A Specs Grading Primer

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**A Traditional Rubric**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Traditional Rubric** | **Excellent (4)**  **A** | **Good (3)**  **B** | **Adequate (2)**  **C** | **Poor (1)**  **D** | Score for Category |
| Criteria 1 |  |  |  |  |  |
| Criteria 2 |  |  |  |  |  |
| Criteria 3 |  |  |  |  |  |
| Criteria 4 |  |  |  |  |  |
| Final Score | | | | | /16 |

* (Columns) A range of quality/performance levels correspond to (Rows) each criteria
* Feedback is tied to grade

**Vs.**

**a SPECS Rubric**

SIMPLE

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Specs Rubric** | **Met** | **Not Met** |
| Criteria 1 |  |  |

COMPLEX

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Specs Rubric** | **Met** | **Not Met** |
| Criteria 1 |  |  |
| Criteria 2 |  |  |
| Criteria 3 |  |  |
| Criteria 4 |  |  |

* (Columns) To “Meet” a specification means achieving at least ‘B’-level/Good quality/performance in (rows) each criteria
* Feedback is tied to an option to revise and resubmit

**What Purposes Do Grades Serve? (Traditionally)**

In *Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment in College,* Barbara Walvoord and Virginia Anderson identify the multiple roles that grades serve:

* as an **evaluation**of student work;
* as a **means of communicating**to students, parents, graduate schools, professional schools, and future employers about a student’s **performance in college**and **potential for further success;**
* as a **source of motivation**to students for continued learning and improvement;
* as a **means of organizing**a lesson, a unit, or a semester in that grades mark transitions in a course and bring closure to it.

Additionally, grading provides students with **feedback on their own learning**, clarifying for them what they understand, what they don’t understand, and where they can improve. Grading also provides **feedback to instructors on their students’ learning**, information that can inform future teaching decisions.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**VS.**

**What purposes do grades serve?**

**(IN the innovative assessment**

**practice of Specs)**

**In innovative assessment, grades serve:**

* as an **evaluation**of student work, grading provides students with **feedback on their own learning**, clarifying for them what they understand, what they don’t understand, and where they can improve.
* as a **source of motivation**to students for continued learning and improvement;
* as a **means of organizing**a lesson, a unit, or a semester in that grades mark transitions in a course and bring closure to it.

**main elements of a specs grading system**

Specs grading is flexible – you can adopt one or two of the three elements or apply an element in some cases and not others.

ELEMENT 1

Specs is a one-level, uni-dimensional rubric – they define truly satisfactory as at least B work (maybe even A-) rigor part ensured. All assignments and tests graded satisfactory/unsatisfactory, pass/fail.

There is no partial credit given–students earn all the points associated with the points, or none of them, depending on whether their work meets the particular specifications you laid out. The specs for a complex assignment are written very carefully, clearly, and thoroughly.

This is formulaic: You are laying out a formula that is important for your students to learn and follow.

ELEMENT 2

Specs offers flexibility policies that allow second chances and buffer the riskiness of no partial credit. Example Flexibility Policy:

Token Economy. At the beginning of the term, give students one, two, or three virtual tokens that give them the chance to:

* Revise an unsatisfactory assignment
* Hand in an assignment 24 hours late without penalty
* Take a makeup exam

If you choose, you can let students earn tokens by submitting satisfactory work early, successfully completing additional assignments, or doing whatever you’d like to reward. Likewise, you can give the student(s) with the most tokens at the end something desirable, like a chance to skip the final exam or a gift card to a pizza/coffee shop.

Element 3

Bundles of Assignments/Tests determine Final Course Grade. A bundle is a set of assignments tied together through learning outcomes. How to form a Bundle:

Set X number of assignments and tests that students will complete in your course (papers, essays, objective items, problem sets, programs, designs, some combination of these)

* Each assignment and test has a companion assignment that enhances its learning value, such as self-regulated learning exercise, a paraphrase of your feedback or revision plan, or a self-assessment. Together, they form a bundle

Example Bundle 1

Your course offers 10 bundles

* Number each bundle (1-5) according to their challenge level so that the lower numbers designate relatively easy and lower-level thinking assignments and tests and higher numbers indicate increasingly demanding and higher-thinking assignments and tests.
* To complete a bundle, a student must finish all the assignments and tests within it at a satisfactory level (which means at least a B level). Each piece of work within a bundle must meet all your specs for satisfactory completion.

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| For a D | students have to complete bundles 1 through 5, which require achieving only knowledge/recall outcomes, plus the ability to write brief reflections. |
| For a C | they have to complete bundles 1 through 6, where bundle 6 also requires comprehension, plus the ability to correct their errors. |
| For a B | they have to complete bundles 1 through 8, where bundles 7 and 8 also require application, plus the ability to plan improvement strategies. |
| For an A | they have to complete all 10 bundles, where bundles 9 and 10 also require evaluation and creation, plus the ability to assess their work. |

Example Bundle 2

You course offers four bundles

* Ranges from relatively easy/basic to very challenging/advanced
* The more challenging bundles will require students to achieve more learning outcomes, including higher level thinking about broader and more complex knowledge

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| For a D | students have to complete only the easiest and most basic bundle. |
| For a C | they have to complete that basic bundle and a somewhat more challenging one. |
| For a B | they have to complete these two bundles and a third one that is even more challenging. |
| For an A | they have to complete all four bundles, the fourth of which is the most challenging. |

Flexible application of specs elements (Examples):

* Integrate pass/fail grading and tokens into a course but retain your current point system
* Grade only some assignments and tests pass/fail
* Institute bundles only for grades C and D, or only for grades A and B

All information in this primer is adapted from:

[Linda B. Nilson, “Yes, Virginia, There’s a Better Way to Grade.”](https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2016/01/19/new-ways-grade-more-effectively-essay) January 2016 *Inside Higher Ed*

[“Grading Student Work.”](https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/grading-student-work/#criteria) Vanderbilt University Center for Teaching

WORDS FOR THOUGHT

“So take heart. If you don’t like the impact that

Your grading system has on you and your students,

you don’t have to tolerate it anymore.”

LINDA B. Nilson (2016)

SpecifyVerb

*Identify clearly and definitely*

* [with clause] state a fact or requirement clearly and precisely

*the agency failed to specify that workers were not their employees*

* Include in an architect’s or engineer’s specifications

*naval architects specified circular portholes*

Specification Noun

*an act of describing or identifying something precisely or of stating a precise requirement*

* a detailed description of the design and materials used to make something
* a standard of workmanship, materials, etc., required to be met in a place of work

*everything was built to a higher specification*

*Thesaurus*

1. *There was no clear specification of objectives:* Statement, stating, naming, identification, definition, defining, describing, description, setting out, setting down, framing, itemizing, designation, designating, detailing, listing, spelling out, enumeration, enumerating, particularizing, cataloging, citing, instancing; stipulation, prescribing, prescription, commanding, ordaining
2. (usually **specifications**) *air-raid shelters built to government specifications were deathtraps:* Instructions, stipulations, requirements, conditions, provisions, restrictions, provisos, guidelines, parameters, order; description, details, delineation

Criterion (plural: Criteria) Noun

*A principle or standard by which something may be judged or decided*

*the launch came too close to violating safety criteria*

*Thesaurus*

Basis, point of reference, standard, norm, yardstick, benchmark, touchstone, test, formula, measure, gauge, scale, barometer, indicator, litmus test; **specification**, guide, guideline, guiding principle, principle, rule, law, canon, convention

1. https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/grading-student-work/#criteria [↑](#footnote-ref-1)