



Shorten Grading Time

Using specifications (specs) grading in an intensive writing course

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Introduction & Need for Innovation

- Evaluation is key to the learning process (Bloom, 1956) and instructors spend a great deal of time providing feedback to students in hopes of improved future work (Orsmond, Merry, & Reiling, 2005).
- Writing assignments can be time consuming to grade given the assignment length and tedious nature of correcting mistakes and providing explanations.
- Specifications (specs) grading aims to reduce time and stress associated with evaluation.

How it Works

Specs grading assesses whether student work meets certain specifications or requirements (Nilson, 2015).

Using a specs approach, **work meeting or exceeding specifications earns full credit**, while **work not meeting specifications receives no credit**.

1. One of the last projects in the semester was chosen for specs grading.
 - *This *timing* was selected as it was assumed most of the students had learned proper writing based upon previous assignment feedback.
 - *The *assignment* selected for specs grading was worth relatively few points overall which the instructors hoped would lessen student anxiety.
2. A specs rubric was created to clearly outline characteristics of satisfactory and unsatisfactory assignments.
3. Students were informed (via the assignment description and two emails) of the different grading structure and encouraged to carefully review the rubric for grading criteria. Asking questions about the rubric or assignment was encouraged.
4. Students were instructed to watch a video about modern animal agriculture practices and then write a short journal entry.
 - *Journaling was selected as it enhances critical thinking, challenges perspectives, and provides a practical way to understand content (Heimstra, 2001).

Specs grading allows for **flexibility** after student work has been graded. Students not earning full credit on their first attempt were individually emailed with directions on how to **resubmit** the assignment.

Results to Date & Implications

- 🕒 Compared to a similar assignment using traditional grading, **specs grading took significantly less time**.
- ✍️ **Less time** was spent determining partial credit and **writing detailed justifications**.
- 👤 No students asked questions about the assignment or rubric which may imply **greater attention paid to assignment details**.
- 🏆 **All 49 students submitted the specs-graded assignment**, but seven did not meet the specifications. Of those who did not meet the specs, four **successfully resubmitted the assignment**.
- 🏆 The **majority of students (n = 30) received full points on both assignments**, but 17 students **scored better with specs grading** than traditional grading.

Future Plans & Advice to Others

Useful, but not for all Assignments

This approach is not appropriate for all assignments. More student feedback is needed to evaluate.

Be Mindful of Additional Factors before Deciding to use Specs

Instructors must pay careful attention to student preferences, and the structure of assignments in general.

Manage Student Anxiety

An all or nothing grading scheme can heighten student anxiety. Instructors should be mindful of this threat and implement safety-nets to help students perform at high levels.

Importance of Timing

Consider students' levels of knowledge and abilities to meet the specifications set. Using specs for assignments later in the semester are suggested.

Resources Needed

- A **comprehensive communication plan** is needed to inform students of the grading structure.
- **Detailed rubrics** serve as a checklist.
- Instructors should develop a **safety-net plan** for those students not initially meeting the requirements.

References

Bloom, B. S. (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives: The classification of educational goals*. New York, NY: David McKay Co., Inc.

Hiemstra, R. (2001). Uses and benefits of journal writing. In L. M. English & M. A. Gillen, (Eds.), *Promoting journal writing in adult education: New directions for adult and continuing education* (pp. 19-26). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Nilson, L. (2015). *Specifications grading: Restoring rigor, motivating students, and saving faculty time*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, LLC.

Orsmond, P., Merry, S., & Reiling, K. (2005). Biology students' utilization of tutors' formative feedback: A qualitative interview study. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 30(4), 369-386.

Writing Prompt
ACOM 2302
Due: April 28

For this writing prompt, you will be graded as either "satisfactory" or "unsatisfactory."

If your writing is satisfactory, you will receive the full 25 points associated with the assignment. If your writing is unsatisfactory, you will receive zero points. **You must meet all criteria outlined below in order to receive a satisfactory grade.** However, if your writing is unsatisfactory, you will have one opportunity to revise and resubmit your assignment.

By this point in the course, you have had ample opportunities to practice using proper grammar, spelling, and punctuation, along with fundamental writing techniques. If more than five errors are found within your response, the grading will cease, and you will receive no credit.

Review your work carefully and reach out to your instructor or TA if you have questions about your work, or the criteria listed below.

Criteria	
Satisfactory (25 points)	A satisfactory assignment will display the following characteristics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No more than five issues with grammar, spelling and punctuation. • All sentences are clear and make sense to read. • The student's name is listed in the header of the document. • The response is between 75 and 100 words. • The submitted document is a PDF or Word file.
Unsatisfactory (0 points)	An unsatisfactory assignment will display the following characteristics: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More than five issues with grammar, spelling, and punctuation are present within the document. • Sentences are unclear and do not make sense. • The student has not included his or her name on the document. • The response is either fewer than 75 words, or more than 100 words. • The submitted document is neither a PDF or Word file.

Figure 1: Specs rubric for journaling assignment

Assignment Grade: _____ / 25

Writing Prompt 2
ACOM 2302
Due: May 5, 2019

	Criteria	Points	Notes
Format	The student's name is listed in the header of the document. The submitted document is a PDF or Word file.	5	
Content	The response is between 75 and 100 words. All three questions are adequately addressed. It is evident the student viewed the video and considered the questions thoughtfully.	10	
Grammar, Spelling, and Punctuation	Document has been carefully proofread. There are no more than five errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Sentences are clear and do not run on.	10	

Figure 2: Traditional rubric for journaling assignment