*Alternative approaches to grading have recently increased in popularity. Alternative grading schemes offer greater flexibility and customization than traditional methods, which made them particularly appealing to instructors as a response to the challenges of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. In general, alternative grading schemes prioritize transparency, a growth/progress orientation to learning, alignment between learning objectives and assessment practices, increased communication between instructors and students, and reduced power imbalances between the same. Despite these similarities, alternative grading schemes differ in the details. This document summarizes a few alternatives to traditional grading processes and compares/contrasts the specifics of each approach.*

**Specifications Grading**

Students earn a course grade based on successfully completing assignments that are bundled together at each grade level by difficulty, quantity, and/or alignment with a particular learning objective. Instructors define clear and comprehensive criteria (aka specs) for successful completion of each assignment; these specs are binary and should articulate what constitutes an acceptable level of learning (*not* perfection). Individual assignments do not receive letter grades; each assignment gets credit only when it meets all specs. The definition of “acceptable” for each assignment should be closely tied to the relevant learning objectives for the assignment. To lower the stakes of any given assignment, specifications grading systems generally allow for (limited) revision opportunities, and instructors provide process-oriented feedback on each assignment, so that assignments that do not yet meet all specifications may be improved. Specifications grading allows for, but does not require, instructors and students to collaboratively define specs for some or all assignments.

**Contract Grading / Labor-based Grading**

At its most basic, contract grading is an agreement between students and instructors that if students meet certain criteria, they will earn a particular grade. The criteria can vary widely from instructor to instructor. For some instructors, the basic contract articulates the work students will do, rather than the quality of that work (for example, Danielewicz and Elbow’s (2009) contract, which indicates that students who complete the listed activities and assignments and make a good faith effort will be guaranteed a B). Any grade above the one articulated in the contract then requires parsing gradations in the quality of student work. Some instructors design contracts (or co-design contracts with students) that are entirely based on the amount of work a student does (aka labor-based grading. See Inoue (2019), for a full explanation and example of labor-based grading). For other instructors, standards of quality are part of the contract. Perspectives vary on whether the grading contract should resemble an end-user license agreement for software (in which the user’s only choice is to accept the terms or not use the product), or a fully negotiated contract produced through deliberations between students and instructors. In contract grading’s most complex manifestations, instructors negotiate an individual contract with each student.

**Mastery/Standards-Based Grading**

Instructors define specific skills and/or areas of conceptual understanding that students must master. These definitions should be concrete, granular, and well-aligned with the course learning objectives. Often, these skills are grouped thematically (for example, Heubach and Krinsky (2020) grouped standards for an intro statistics course into “Descriptive Statistics” and “Inferential Statistics” categories). The instructor must also define degrees of mastery (ex: below mastery (B), near mastery (N), mastered (M), exceeds expectations (E)). Students earn a grade in the course by demonstrating a degree of mastery over various combinations of skills. For example, to earn a B in a course, a student may need to earn at least an M in 8 of 10 skills within a certain category, whereas to earn an A, a student needs to earn an E in 7 of 10 skills and an M in the remaining 3. The key difference between mastery-based grading and specifications grading is whether assessment occurs at the assignment level or the skill level. A single assignment can assess several skills. In specifications grading, a student meets/does not meet the expectations of the assignment as a whole, whereas in mastery grading, an assignment can be broken into separate components that represent specific skills.

**Portfolio Grading / Holistic Grading / Ungrading**

Portfolio-based grading systems, aka Holistic Grading or Ungrading, prioritize a process-oriented approach to evaluation. They take a holistic look at students’ development and learning throughout a course, as represented by the entirety of a students’ work (often collected in a portfolio). There are few rules and structures that define these grading systems, but typically, individual projects and assignments do not receive grades. Rather, students revise assignments across the course of the semester, in response to instructor and peer feedback. Students’ reflections on their progress and their learning processes are an integral part of the portfolio. Students select works to include in their portfolio that illustrate their learning across the course. There is great variability in how the final course grade is determined: some instructors determine grades through a conversation with each student, others will incorporate an element of peer evaluation, yet others will review the contents of a students’ portfolios and the degree to which their reflections demonstrate self-awareness and skill development over time. Instructors may combine multiple of these processes or invent others.

**Alternative Grading Scheme Comparisons and Contrasts**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Specifications Grading** | **Contract Grading** | **Mastery/Standards Based Grading** | **Portfolio / Holistic Grading** |
| Opportunities for revision | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Letter grades given on assignments | No | Depends on the design | No | Depends on the design; typically not |
| Evaluation criteria co-designed with students | Possible but not required | Possible but not required | Not typical, but possible | Possible but not required |
| Holistic evaluation criteria | Yes | Depends on the design | No | Depends on the design |
| Evaluation based on completion or quality | Both | Either/Both | No | Either/Both |

**References and Recommended Readings**

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