

Sample Specifications Grading Scheme:

Course: ENGL 2507 Identity, Selfhood, and Otherness in Renaissance Drama

Professor: Adriana Streifer

The text in this sample specs grading scheme is taken from the syllabus for ENGL 2507; it is therefore written for a student audience. Before you look at the specs grading scheme, I recommend reading through the learning objectives and short assignment descriptions. These sections will help you make sense of the amount and kinds of work that the specs grading scheme asks of students.

By the end of this course, you will be able to:

1. Describe and analyze representations of selfhood and otherness in early modern drama, and compare and contrast these representations with contemporary understandings of these concepts, and your own beliefs.
2. Imagine the various impacts different performance choices have on your interpretations of play texts.
3. Write analytically about course texts and ideas, using close reading to make your arguments (this means analyzing and interpreting textual evidence, especially a text's rhetorical and formal elements).
4. Explain to others how theater can shape, critique or reflect a culture's worldview and assumptions, especially as those assumptions pertain to marginalized peoples.
5. Reflect on your learning experiences throughout the course, making connections between the course materials, your learning and studying processes, and your enjoyment and valuation of reading, literature, and theater.

What are the major assignments?

Detailed descriptions and criteria for all assignments are available on Collab.

Essays: You'll write a few essays in this course, each of which will gradually build up your writing and literary analysis skills. The essays are your opportunity to grapple in depth with the plays; craft complex arguments on topics that intrigue you; pay close attention to the details of the text; and articulate the connections between performance, and the thematic, historical, and formal features of the texts.

Essay Revisions: Writing is not just a final product; it is also, and perhaps more importantly, a form of ongoing inquiry. In order to acknowledge that any piece of writing is really a form of thinking in progress, you will have the opportunity to revise any of your essays (in exchange for a token – see below for details). Revision assignments will also offer you the chance to reflect on your growth as a writer, by including reflective annotations in the margins of your revised papers.

Piazza Posts: These are very short discussion board posts that are meant to help you think about the reading ahead of class, set the topics for discussion, and put you in dialogue with your classmates' ideas.

Now Comment Annotations: Now Comment is a feature in Collab that allows multiple readers to annotate a text, and comment on others' annotations. There will be the option to do this once per play. The idea is to practice close reading and see how your classmates' perspectives shape your own ideas.

Performance: You can choose to do a brief performance (either alone or in a group) in exchange for writing fewer homework assignments. See the homework assignment sheet for details.

Final Reflection: In place of a final exam, you'll write a take-home reflection in which you examine your learning process, whether your ideas have changed over time, and how your learning has coincided with the course objectives. Your reflections will be due on the day of the final exam.

Podcast: Lumped in with the essay assignments is a chance to create a podcast. The goal of the podcast is to make connections between a play and its contemporary relevance, such that an audience of non-experts would be interested in and see the significance of our course texts in our current cultural and political moment. Podcasts will be analogous to (though much shorter than) high quality story-telling podcasts such as *This American Life*. I will provide examples to get you started.

How will your learning be evaluated?

In a perfect world, grades wouldn't exist. We would discuss literature out of pure intellectual curiosity. Alas, we do not live in a perfect world, but I have tried to come up with the best possible alternative – an evaluation scheme that de-emphasizes grades so that you can pursue what interests you and take ownership of your learning. This scheme is called *specifications grading*. Specifications grading means that your course grade will be determined by the amount of quality work you choose to do. Assignments are bundled together at each grade level based on amount of work and/or level of complexity. The A bundle of assignments requires more work, and work of greater complexity, than the B bundle, which is likewise more challenging than the C bundle, etc. Rather than earning a grade for each assignment, you earn your course grade by meeting the expectations on all of the assignments within your chosen bundle. You have an opportunity to think ahead about what grade you would like to earn in this course and plan your workload accordingly, but your chosen grade is not set in stone – you can reevaluate this choice at any time.

The products of your learning will be evaluated as “meets expectations”, or “does not meet expectations yet”, based on specific criteria for each assignment. You will get credit for an assignment when it meets ALL of the criteria. There are no points, percentages, or gradations of quality in specifications grading – an assignment either meets expectations, or it does not. I will share these criteria with you well in advance of each assignment, and we will reference the criteria in workshops and homework assignments so that you can calibrate your work to the criteria before you turn it in. In the case of participation, you will have the opportunity to contribute to defining the criteria for evaluation. My expectations are high, but that is because I believe you are all more than capable of meeting them!

As you may have noticed, one of the evaluation categories is “does not meet expectations yet,” rather than “fail.” The word choice is deliberate; I want to cultivate a learning environment in which you feel comfortable taking risks, and in which you see learning as an incremental process. To lower the stakes, you will get 2 virtual “tokens”, which you may redeem for any of the following purposes:

- Revise and resubmit an essay that does not yet meet expectations to fulfil expectations (due 1 week after I return the essay to you with comments);
- Receive an extension of 48 hours on an essay assignment deadline (must be requested at least 24 hours before the deadline);
- Skip a homework assignment (up to 2 times);

- Write about one less objective on the final reflection assignment than the grade level you're aiming for;
- Eliminate an absence from the record (up to 2 times).

You can earn up to 3 additional tokens in the following ways:

- No absences, late arrivals, or early departures across the entire semester (earn up to 2 tokens, one for no absences prior to spring break, and the second for no absences after spring break)
- Complete 12 homework assignments – 2 more than the A bundle (1 token earned)
- Turn in a discussion summary within 24 hours of class (1 token earned, see separate guidelines on Collab)
- Lead a class discussion (1 token earned, see separate guidelines on Collab)

Specifications Grading Scheme

	A	B	C	D
Essays/Podcast	4	3	2	1
Final Reflection	3 objectives	2 objectives	1 objective	
Essay revision (no token required)	X	X	X	
Homework (Piazza posts, Now Comment, or performance)	10, or 8 + performance	8, or 6 + performance	6, or 4 + performance	4, or 2 + performance
Participation and Attendance	X	X	X	X

Plus and minus grades will be determined by the quality of your participation. The criteria for meeting expectations in participation are the same across all grade bundles. If you meet expectations in participation, you will earn a solid letter grade. Students who do not meet expectations for participation will earn the minus grade appropriate to their selected grade bundle, and students who exceed expectations in participation will earn a plus grade. The only way to earn an A+ in the course is to complete the A bundle, plus turn in 4 unused tokens at the end of the semester.

Each grade bundle is an indivisible unit; all assignments in a bundle must meet expectations in order to earn the associated grade. In other words, the lowest level assignment you complete sets the ceiling for your grade. For example, if you complete 8 homework assignments, you cannot earn more than a B+ in the course, even if you have otherwise completed most of the A bundle.