



# Center for Teaching and Learning

## Specifications (Specs) Grading: Emphasizing Learning and Deemphasizing Grades

### What It Is

Specifications grading is a [better way to grade](#) that exemplifies these features:

- Instruction and assessments are organized around a set of learning outcomes.
- Evaluation of student success is based on the achievement of clearly articulated specifications. Tests and assignments are graded satisfactory/unsatisfactory (S/U).
- Course grades are determined by the completion of bundled tests and assignments.
- Students are provided with opportunities to revise and resubmit unsatisfactory work.

### How It Works

<b>Develop clear learning outcomes</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use <a href="#">backward design</a> to align learning outcomes, assessments, and instructional activities.</li> <li>• Use <a href="#">Bloom’s revised outcomes chart</a> to articulate low- and higher-level learning outcomes.</li> <li>• Use an <a href="#">outcomes map</a> to identify ultimate, mediating, and foundational outcomes.</li> </ul>
<b>Set specifications for tests and assignments</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide <a href="#">clear directions</a> for assignments. Define acceptable work.</li> <li>• Grade all assignments (S/U) without any partial credit; set requirements for satisfactory at B-level or higher.</li> <li>• Use a clear <a href="#">one-level rubric</a> to grade assignments.</li> </ul>
<b>Create grade bundles</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cluster groupings of assignments (<a href="#">bundles</a>) that are associated with final course grades.</li> <li>• Tailor <a href="#">bundles to assess students’ achievement of specific learning outcomes</a>.</li> <li>• Ensure that the <a href="#">bundles associated with higher grades</a> assess the mastery of more or advanced, higher-level outcomes.</li> </ul>
<b>Add flexibility—integrate “safety-net mechanisms” (Nilson, 2015, p. 64)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Introduce a system of tokens to reduce the stress of all or nothing S/U grading.</li> <li>• Allocate between 2 and 5 tokens per student at the beginning of the term. A token can be redeemed to:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ To revise unsatisfactory work, take a makeup exam, retake an exam, or get a 24-hour extension on an assignment.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• When possible, have teaching assistants track token redemptions in a shared online spreadsheet (Blackstone &amp; Oldmixon, 2019).</li> </ul>

### BENEFITS

- May help increase students’ self-regulation, mastery learning, and instructor transparency.
- Students’ grades are more valid and reliable indicators of what they have learned.
- May help shift students’ focus from points and grades to outcomes achievement.

## ADVICE

- Start with [five W's questions](#). Tell your [department chair](#) in advance.
- [Describe the grading approach](#) in the syllabus, on the first day of class, and provide reminders.
- If specs grading is not feasible, use [4 simple ways to ease the spotlight off points](#). Also, [make your assessments help students learn](#).

Sources: [Blackstone, B. & Oldmixon, E. \(2019\)](#); Nilson, L. B. (2015). Specifications grading (book); [Nilson, L. B. \(2016\)](#); [Pope et al. 2020](#); [Talbert, R. \(2015\)](#).

