

The Innovative Instructor

Topic Focus

Topic: Assessment Strategies

Specifications Grading

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What this is

The Innovative Instructor is an article series (<https://cer.jhu.edu/ii>) and a blog (<http://ii.library.jhu.edu>) related to teaching excellence at Johns Hopkins

This article is a part of a collection that focuses on a specific topic listing strategies and resources to explore

Article categories

Best Practice

How to use technologies and apply innovative instructional methods

Pedagogy

Hopkins professors share successful strategies for teaching excellence

Technology

Information about emerging technologies, who is using them and why you should know

For information on how to contribute to *The Innovative Instructor* or to read archived articles please visit: <https://cer.jhu.edu/ii> or email: cerweb@jhu.edu

About the CER

The Center for Educational Resources partners with faculty, postdocs, and graduate students to extend instructional impact by connecting innovative teaching strategies and instructional technologies

What it is

With specifications grading, students are graded pass/fail or satisfactory/unsatisfactory on individual assessments. Students' final grades are based on how many assessments they passed. For example, passing 20 or more assignments out of 23 would equate to an A; 17-19 assignments would equate to a B. Instructors create very detailed specifications (or 'specs') outlining what is considered a passing grade, which usually corresponds to B-level work or better (Kelly, 2018). Rubrics are often used to convey this information to students, indicating exactly what students need to do as well as the quality standards that need to be met. Depending on how the instructor has set things up, students are often given multiple opportunities to reach their goals, including the ability to revise failed assessments. This allows them to learn from their mistakes as well as corrective feedback from the instructor in a self-paced, low stress environment (Kelly, 2018).

Challenges

Procrastination

- Potential for student procrastination – if there are little or no set due dates on assignments (which is common when using specifications grading), students may wait until the last minute to complete everything at once.

Increased Lead Time

- Work required upfront for instructors to create clear, comprehensive rubrics/specifications for each assignment.

Solutions to consider

Guidelines for pacing

- Provide a pacing guide and/or choose to set more due dates throughout the semester. Be mindful of procrastinators and check in with them periodically.

Rubric simplicity

- Adjust the detail of the rubric according to the complexity of the assignment.

Who is using it

Dr. Rebecca Kelly, Associate Teaching Professor in Earth and Planetary Sciences at JHU, currently uses this grading approach. She cites several benefits including:

- Students progressing at their own pace
- Increased quality of student work, high attention to detail
- Simplified grading for instructors

More detail about Dr. Kelly's experience can be found here:

https://cer.jhu.edu/files/InnovInstruct-Ped-18_specifications-grading.pdf

References

Kelly, R. (2018). Meaningful Grades with Specifications Grading. *The Innovative Instructor*. Retrieved from https://cer.jhu.edu/files/InnovInstruct-Ped-18_specifications-grading.pdf

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