

Title: “Getting Started with Specifications Grading”

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Abstract

Specifications grading is an alternative assessment approach in which students have multiple opportunities to submit work evaluated as either meeting or not meeting clearly defined criteria. Advocates suggest it can enhance learning while promoting equity and transparency in teaching. It can be implemented on the scale of a single assignment or an entire course and has been described as a way to “restore rigor, motivate students, and save faculty time” (Nilson, 2015).

We explored this approach through the development of *Getting Started with Alternative Grading in the Psychology Classroom* (2025, Society for the Teaching of Psychology), an e-book of instructor experiences with specifications grading and other alternative assessments. Contributors reported improved achievement of course outcomes, reduced ambiguity in assignment requirements, greater flexibility, enhanced equity, and adaptability for classes of all sizes. Students often noted reduced grade anxiety and a shift toward focusing on learning rather than points, though some found the unfamiliar structure stressful. Many instructors found that specifications grading lessened the emotional and cognitive toll of grading, though it did not always reduce grading time.

In this interactive workshop, we will introduce the foundations of specifications grading, its alignment with backward course design, and lessons from the e-book and our own teaching experiences. We will address common concerns—such as maintaining academic challenge, gaining student buy-in, managing grading workload, and balancing flexibility with accountability. Participants will engage in redesigning a single assignment or brainstorming how to anchor an entire course in specifications grading.

Bio

KatieAnn R. Skogsberg, PhD, is Professor of Neuroscience at Centre College, where she teaches psychology, behavioral neuroscience, and sensory systems, and mentors undergraduate research in cognitive neuroscience. She earned her PhD in Psychology: Brain, Behavior, and Cognition from Northwestern University. Her scholarship focuses on authentic assessments, alternative grading methods, and student learning outcomes, and she is co-editor of *Getting Started with Alternative Grading in the Psychology Classroom* (2025). Dr. Skogsberg’s teaching has been recognized with the Kirk Award for Teaching Excellence, the Centre College Center Scholar Award, and designation as a Fellow of the Midwestern Psychological Association. She serves as Associate Editor for E-Books for the Society for the Teaching of Psychology.

Deanne Buffalari, PhD is an associate professor of neuroscience and psychology at Westminster College in New Wilmington, PA, where she also serves as Faculty Development Officer. Her scholarship is focused on the study of how adaptive behavior becomes maladaptive; she uses preclinical models to study stress, anxiety, reward, and addiction. This work has been acknowledged with a Henderson Lectureship from Westminster College in 2021. She also works to understand and promote engaging pedagogical and

curricular approaches to undergraduate education, as well as how varied techniques and environments can help scientists and educators thrive. She is chair of the Midcareer Psychology Committee of the Society for Teaching Psychology and associate editor of the eBooks division of the Society for Teaching Psychology.

Ellen Carpenter, PhD, is Associate Professor of Psychology, as well as the Program Director for Undergraduate Psychology at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia. She also serves as a Faculty Fellow for the First Generation/AAPI Student Success Center. She was awarded the department's Outstanding Teaching Award in 2022 and Outstanding Service Award in 2023. She currently teaches both undergraduate and graduate courses in the areas of cognition, learning, perception, and biological psychology. She currently serves as the Director of STP's SoTL Mentoring Workshop and was a committee chair for a Presidential Task Force in 2021. She recently started competing in Masters Track and Field and is having a blast!