

## Guidelines for Writing Effective Assessment Criteria

Assessment criteria are descriptive statements that provide learners and instructors with information about the qualities, characteristics, and aspects of a given learning task. Assessment criteria make it clear to learners what they are expected to do to demonstrate achievement of the learning outcomes and factors instructors will take into account when making judgments about their performance. Sharing assessment criteria with students at the beginning of the course is an effective way to help students build confidence in their learning and improve their performance. Making assessment criteria explicit helps them recognize what is important and valued in the curriculum, focus their efforts on key learning outcomes and evaluate their own performance through self-assessment and reflection. Assessment criteria are a way to provide formative feedback throughout a course to support ongoing learning, as well as to provide end-of-term summative assessment.

Assessment criteria take the “guess-work” out of grading for instructors **and** students. Well-defined assessment criteria allow instructors to evaluate learners’ work more openly, consistently and objectively. This increases a sense of fairness from the students’ perspective and makes it easy for the instructor to explain / justify how marks have been awarded.

### Examples of Assessment Criteria

- *create a design brief that incorporates design process and principles*
- *analyze distributions using probability and data analysis techniques*
- *use tools and models to integrate quantitative and qualitative information in problem-based analysis using relevant tools and models*
- *adopt a variety of roles on a consulting team task force*
- *justify management's actions in selecting specific recommendations among alternative possibilities*

### Types of Assessment Criteria

- **Threshold** – threshold standards tell the student what must be done to demonstrate achievement of the learning outcome, i.e. identify the minimum standard to pass
- **Grading** – grading criteria provides a general description of the standard required for allocation of a particular grade within a hierarchy of grades (A+, A, A- to Fail)
- **General** – general criteria provide general outcome descriptors that can be achieved more or less well. Students’ work will be judged within a performance range and marks are allocated accordingly. Typically, criteria of this sort are used to evaluate such things as the use of referencing, accuracy of language, use of supporting evidence in drawing conclusions, quality of critical thinking, etc. (Jenny Moon, 2003)

## Relationship of Assessment Criteria to a Program of Study

Before writing assessment criteria it is important to understand how assessment criteria relate to course design. The following diagram illustrates how assessment criteria both inform and are informed by learning outcomes.

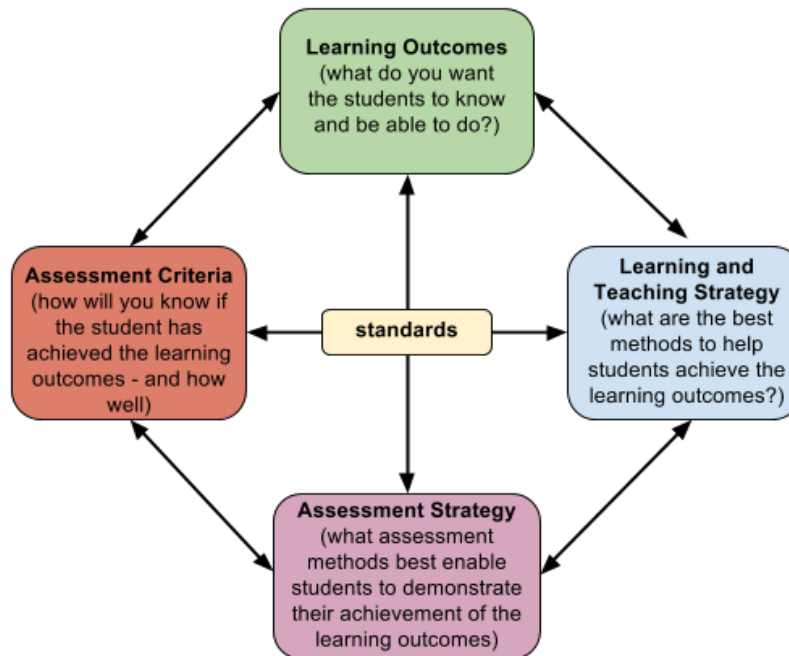


Figure 1: Planning a unit of study (adapted from Rosie Bingham, 2002)

## Writing Effective Assessment Criteria

### PREPARING TO START

#### 1. Review the learning outcomes and assessment tasks

##### Check to ensure that course learning outcomes:

- clearly and comprehensively articulate what students will know, be able to do, and value at the end of an educational experience in a [hierarchy of levels](#)
- start with a concrete verb that describes the intention of the learning outcome and indicates the level of cognitive, affective, social and/or skill-learning that is being looked for or expected in the assignment/course/program

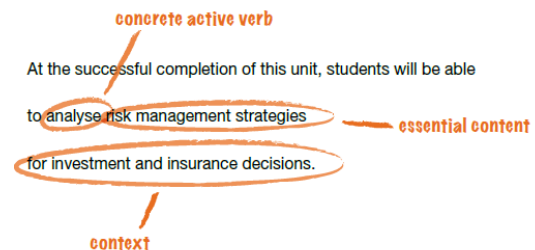


Figure 2: Elements of a learning outcome statement

- are written at minimum acceptable (pass/fail) standard and describe the learning that must be attained for students to pass the course, unit or assignment

**Check to ensure that assessment tasks:**

- are designed to provide adequate opportunity for students to demonstrate that they've achieved the intended learning outcomes
- are constructively aligned with the learning outcomes, learning opportunities, and assessment method. Alignment is key to creating effective assessment tasks. As defined by Ralph Tyler almost fifty years ago, alignment simply means starting with the 'desired outcomes' of the course and working backwards so that the assessment tasks reflect and support them. In some sense a successful course can be considered as an exercise in reverse engineering. Figure out first where you want your students to end up, and (only) then how best to help them get there. (Jim Wilkinson (2010)

**2. Articulate the terms and distinguish the difference between 'criteria' and 'standards' '**

Assessment criteria include two components - criterion and performance standards. Sadler (1987) defines these terms as:

**Criterion:** a property or characteristic by which the quality of something may be judged. Criteria specify qualities of interest and utility, but make no statement or assumptions about actual quality.

**Standard:** a definite level of achievement aspired to or attained. Standards are about definite levels of quality (or achievement, or performance)

*Table 1: Distinguishing between criteria and standards*

Criteria	Standards		
	Excellent High standard (8-10 marks)	Competent Good/pass standard (6-7 marks)	Not Yet Complete Fail standard (0-5 marks)
<i>quality of teamwork (10 points)</i>	Team worked well together. Each member contributed in a valuable way to the project. High level of respectful behavior when expressing opinions and ideas and, giving and receiving feedback. High level of collaboration.	The team worked well together most of the time, with only a few occurrences of communication breakdown and/or failure to collaborate when necessary. Members were mostly respectful to each other	The team did not collaborate or communicate well. Some member would work independently, without regard to objectives or priorities. A lack of respect and regard was frequently noted.

The standards described in above example illustrate three distinct levels of quality, achievement or performance. Three to five levels are typically used to describe standards.

The [standard labels](#) such as “Excellent,” “Proficient” or “Fail,” “Sophisticated,” “Competent” or “Not Yet Complete” used in conjunction with marks, can convey standards verbal descriptors are very effective way of supporting student learning. They can be used for formative assessment activities such as practice marking, self and peer assessment, providing feedback, and structured reflection to enhance learning.

### **3. Refer to relevant resources**

- [Academic Regulations: Section 4: Grading Scales](#)
- Faculty, school or department resources (e.g., guidelines, models, exemplars, program learning outcomes)
- School or department program curriculum maps
- Examples of student learning at different levels (e.g., pre-requisite courses and subsequent course in the program, where applicable)
- Examples of assessment criteria from other course and institutions

## **WRITING ASSESSMENT CRITERIA**

### **4. List, describe, curate and organize criteria**

- Criteria are more than a set of headings. For example, ‘use of theory’, is not on its own, a criterion. Criteria about theory must describe what aspects of the use of theory are being assessed. You may value any one of the following: the students’ ability to make an appropriate choice of theory to address a particular problem, or to give an accurate summary of that theory as it applies to the problem, or to apply it correctly, imaginatively, and/or with originality, or to critique the theory, or to compare and contrast it with other theories.
- Analyze the learning outcomes and identify the specific characteristics that contribute to the overall assignment. The verb in the learning outcome becomes the category of performance for which you will generate criteria. The verb describes the intention of the learning outcome and indicates the level of learning that you are looking for or expecting in the assessment and the category of performance for which you will generate criteria. For example, if the verb is ‘analyze’ then you ask yourself ‘what are the essential characteristics of the analyze skill that must be performed by the learner?’ These characteristics then form the criteria.
- List all the things that students need to know and be able to do to pass the course (or the assignment). Keep the list to a manageable size so students can handle the cognitive load and clearly understand what is expected of them - four or five criteria per unit are usually sufficient or between 3 and 10 per course. These criteria and these should be roughly of equal importance
- Reflect on ways to measure the outcome(s).
- Imagine what the ideal assignment (that aligns with the learning outcome(s)) would look like and list all the elements it should contain.

- Prioritizes the topics in terms of their perceived importance. Generally, students should be expected to gain a higher level of understanding in those topics perceived to be most important

Table 2: Linking learning outcomes and criteria

Learning Outcome	Assessment criteria
<b>Integration</b> Integrate qualitative and quantitative information ...	<i>Use tools and models to integrate quantitative and qualitative information in conducting problem-based analysis</i>
<b>Working with Others</b> Collaborates with others to achieve a common goal	<i>Function at a supervisory or mid-management level with colleagues within a team to produce high quality deliverables.</i>

## 5. Create a marking scheme

Decide how many standards to describe. The number of levels of verbal descriptions depends on the marking scheme, the practice in your school and/or the ability of the assessment task to make fine distinctions in a reliable way and the degree to which fine discrimination is required.

Most examples find it sufficient to describe three or four levels in answer to the following questions:

- What is the best possible standard that can be anticipated in this learning environment?"
- What is the least standard that will be considered acceptable?
- What standards lay between these two?
- What standard can be anticipated as unacceptable?

Sadler, 1998

## 6. Label the verbal descriptors of standards

If your school does not have verbal descriptions of standards or levels of achievement that link to the model used to calculate final grades, see some examples of 'labels' are provided below in Table 3.

Table 3: Some common terms used to 'label' verbal descriptions of standards (RRU Graduate level)

<http://policies.royalroads.ca/academic-regulations/section-4-grading>

Standard Type	Levels of Achievement						
1. Grade Point	0.0	2.67	3.00	3.33	3.67	4.00	4.33
2. Letter Grade	F	B-	B	B+	A-	A	A+
3. % Bands	0-69%	70-72%	73-76%	77-79%	80-84%	85-89%	90-100%
4. Marks/20	0-13.5	14	15	15.5	16-16.5	17-17.5	18-20
5. Levels	Level 1	Level 2		Level 3		Level 4	
6. Labels	Fails to meet threshold level of achievement	A moderate level of achievement.		A high level of achievement		A very high to outstanding level of achievement	

Of the examples above, the 'labels' for Grade Point, Letter Grade and % Bands are from the [RRU graduate-level](#) are [RRU graduate-level grading policies](#) (the assessment scheme is different at the

*undergraduate level); and, #4 'Marks' constitutes a simple marking scheme example and may not be necessarily correct (nor mathematically correct).*

## **7. Describe the standard(s) for each of the criteria**

- Standards should be at a reasonable, appropriate and achievable level
- Describe in brief, clear, specific language what is the best that you might expect
- Describe levels of expected performance for the assessment
- When describing standards:
  - describe demonstrable behaviour - *not* the student
  - avoid vague terms which are open to a wide range of subjective interpretation such as “critical”, “appropriate”, “excellent”, “analytical”
  - use terms likely to be understood by students – avoid the obscure or esoteric
  - point out what *was* done in demonstrating lower than optimal standards is often more supportive of learning than listing what *was not*

## **8. Weight the criteria**

- As soon as you have more than one assessment criterion you will also have to make decisions about their relative importance (or weighting)
- Weight of the criteria should commensurate with the weight of the unit, the importance of the concepts, the significance of the learning outcome to the course/program and take into account student’s workload
- Ensure that the marking schemes and criteria are appropriate
- Weight of the criteria will also be determined by the discipline. For example, a marking scheme for a written assignment might include: content, organization, mechanics, grammar and style  
Criteria such as mechanics, grammar and style may be weighted higher in some disciplines than in others

## **9. Create grading criteria**

- Define the threshold or lowest pass assessment criteria. This would be the quality of performance that would necessitate a bare pass
- Define 2-3 intermediate [levels of performance](#) and the excellence level of performance
- Start writing at the ‘pass’ level and work upwards. (The danger if you start writing at the A+ level is that as you move downward the assessment criteria become more and more negative.)
- The assessment criteria can be presented to student before the learning event in a [rubric](#). It can be used for formative activities such as providing feedback, reflection and peer and self-assessment

## **FINAL REVIEW**

## **10. Review and revise to ensure appropriateness and relevance**

Check for:

- organization and consistency style, mechanics, grammar and format
- alignment with program and institutional grade descriptors and policies
- appropriateness of the marking schemes or criteria

Regularly review your assessment criteria to:

- respond to student feedback
- ensure they are relevant if the assessment tasks has been changed
- maintain currency with changing university grading policy and regulations
- take advantage of new and updated resources

## Assessment Criteria in Course Document

In course documents there is a hierarchy of:

- Learning outcomes
- Assessment criteria
- Standards of performance

Assessment criteria are developed to align with the learning outcomes and not the other way around; and, standards of performance in turn elaborate on how well students are able to achieve the learning outcomes.

## Key Points to Remember about Writing and Using Assessment Criteria

When you are writing assessment criteria it is useful to keep the following guiding principles in mind.

Assessment criteria should:

- match the assessment task and learning outcome
- be meaningful to course context vs. generic to any course
- help students know what they need to know, do, and value to achieve the learning outcomes
- help students understand what you expect at different levels of achievement – use a [taxonomy of educational objectives to](#) help you
- be understandable to all stakeholders – keep them as brief as possible and avoid jargon
- be manageable in number – four or five per unit is usually sufficient or between 3 and 10 per course and these should be roughly of equal importance
- be distinct from each other – avoiding duplication will make it easier for you and your students to understand and apply the criteria
- enable consistency in marking

- be used to provide useful feedback to students
- distinguish task dimensions – e.g. complex tasks have multiple dimensions thus require multiple criteria
- reflect the overall, published, aims of the program/course (If, for example, the course claims to prepare students for entry into a particular profession, then achievement of the entry requirements should be specified in the assessment criteria)
- be commensurate with the weight of the unit and take into account student workload
- criteria for generic skills, such as communication, should be in the context of the particular course in the particular way in which it occurs in that discipline, subject or area of study or activity

Assessment criteria should enable you to assess students' work openly and fairly, and make it possible for you to provide valuable feedback to students and to easily justify how marks have been awarded.



## References

- Armstrong, S., Chan, S., Malfroy, J., & Thomson, R. (2015). *Assessment Guide Implementing criteria and standards-based assessment*. Sydney, Australia: Teaching Development Unit, University of Western Sydney. Retrieved from [https://www.uws.edu.au/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/449860/PVC5557\\_Assessment\\_Guide\\_LR3.pdf](https://www.uws.edu.au/data/assets/pdf_file/0004/449860/PVC5557_Assessment_Guide_LR3.pdf)
- Bloxham, S. & Boyd, P. (2007). *Developing Effective Assessment in Higher Education - A Practical Guide*. Maidenhead, UK: McGraw-Hill. Retrieved from <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.ezproxy.royalroads.ca/lib/royalroads-ebooks/detail.action?docID=332673>
- Price, M. (2005). Assessment standards: the role of communities of practice and the scholarship of assessment. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 30(3), 215-230. Retrieved from <https://ezproxy.royalroads.ca/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.royalroads.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=16266852>
- Rust, C., (2010). Improving students learning: the role of assessment criteria and processes. *Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, Oxford Brookes University*. Retrieved from [https://www.dkit.ie/system/files/Chris%20Rust%20-%20Improving%20Students%20Learning%20-%20powerpoint%20presentation\\_1.pdf](https://www.dkit.ie/system/files/Chris%20Rust%20-%20Improving%20Students%20Learning%20-%20powerpoint%20presentation_1.pdf)
- Sadler, D. R. (2005). Interpretations of criteria-based assessment and grading in higher education. *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 30(2), 175–194. Retrieved from <https://ezproxy.royalroads.ca/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.royalroads.ca/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=16122566>
- Tasmanian Qualifications Authority. (n.d.). *Developing Assessment Criteria and Performance Standards*. Retrieved from [http://www.tqa.tas.gov.au/4DCGI/WWW\\_doc/210125/RND01/DevelopingAssessmentCriteriaStandards.pdf](http://www.tqa.tas.gov.au/4DCGI/WWW_doc/210125/RND01/DevelopingAssessmentCriteriaStandards.pdf)
- Wilkinson, J. (2010). *Creating Assignments & Exams*. *Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard University*. Retrieved from <https://bokcenter.harvard.edu/creating-assignments-exams>
- Writing Assessment Criteria. (n.d.). *Learning and Teaching at UCA*. Retrieved from <https://ucalarningandteaching.wordpress.com/course-documentation/writing-assessment-criteria/>