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

| Develop clear learning outcomes | • Use backward design to align learning outcomes, assessments, and instructional activities.  
  • Use Bloom’s revised outcomes chart to articulate low- and higher-level learning outcomes.  
  • Use an outcomes map to identify ultimate, mediating, and foundational outcomes. |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Set specifications for tests and assignments | • Provide clear directions for assignments. Define acceptable work.  
  • Grade all assignments (S/U) without any partial credit; set requirements for satisfactory at B-level or higher.  
  • Use a clear one-level rubric to grade assignments. |
| Create grade bundles | • Cluster groupings of assignments (bundles) that are associated with final course grades.  
  • Tailor bundles to assess students’ achievement of specific learning outcomes.  
  • Ensure that the bundles associated with higher grades assess the mastery of more or advanced, higher-level outcomes. |
| Add flexibility—integrate “safety-net mechanisms” (Nilson, 2015, p. 64) | • Introduce a system of tokens to reduce the stress of all or nothing S/U grading.  
  • Allocate between 2 and 5 tokens per student at the beginning of the term. A token can be redeemed to:  
    o To revise unsatisfactory work, take a makeup exam, retake an exam, or get a 24-hour extension on an assignment.  
  • When possible, have teaching assistants track token redemptions in a shared online spreadsheet (Blackstone & Oldmixon, 2019). |

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.