

# Learning Without Grading

*An introduction to contract  
or specifications grading*



## WID WINTER DAYS COMING IN JANUARY 2023

WID aims to kick off the Winter semester with a bang by bringing you three events in January 2023. Hopefully, you'll find something in the events below that can inspire you and your students to greater heights in the new semester.

### January 2023 Events

#### Learning Without Grading: An Introduction to Contract or Specifications Grading

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Friday, January 13, 10:00-11:30 am, on Teams. Click [here](#) to register.

Over the past few years, several Dawson teachers have experimented with Contract or Specifications grading, which is a way to take the focus off of grades, and instead emphasize each individual's progress and body of work throughout the semester. In this informal online meetup, three teachers share their experiences with this different paradigm. Three brief presentations followed by questions and conversation. Presenters: Ben Lander (History), Jocelyn Parr (History), Jeff Gandell (English)

#### Rethinking Community In And Out of the Classroom

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Monday, January 16, 10:00-12:00, lunch served from 12:00-1:00. In 3F.38. Click [here](#) to register.

How can we foster meaningful relationship-building to support student learning? Join the Writing in the Disciplines 2022 Fellows for a show-and-tell workshop on four strategies for building community within and beyond the classroom: group work, grading and feedback, translanguaging, and real-world partnerships. Followed by a delicious lunch. Presenters: Sara Louise Kendall (Geography), Ivan Freud (Religion), Noah Brender (Humanities), Kasia Wolfson (Anthropology), Ahmad Banki (Economics).

#### Collaborative Writing Technologies for the English Classroom

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Wednesday, January 25, 2:30-4:00, in person, room to be determined. Click [here](#) to register.

This workshop is an introduction [Miro](#), an online interactive canvas that can be used for annotation, idea-generating, and other collaborative tasks both in the classroom and at home. Miro is free, easy to use, and requires no sign-in on the part of students or collaborators. It's an excellent way to create classroom artifacts that can serve as useful class reference materials. Miro is ideally suited to an Active Learning Classroom, but it can be employed just as effectively in any classroom environment. This workshop is geared toward English teachers, but could be of interest to any discipline that requires the reading and discussion of difficult texts. Presenter: Jeff Gandell (English)

# Order of operations

1. What is contract grading?
2. What is specifications grading?
3. Benefits
4. Contract vs. specifications
5. Take it slow!
6. Are we allowed to do this?
7. *Example 1: Ben (History)*
8. *Example 2: Jocelyn (History)*
9. *Example 3: Jeff (English)*
10. Further reading
11. Questions/Discussion
12. Next steps?

# What is contract grading?

“In a contract grading course, students have to complete a specific list of tasks in order to achieve a certain grade. These tasks are listed and explained on a contract” (Bean & Melzer 347).

Typically used with portfolios. A portfolio would include a collection of student work in a semester that culminates in a final product. It emphasizes process, increases value for students, and can “offer teachers a more holistic approach to assessing a student’s performance while also supporting the teacher’s coaching role” (Bean & Melzer 342).

## 2 types of contract grading schemes

1. With instructor gate
2. Without instructor gate

# Specifications Grading

- All assignments are graded pass/fail. “We are assessing whether a student’s work meets certain specifications—that is, one or more requirements that we set for a piece of student work” (Nilson 56).
- Essentially, students must complete all the criteria to pass any assignment. Either they meet the criteria (pass) or they do not (fail).
- The pass criteria are generally set at around a B or 80% level.

# Converting to final grades

- Bundling: Students choose a “bundle” of assignments that they will complete in order to attain a specific final grade.
- The higher grade, the higher amount of increasingly difficult bundles the students must complete.

# Benefits: Contract grading

“Contract grading is an approach to assessment that aims to lessen student anxiety, reduce the subjectivity of grading, and shift more of the emphasis of evaluation to students’ labor and processes” (Bean & Melzer 347).

“Asao Inoue...critiques the white, middle-class standard that is typically applied in grading student writing and the ways this standard often puts students of color at a disadvantage. Inoue argues that a course focused on assessing labor rather than teacher judgments about the quality of final drafts is more democratic and equitable” (Bean & Melzer 351).



# Benefits: Specs grading

- Ensures that everything a student hands in is of a high standard and completely meets the competency of the assignment.
- To pass, students simply need to complete fewer assignments, and assignments that are less cognitively demanding.
- To get an A, students need to complete all assignments, including the most cognitively demanding ones.
- Motivational value: Allows students to feel “in control of [their] life outcomes and attributes them to [their] own efforts and determination” (Nilson 106).

# Contract vs specifications

- They're very similar in a lot of ways.
- At the end of the day, no need to rigidly define which model you're choosing.  
Can be a hybrid style.
- The point is to:
  - Give students a choice in their own learning journeys.
  - Focus on process and individual improvement, rather than on a potentially subjective and ambiguous judgment of "quality".

# Take it slow!

- Take the time to read some of the suggested material at the end of this presentation.
- You don't have to design your entire course around a contract or specs grading model. You can start by using one group of assignments.
  - To get a 10/10 on journal submissions, you must complete all 10 and demonstrate...
  - To get an 8/10, complete 8/10 and demonstrate...
  - Etc.

# Are we allowed to do this?

Good question!

From pages 15-16 of ISEP:

- *The course outline will contain the following information:*
- *6. A. Grade assigned to each assessment item (e.g. 25% for a class test, 40% for a project, 35% for final examination)*

Let's look at our 3 examples and see if any are contravening the above stipulation.

At the very least, with a little creativity you can certainly design your contract/specs grading scheme in a way to respect the above.

# Examples

# Further Readings

- Bean, John C. & Dan Melzer. *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. 3rd Edition. Jossey-Bass, 2021.
  - Chapter 16: Alternatives to Traditional Grading.
- Nilson, Linda B. *Specifications Grading: Restoring Rigor, Motivating Students, and Saving Faculty Time*. Stylus, 2015.
  - Chapter 5: Essentials of Specifications Grading
  - Chapter 6: Converting Specs-Graded Student Work into Final Letter Grades
  - Chapter 7: Examples of Specs-Graded Course Designs

**Both books are available as e-books from the Dawson library.**

# Questions/Discussion

# Next steps

Try it for one group of assignments in your class this semester?

Follow up meeting?