



GEOG/ERS 361

Food Systems and Sustainability

**Department of Geography & Environmental Management,
Faculty of Environment
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Class time: online asynchronous
Office hours: by appointment

Course Description

No other human activity has a greater ecological impact than our food system. Socio-cultural, economic, and political dimensions also shape the sustainability and resilience of our food system. How has our food and food system evolved over time? What does a sustainable food system or a sustainable diet mean? What actions are individual citizens, NGOs, businesses, and government of various levels taking to shape our food system in more, or less, sustainable directions? This online course covers a range of themes including linkages between food systems and health, ecosystems, climate and energy, sustainable diets, food environments, the global economy, food localism, labour and justice, food secure cities and regions, fisheries, food movements, circular economies and food waste, food security, food sovereignty, and agroecology.

Understanding many sides of an issue places you in a stronger position to determine and defend your own ideas. Food system change is a topic fraught with debate, particularly in relation to balancing socio-economic and ecological considerations. Moreover, many policies or initiatives will have significant impact on 'marginalized' groups. The course develops your familiarity with key debates on sustainable food and food systems.

Learning Outcomes

Upon completion of this course, you should be able to critically analyze and explain:

- Key environmental, economic, social, and political challenges to food system sustainability
- The historical development of the contemporary food system, and associated main concepts and models (e.g., community-based/regional *versus* globalized/industrial food systems)
- Some significant initiatives to improve food system sustainability that are led by the state (i.e., policies), the private sector (i.e., market-based), and civil society (community-based or grassroots)

In addition, you will gain some ideas about cultivating a personal connection to food, place, and the land.

Grade breakdown

This course uses a relatively new grading method called "specifications grading" (similar to "contract grading"). Basically, you decide what grade you want to achieve in the course and you complete a "pathway" of assessments (e.g., weekly responses, assignments, tests) to achieve that grade. Your grade is based on the number and level of difficulty of assessment that you complete. For more information on specifications grading, you can read the article [Yes, Virginia, There's a Better Way to Grade](#), or you can read the book by Linda B. Nilson.

The rationale for specifications is five-fold:

1. It better links assessment with learning outcomes. Your final grade has more meaning because it is not simply an average of things you did well or not, but rather reflects the number and level of learning objectives/outcomes achieved for the course.
2. It increases students' agency in determining their grades through the creation of clear pathways. This reduces students' stress and anxiety over grades, increases motivation, and orients students' attention toward learning rather than performance.
3. Clear criteria (specifications) for different grades reduces the stress and anxiety of instructors by reducing the amount of "negotiation" and "hairsplitting" with students over marks.
4. Instructors allocate more time towards formative (on-going, constructive) feedback, focusing more on improving student learning rather than summative assessment.
5. Resubmission encourages risk-taking, creativity, and "outside the box" thinking.

Specifications grading is typically preferred by students over the traditional grading systems as:

- it motivates students to work harder,
- there is more student choice and control,
- it reduces stress,
- students feel more responsible for their own grades,
- it feels more like coaching, and
- it fosters higher order and creative thinking.

All assessments are graded on the basis of credit/non-credit (i.e., pass/fail). Importantly, a **"credit" for an assessment is not simply a 50%**. With specifications grading, a credit means that you are competent in the learning objective/outcome (or "competency") being assessed. This is a much higher bar - you can think of it as the top one or two tiers of a traditional grading rubric, equivalent to a B or even a low A. Since your assessments more closely align with specific learning outcomes/objectives, achieving one outcome/objective exceptionally well does not "balance" or "offset" with doing very poorly for another outcome (as is the case with traditional grading schemes). In the specifications grading model, you are given a grade according to the number of learning outcomes for which you demonstrate competency. Earning a high mark in this course means that you demonstrated competency across multiple learning outcomes and objectives. By choosing a grade pathway, you are choosing the learning

outcomes/objectives for which you wish to demonstrate competency and then working with the instructor and TAs to reach this goal (e.g., through revision and resubmission, if necessary).

You can switch pathways, with some caveats. You can always move to a lower-level competency pathway. You can move up to a higher-level pathway as long as you have met all the due dates for that pathway's assessments. If you have missed a deadline for a higher-level pathway that you would like to switch to, then please speak to the instructor to discuss. You may be permitted to still switch pathways at the instructor's discretion and potentially with some additional make-up work. **Switching up pathways will not be accommodated following Reading Week.**

Summary of Assessment

This course has assessments due every week. Staying on top of your work is essential if you are to do well in this course. The table below is organized to help you better see the requirements for different grade pathways.

	Grade D Pathway	Grade C Pathway	Grade B Pathway	Grade A Pathway	Resubmissions
Final Grade	55%	65%	75%	85%	
Weekly Responses	6 Responses	8 Responses	10 Responses	11 Responses	Resubmission allowed - only two times over the term, within 3 business days of receiving your grade.
Commentaries	Not required	Not required	At least 4 commentaries	At least 5 commentaries	
Assignment 1	Required for all pathways				Resubmission allowed - only once.
Assignment 2	Required for all pathways				Resubmission allowed - only once.
Final Test	Question Set 1	Question Set 1	Question Set 2	Question Set 2	Resubmission allowed - only once.

Resubmissions

Weekly Responses: in order to ensure that everyone is familiar with the expectations for the weekly discussions, everyone will have one "free" chance to resubmit their Module 1 weekly response (within 3 business days of receiving your grade) if it does not meet the threshold the first time. Then, from Module 2 through 12, you will have two opportunities in total to resubmit your weekly response *or* commentary (within 3 business days of receiving your grade). I.e., you could resubmit one commentary and one weekly response, or two weekly responses, or two commentaries. **To claim this opportunity, email your TA and make a note of this with your submission.**

Assignments and Final Test: if your assignment or final test submissions do not meet the threshold for that assessment, you will be given one chance (for each assignment or test) to resubmit that assessment without penalty. Your resubmission will be due within 3 business days of receiving your grade. If you fail to meet the threshold again then you will have to redo that assessment a third time with **a penalty of 5% taken from your overall final course grade**. A fourth resubmission would result in **a 10% deduction from your overall final grade** and so on. Closely re-read the original instructions as well as the feedback and directions from your instructor/TA.

Bonus Grades and Final Grades

At the conclusion of the course, your final numeric grade will be determined based on which competency pathway you successfully completed (e.g., for a B pathway this starts at 75%), minus any late penalties and extra resubmission penalties, plus bonus grades. **Bonus grades** can be earned to the upper range of the pathway (e.g., for a C pathway this is between 65 and 69%; for B pathway this is between 75%-79%; for an A pathway this is between 85 and 100%). Bonus grades will be given based on the following criteria:

- Exceptional quality of writing and critical reflection in all assessments
- Submission of at least one additional weekly discussion post or commentary beyond what was specified for your chosen pathway

For example, a student may achieve a 90% grade by completing all of the requirements for the A pathway as well as 4 additional commentaries (or 1 additional weekly response plus two commentaries), plus exceptional quality of writing and critical reflection.

Additional information about the course (details of assigned materials and assignments) are available on the course website on Learn.