

SPEED UP WITH SPECIFICATIONS GRADING

T. H. M. Gellar-Goad
Wake Forest University
Department of Classical Languages

thmgg@wfu.edu
@thmggwfu
wfu.academia.edu/ted

SPECS GRADING IN A NUTSHELL

Linda Nilson, *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, & Saving Faculty Time*

- all assignments are evaluated pass/fail
 - detailed lists of criteria (checklists or single-row rubrics)
 - students choose their grade by satisfactorily completing a set number of assignments
- (cf. Atul Gawande, *The Checklist Manifesto: How to Get Things Right* — last page of this handout)

WHY SPECS GRADING?

- a huge time-saver for faculty that gives students clarity and focus
- broadly applicable and customizable on both large and small scales
- fosters ownership and *intrinsic motivation* — on outcomes, not points/grades
- higher standards leads to higher quality, achievement, satisfaction

IMPLEMENTATION BASICS

- explicitly state learning outcomes (basic, advanced, optional) for course
- link old and new assignments to learning outcomes
- develop detailed checklists or pass/fail single-row rubrics for each assignment
- include recommended times (and deadlines, if necessary) for each assignment
- identify learning outcomes necessary for A-level, B-level, C-level (and D-level?) mastery
- group assignments into “packages” corresponding to each course/unit letter grade
- assess each assignment according to pass/fail standards
- assign final letter grades based on satisfactory completion of “packages”
- *optional: include system for assignment resubmission, exemption “tokens,” or the like*

SELLING IT TO STUDENTS AND ADMINISTRATORS

students

- extremely clear expectations & standards
 - student choice; instructor’s trust in students
 - closer to real-world situations / adult experience
 - explicit link between work and mastery of course skills/content
- (also see sample syllabus paragraph at end of handout)

administrators

- despite pass/fail grading of assignments, the final outcome is a letter grade
- rigorous, clear assessment system
- standards-based performance

PEDAGOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS

cognitive frameworks (Nilson ch. 3)

- Bloom's taxonomy of learning tasks
 - knowledge
 - comprehension
 - application
 - analysis
 - synthesis (or evaluation)
 - evaluation (or synthesis/creation)
- Perry's stages of cognitive development
 - dualism
 - multiplicity
 - relativism
 - commitment
- Wolcott & Lynch's "thinking performance patterns"
 - Confused Fact-Finder
 - Biased Jumper
 - Perpetual Analyzer
 - Pragmatic Performer
 - Strategic Re-Visioner
- higher grades: higher hurdles? more hurdles? Both?

motivation (Nilson pp. 106–109)

- self-efficacy
- expectancy-value theory
- goal orientation (performance vs. learning)
- self-determination
- goal-setting

TRADITIONAL vs. SPECS GRADING (Nilson pp. 125–127)

standard points grading system
series of assignments required of all students

all students required to attend all classes

no clear link between grades and learning
all students assumed to achieve all outcomes
multi-level rubrics
partial credit
extra credit or retakes
late work policies

→ pass/fail-based specs system
→ students select desired grade and produce appropriate amount & quality
→ students seeking a lower grade may opt out of later assignments
→ explicit links between work & outcomes
→ grading based in demonstrated learning
→ specs derived from top two rubric levels
→ all assignments pass/fail only
→ limited resubmissions / waivers (tokens)
→ limited (tokens)

SAMPLE ASSIGNMENT CHECKLISTS

speech (for The Threshold of Democracy: Athens, 403 BCE)

To complete your Formal Speech satisfactorily, do this: (approx. 2–3 hours)

- email your talking points to me at least 24 hours prior to your speech:
 - a bulleted list of 4–6 items, each one sentence or shorter, including:
 - your proposal as you will write it on the board
 - the basic arguments you will use
 - a quote from Thucydides or Plato in support of your argument
 - how you will rebut likely counterarguments
 - a list of all sources you consulted in preparing your talking points
 - a short paragraph (2–4 sentences) explaining how your speech fits into your faction's agenda (or, if indeterminate, your own agenda)
- use only talking points, or nothing written at all, to deliver your speech
- deliver your speech practicedly and skillfully:
 - use appropriate *pacing*
 - use appropriate *volume*
 - use appropriate *tone*
 - speak with *fluency*
 - speak with *clarity*
- actively and preparedly respond during the question/discussion period
- email an informal speech reaction to me within 24 hours of your speech:
 - in what ways were your speech and delivery successful?
 - unsuccessful?
 - what will you focus on for your next speech (in this game or next)?

debrief paper draft

Review your role sheet (and, where applicable, your faction sheet), your Brief Draft, and my feedback on your Brief Draft. Think about everything — each event — that happened during the game, and your part in how things unfolded. Write a self-narrative about the game, and an evaluation of how you think you did. What did you do well? What did you do not-well? What are you proud of? How could you have done better? What advice would you give the You who was writing the role/agenda brief? (You can't say "So-and-so has X secret agenda!" or other gimmicky pieces of advice.) **What have you learned** from this scenario? What will you take away from this part of this course? What do you want to remember in five or ten years?

To complete your Debrief Draft satisfactorily, do this: (approx. 1.5 hours)

- email your paper to me by the beginning of class on the date it's due
- write 350–500 words, no more no less
- use a clear, direct, concise style
- write from your own (not your character's) first-person perspective
- demonstrate your reflection & metacognition by including:
 - an evaluation of how you think you did
 - what you did well and not-well
 - how you could have done better
 - what you learned from the game, both content and skills
 - your long-term takeaway from this part of the course

Carefully read your new role sheet and do some digging to find out what more you can about your character, as well as any other characters you'd like to know more about at this point. Read, in the *Crisis of Catiline* section of your coursepack, pages 7–25, 35–59, 105–108, 114–115, and 118–123. Think about the differences between Athenian and Roman systems of government. Research the garment a Roman senator would wear to the Senate. Write up a response that fulfills the criteria in the checklist below. Begin working on your Role/Agenda Brief, which is due on Friday.

To complete your Debrief Draft satisfactorily, do this: (approx. 2 hours)

- email your homework to me by the beginning of class on Wednesday
- write a paragraph discussing *in character* the issues in your reading
- write a paragraph about the key differences between Athenian and Roman systems of government
- describe the Roman senator's standard garment:
 - what is it called?
 - could it be done with the same fabric you used for the Athenian *chiton*?
 - does it require a pin?
 - does it require a belt?
 - how will you go about putting it on when we begin the game?

SAMPLE SPECS-GRADING UNITS

The Threshold of Democracy: Athens, 403 BCE

For the Athens *Reacting* unit (25% of your final grade), letter grades are earned by satisfactorily completing all assignments as follows:

- C**
 - (1) Brief Draft
 - (2) 2 Formal Speeches
 - (3) Lenaia Festival Play
 - (4) 4 out of 7 Homeworks
- B** all assignments required for a C, plus 2 additional Homeworks, and:
 - (5) Brief Revision
 - (6) Debrief Draft
 - (7) Speaking Skills Check-In
 - (8) informally speaking at least once each Assembly session
- A** all assignments required for a B, plus the last Homework, and:
 - (9) robust participation in each Assembly session, including citations of ancient sources and evidence-based rebuttals of opposing arguments
 - (10) at least one outside-of-class in-character cultural act, well-researched and documented for me: e.g., public performance of a scene from tragedy/comedy (with video), curse tablet (with photos), non-vandalizing "graffiti" or speech in the quad (with photos/video, respectively), vase-painting (submitted to me)

If you don't earn a C, you'll earn a grade of F. Each absence from a game session (including prep and postmortem sessions) will reduce the letter grade earned by a partial grade (A to A–, C– to D+, and so forth).

The Pluto Debate: The International Astronomical Union Defines a Planet (chapter-length game)

For the Pluto *Reacting* mini-game (which takes the place of one test), letter grades are earned by satisfactorily completing all assignments as follows:

- C** (1) Formal Speech
(2) Split-Role Coordination Report (or, for single-player roles, Brief)
- B** all assignments required for a C, plus:
(3) Planet Data Plotter Graph
(4) informally speaking at least once each session
- A** all assignments required for a B, plus:
(5) an explanatory paragraph accompanying the Planet Data Plotter Graph
(6) robust participation in each session, including evidence-based rebuttals of opposing arguments

If you don't earn a C, you'll earn a grade of F. Absence from a game session (including prep and postmortem) will reduce the grade earned by a full letter.

SAMPLE SPECS-GRADING COURSE STRUCTURE

For this course, letter grades are earned through completion of modules, each of which consists of a bundle of pass/fail assignments:

- C** the following modules:
(1) The Threshold of Democracy: Athens, 403 BCE (*RTTP* game)
(2) The Res Publica in Transition: Rome, 63–44 BCE (*RTTP* game)
- B** all modules required for a C, plus:
(3) The Heirs of Alexander (*RTTP* minigame)
(4) Speaking Skills Check-In
(5) Learning to Learn
- A** all modules required for a B, plus:
(6) The Pluto Debate (*RTTP* minigame)
(7) Ancient Cultural Experience

You need to complete a module in full for it to count. If you don't earn at least a C, you earn a grade of F. Each unexplained absence from a class session (beyond 2 freebie absences) will reduce the letter grade earned by a partial grade (A to A–, C– to D+, and so forth). **But:** once you've completed the modules you need to earn the grade you desire, you can **opt-out** of all class sessions left by notifying me by email.

You begin the semester with 3 *symboloi*. Each *symbolos* may be handed in to me in exchange for one of the following:

- a 24-hour extension on one assignment submission (not a Formal Speech)
- a resubmission of an assignment that didn't pass (not a Formal Speech)
- an additional freebie absence beyond the second
- at the end of the semester, 3 *symboloi* can buy a keepsake memento
- at the end of the semester, 2 *symboloi* can buy a book prize

SAMPLE SPECS-GRADING SYLLABUS SPIEL

Unlike most classes at Wake Forest University, this course uses the “*specifications grading*” methodology. In a traditional course, everyone completes the same assignments and gets letter or percentage grades on each assignment, with the final course grade calculated by a weighted aggregate of all assignments. In a specifications-grading system, on the other hand, all assignments are evaluated on a high-standards pass/fail basis using detailed checklists of assignment requirements and expectations. Letter grades are earned by the satisfactory completion of a certain number and kind of assignments. Students *choose* what letter grade they desire and complete all assignments designated as part of that letter grade.

This system allows you as a student much more choice and is closer to the kinds of real-world experiences that adult life entails (think driver’s license exams and the like). This system is more rigorous than traditional grading and builds on well-documented links between high expectations and student success. It creates a safe but challenging environment in which you will thrive, because each assignment is assessed pass/fail, and the requirements for a pass are always clearly delineated. It will be easy for you to tell whether your work is complete, done in good faith, and consistent with my expectations and the intended learning outcome.

There’s some flexibility available in the form of *tokens*, which you’ll start with at the beginning of the semester and which you’ll be able to use to resubmit an unsuccessful assignment, get a temporary extension, or the like — or if you work hard and conserve them, you can get a bigger reward at the end of term.

As you will see as you read the rest of this syllabus, it is up to you what final letter grade you earn in this course. Your satisfactory completion of assignments will determine that grade. You might choose to *wade into* the course content & skills by fulfilling the C-level requirements. You might want to take things further and *swim around* by additionally completing the B-level requirements. Or you might go the distance and *dive right in* with the A-level challenge. Regardless of your path, I’m here to help. The choice is yours!

MORE ON CHECKLISTS from Atul Gawande, *The Checklist Manifesto*

p. 120: “There are good checklists and bad.... Bad checklists are vague and imprecise. They are too long; they are hard to use; they are impractical.... They treat the people using the tools as dumb and try to spell out every step. They turn people’s brains off rather than turn them on. Good checklists, on the other hand, are precise. They are efficient, to the point, and easy to use.”

pp. 122–123: “When you’re making a checklist...you have a number of key decisions. You must define a clear pause point at which the checklist is supposed to be used.... You must decide whether you want a DO-CONFIRM checklist [a retrospective list after the activity has been performed] or a READ-DO checklist [a recipe-like checklist where tasks are completed as they are checked off].... The checklist cannot be lengthy. A rule of thumb some use is to keep it between five and nine items, which is the limit of working memory.”

p. 128: tasks that users are always going to perform automatically shouldn’t be on the checklist.

p. 177: “The fear people have about the idea of adherence to protocol is rigidity. They imagine mindless automatons, heads down in a checklist, incapable of looking out...and coping with the real world in front of them. But what you find, when a checklist is well made, is exactly the opposite. The checklist gets the dumb stuff out of the way, the routines your brain shouldn’t have to occupy itself with..., and lets it rise above to focus on the hard stuff”