formal, structured intervention strategy rooted firmly in the principles of behavioral psychology. It is fundamentally a documented agreement negotiated between a student (the subject) and an authority figure (typically a teacher, parent, or clinician), specifying mutual expectations regarding behavior modification. This contract delineates a precise, measurable target behavior that the student commits to performing or ceasing, and concurrently outlines the specific consequences, both positive and negative, that will follow the student's adherence to or deviation from the agreed-upon terms. The central function of the contract is to increase the student's sense of **responsibility** and internal locus of control regarding their actions, transforming abstract expectations into concrete, verifiable objectives. By formalizing this relationship, the plan minimizes ambiguity and ensures that all parties possess a clear understanding of the established **contingency management** structure.

Unlike informal verbal requests, the Contract Plan gains its efficacy through the visual and tangible commitment of signing a document, which symbolically elevates the seriousness of the behavioral goal. The defined structure typically includes several essential components: a clear identification of the undesirable behavior to be corrected (e.g., disruptive talking, failure to complete homework); the operational definition of the desired replacement behavior; the specific reward or advantage (positive reinforcer) contingent upon successful performance; and often, a clearly articulated reaction cost or penalty (negative consequence) for non-compliance. This dual system of reinforcement and response cost is critical, as it provides immediate and predictable feedback, which is necessary for effective behavioral shaping. Furthermore, the negotiation process itself is therapeutic, compelling the student to participate actively in setting their own goals and acknowledging the link between their efforts and subsequent outcomes, thereby fostering intrinsic motivation alongside extrinsic motivation.

The application of the Contract Plan is highly flexible but is most commonly encountered in specialized educational environments or clinical settings addressing issues such as oppositional defiance, academic procrastination, or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). The success of the plan hinges on meticulous detail, particularly ensuring that the target behavior is objective and measurable, avoiding vague terms like "be good" in favor of specifics like "remain seated during instructional periods" or "submit all assigned math problems by Friday." The documented nature of the plan serves as a continuous reference point, allowing teachers and students to track

progress systematically, providing both immediate feedback and longitudinal data necessary for evaluating the intervention's overall effectiveness and making necessary adjustments over time, ensuring the contract remains relevant and challenging as the student's behavior improves.

2. Theoretical Foundations

The theoretical bedrock of the Contract Plan is fundamentally rooted in the principles of **Behavior Modification**, an applied form of behaviorism heavily influenced by the work of B.F. Skinner on **Operant Conditioning**. Operant conditioning posits that behavior is a function of its consequences; behaviors that are followed by rewarding consequences are more likely to be repeated, while those followed by punitive consequences are less likely. The Contract Plan systematically manipulates these consequences--the "advantage" and the "reaction cost"--to shape desirable behavior. The designated advantage serves as a positive reinforcer, increasing the probability of the targeted positive behavior occurring again. For example, if Jeffrey successfully completes his studying (the operant), he earns extended screen time (the positive reinforcer), thus strengthening the association between studying and reward. This systematic, non-random delivery of reinforcement distinguishes the behavior contract from mere bribery, establishing a scientific framework for learning.

Furthermore, the structure relies heavily on the concept of the Premack Principle, sometimes known as "Grandma's Rule," which states that a high-probability activity (a desired reward or privilege) can be used to reinforce a low-probability activity (the desired behavior). For instance, if a student is highly motivated by playing video games but infrequently completes homework, the contract formalizes the arrangement: completion of the less preferred task (homework) must precede access to the preferred activity (video games). This formal scheduling of contingencies ensures that positive outcomes are directly linked to behavioral success. The inclusion of a reaction cost, though often used sparingly in educational settings compared to reinforcement, introduces the element of negative consequences, such as response cost (the removal of previously earned privileges or positive reinforcers) or mild forms of punishment, serving to decrease the frequency of the undesirable, disruptive behavior. The careful calibration of these contingencies is vital; the reinforcements must be powerful enough to motivate change, and the costs must be meaningful enough to discourage failure without being overly punitive or leading to resentment.

Beyond basic reinforcement, the explicit and written nature of the contract also leverages aspects of cognitive-behavioral theory, particularly relating to goal setting and self-monitoring. By participating in the creation and signing of the contract, the student engages in a public commitment that enhances accountability. This transition from external control (teacher telling the student what to do) to shared accountability (student agreeing to the terms) facilitates the internalization of behavioral standards. The contract serves as an external aid to self-regulation,

prompting the student to monitor their own behavior against the stated criteria. As demonstrated in the example where Jeffrey's attitude improved and he studied harder, the psychological impact of being responsible for one's own behavioral trajectory, supported by clear consequences, leads to a tangible shift in attitude and increased effort, bridging the gap between purely external behavioral manipulation and intrinsic motivation development.

3. Implementation Steps and Components

Effective implementation of the Contract Plan necessitates a rigorous, multi-step process to ensure clarity, fairness, and consistent application. The initial step involves the precise **Identification and Operational Definition** of the target behavior. Vague complaints must be translated into observable and measurable actions. For example, rather than stating the goal is "to be respectful," the contract must specify "to raise hand before speaking during lectures" or "to use socially appropriate language when addressing peers." This specificity eliminates subjective interpretation and allows both the student and the supervisor to objectively track progress, which is paramount for data collection and evaluation.

The second critical step is the **Negotiation and Goal Setting** phase. This is where the contract moves beyond a simple directive and becomes a mutual agreement. The authority figure and the student collaboratively determine realistic, attainable goals (often following the SMART criteria: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound). During this discussion, the rewards and potential costs are mutually agreed upon. It is essential that the student views the rewards as highly motivating and the costs as manageable but effective deterrents. For instance, the reward might start small and immediate (e.g., five minutes of free time for 30 minutes of sustained focus) and gradually increase in value and delay as the student masters the behavior, promoting generalization and maintenance.

The final implementation steps focus on **Formal Documentation and Consistent Execution**. The contract must be written down, clearly detailing the target behavior, the schedule of reinforcement (when the reward is delivered, e.g., hourly, daily, weekly), the designated reward, the response cost for failure, and the duration of the contract. Both the student and the supervisor sign and date the document, often witnessed by a third party (like a parent or administrator), solidifying the commitment. Following signing, execution requires unwavering consistency. Data collection must occur regularly--tracking instances of success and failure--and the consequences (both advantages and reaction costs) must be delivered immediately and reliably according to the written schedule. Inconsistency undermines the established contingency relationship, leading to extinction of the desired behavior or an increase in behavioral volatility, thereby nullifying the contract's effectiveness. Regular review meetings are also necessary to discuss progress, troubleshoot barriers, and adjust the terms as the student achieves initial goals.

4. Types of Contingencies: Advantages and Reaction Costs

The core mechanism of the Contract Plan involves the strategic deployment of two primary types of contingencies: **Advantages** (Positive Reinforcement) and **Reaction Costs** (Negative Consequence/Punishment). The advantages are designed to incentivize the student by providing access to desirable items, activities, or privileges immediately following successful completion of the target behavior. These reinforcers must be individualized; what motivates one student (e.g., extra computer time) may not motivate another (e.g., peer recognition). Common advantages include tangible rewards (stickers, small toys, snacks), activity rewards (listening to music, choosing a classroom job), or social rewards (praise, positive attention from parents/teachers). The power of the positive advantage lies in its ability to create a motivational loop, making the effort required for the desired behavior less burdensome than the reward is desirable. Crucially, the reinforcement schedule is often denser at the beginning of the contract, transitioning to intermittent reinforcement as the behavior becomes established, which aids in behavioral maintenance after the contract is phased out.

Conversely, Reaction Costs serve as deterrents, diminishing the likelihood of undesirable behavior recurrence. These costs must be carefully chosen to avoid fostering hostility or damaging the student-teacher relationship, prioritizing non-physical and educationally relevant penalties. The most common form is **Response Cost**, where earned privileges or tokens are withdrawn following a behavioral infraction. For example, if a student earns points for attending class on time, arriving late results in the loss of a predefined number of those points. Other forms include mild forms of **Time-Out** (removing access to reinforcement for a brief period) or restitution (the student must fix the damage or apologize for the disruption). Effective reaction costs are always predetermined, clearly defined in the contract, and applied impersonally and immediately. The explicit inclusion of these costs ensures that the student understands the full scope of consequences, reinforcing the concept that behavior choices have predictable, measurable outcomes, which is central to building self-discipline.

The most successful Contract Plans often utilize a token economy integrated with the contract, where success is rewarded with tokens or points which the student can later exchange for the stated advantages. This method provides flexibility and allows the student to tolerate a delay between the desired behavior and the ultimate reward, which is a crucial life skill. Furthermore, the balance between advantages and reaction costs is key to the contract's overall efficacy and ethical acceptance. Contracts heavily skewed toward punishment tend to yield only temporary compliance and can harm student motivation and self-esteem. Therefore, expert application of the Contract Plan emphasizes a substantial overweighting of positive reinforcement (advantages) over negative consequences, ensuring that the student is primarily motivated by the desire to succeed and gain reward rather than the fear of penalty.

5. Applications in Educational Settings

The Contract Plan is a highly versatile tool employed across various educational contexts, ranging from standard elementary classroom management to intensive behavioral interventions in special education. In general education, contracts are highly effective for managing common classroom difficulties, such as consistent homework submission, participation in group activities, and adherence to classroom rules (e.g., remaining seated, respecting turn-taking). For a typical student, a contract might focus on a specific academic deficit, such as improving reading fluency by setting criteria for practice time and rewarding performance improvements with privileges like library access or peer tutoring roles. The structured nature of the plan provides teachers with an objective mechanism for dealing with behavioral issues that might otherwise consume disproportionate time and energy, allowing for consistent, predictable consequences that benefit the entire learning environment.

In Special Education, particularly for students with emotional/behavioral disorders (EBD) or specific learning disabilities (SLD) that manifest as behavioral deficits, the Contract Plan often forms a central component of an **Individualized Education Program (IEP)**. For these students, the plan can target complex behaviors such as aggression, self-injurious behavior, or severe non-compliance. Here, the contract is highly individualized, developed only after a comprehensive Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) identifies the function (or purpose) of the challenging behavior. The resulting contract then aims to teach and reinforce a functionally equivalent replacement behavior. For example, if a student acts out to escape difficult tasks (the function), the contract rewards them for using an appropriate communication strategy (the replacement behavior) to request a break, rather than disrupting the class. This targeted approach ensures that the intervention addresses the root cause of the behavior, not just the observable symptom.

Beyond individual contracts, the underlying principles are often adapted for group contingency management, though individual contracts remain the primary application. The plans also serve as a crucial bridge between home and school environments. When parents are included in the contracting process, signing the document and administering agreed-upon rewards or costs at home, the intervention gains immense power through generalization and consistency across settings. This home-school collaboration is essential because many target behaviors, such as study habits or respect for authority, require consistent reinforcement across the student's entire ecological system. When Jeffrey's parents and teachers both noticed his improved studying, as mentioned in the source content, it illustrates the powerful synergistic effect of coordinated adult attention and consistent application of the contingency framework across the student's daily life.

6. Effectiveness and Empirical Evidence

Empirical evidence overwhelmingly supports the effectiveness of behavior contracts, particularly

when implemented with fidelity and adherence to core behavioral principles. Studies consistently show that the formalized, documented nature of the contract leads to greater accountability and clearer expectations, resulting in measurable improvements in targeted behaviors, ranging from reduced off-task behavior in classrooms to increased academic output. One significant reason for this efficacy is the principle of immediacy: the contract establishes a system for the rapid delivery of consequences, minimizing the delay between behavior and consequence, which maximizes the learning effect, especially for younger students or those with attentional deficits. Furthermore, the commitment inherent in signing a contract, leveraging social commitment theory, provides an extra motivational boost that verbal agreements lack, making students more likely to follow through on challenging behavioral goals.

The use of the Contract Plan is particularly well-documented as an effective strategy within the broader framework of Positive Behavior Supports (PBS) and Response to Intervention (RTI) models in schools. Its measurable nature facilitates rigorous data collection, allowing educators to track baseline behavior, intervention response, and maintenance gains. This data-driven approach means that if a contract is not yielding the desired results after a predetermined period, the team can quickly adjust the reinforcement schedule, modify the reward, or clarify the target behavior, ensuring that intervention time is optimized. For students who exhibit low levels of intrinsic motivation for academic tasks, the external, tangible motivation provided by the contract serves as a scaffolding mechanism, allowing them to experience success and the positive feelings associated with achievement, which can eventually lead to the development of intrinsic interest.

However, the effectiveness of the Contract Plan is heavily contingent upon several mediating factors. First, the reward must truly be valued by the student (high incentive value), and second, the teacher must apply the consequences (both positive and negative) consistently 100% of the time. Research highlights that contracts fail most often when implementation is lax, or when the goals are set too high initially, leading to frustration and contract rejection. When successful, the Contract Plan not only corrects specific maladaptive behaviors but also teaches crucial metacognitive skills, such as self-monitoring, goal setting, and understanding cause-and-effect relationships, providing students with a structured strategy they can eventually internalize and apply to future challenges. The documented success in shifting a student's attitude, as seen in the Jeffrey example, underscores the powerful psychological impact of formalized commitment and predictable success.

7. Challenges and Ethical Considerations

Despite its proven effectiveness, the Contract Plan faces several implementation challenges and ethical considerations that practitioners must navigate carefully. One primary challenge is ensuring the **“fidelity of implementation”**. Behavioral contracts require significant administrative effort, including continuous data tracking, frequent negotiation, and immediate delivery of consequences.

In busy educational settings, teachers may struggle to maintain the required consistency, which quickly erodes the contract's effectiveness by weakening the contingency relationship. If a reward is promised but delayed or forgotten, the student learns that the agreement is unreliable, leading to non-compliance and resistance.

Ethically, concerns often revolve around the potential for **coercion and fairness**. Although contracts are ideally negotiated mutually, power dynamics often exist where the student may feel compelled to sign an agreement simply to avoid punitive measures imposed by the authority figure. Practitioners must ensure the student genuinely understands the terms and feels invested in the process, rather than merely submitting to an imposed structure. Furthermore, the selection of rewards and reaction costs must be scrutinized. Rewards should not be things the student is already entitled to, nor should reaction costs involve the removal of fundamental rights (e.g., access to meals or necessary services). Over-reliance on severe response costs can lead to negative emotional side effects, such as anxiety, avoidance, or hostility, necessitating a commitment to positive reinforcement as the dominant motivational strategy.

Another significant debate centers on the concept of **generalization and dependence**. Critics argue that while behavior contracts effectively manage behavior in the short term, they may foster dependence on external rewards, potentially hindering the development of intrinsic motivation. If a student only behaves appropriately when a contract is physically present and a reward is immediate, the behavior may extinguish once the contract is removed. Addressing this requires careful planning during the phasing-out stage of the contract. Successful plans systematically fade the reliance on external tokens and rewards, substituting them with natural, intrinsic reinforcers (e.g., the satisfaction of a job well done, improved grades, peer acceptance) and shifting the contract from frequent, immediate rewards to infrequent, delayed reinforcement, thereby promoting the maintenance of positive behavior long after the formal contract has concluded.

Further Reading

[Operant Conditioning \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Behavior Modification \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Contingency Management \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Individualized Education Program \(IEP\) \(Wikipedia\)](#)