CQSD
CENTRE FOR | QUALITY SUPPORT & DEVELOPMENT

University of Reading

FOCUS ON: ASSESSMENT & FEEDBACK

DEVELOPING AND USING ASSESSMENT CRITERIA AND RUBRICS

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA & RUBRICS

Student performance in assessment should be measured against criteria (criterion-based assessment), not in relation to the performance of other students (norm-referenced assessment).

Well-designed criteria and rubrics play a key role in ensuring assessment requirements and expectations are clear and explicit for both students and markers. Rubrics support students in understanding *what* 'good' looks like, *where* they should focus their efforts and *how* markers will grade their work. Actively engaging students with criteria and rubrics impacts positively on student outcomes and confidence (Jones et al., 2017). For markers, rubrics provide the basis for consistency of academic judgement and reduce the time and administrative burden of marking.

This guidance aims to provide practical advice for creating and using rubrics that support assessment *for* learning. Individuals and module marking teams can use it when setting or marking coursework; programme teams may use it to support and scaffold assessment expectations across a programme.

DEFINITIONS, SCOPE & BENEFITS

The terminology around assessment can pose challenges. In policy and practice 'assessment' criteria, 'grading' criteria and 'marking' criteria are used interchangeably. In the pedagogic literature 'rubrics' are often confused with checklists and rating scales (Brookhart, 2018). **Consistent use of terminology across a programme team may help avoid confusion** amongst students and staff. For clarity, in this guidance we are using the term 'assessment criteria' or 'criteria' for short, and the following definition of a rubric:

> "A rubric articulates expectations for student work by listing criteria for the work and performance level descriptions across a continuum of quality (Andrade, 2000; Arter and Chappuis, 2006). Thus, a rubric has two parts: **criteria** that express what to look for in the work and performance **level descriptions** that describe what instantiations of those criteria look like in work at varying quality levels, from low to high." (Brookhart, 2018, p.1)

Rubrics are typically set out as a table with criteria in the first column and level descriptors for each grade category in the subsequent columns.

	First class (upper range) 85–100%	First class (lower range) 70–84%	2.1 60–69%	2.2 50–59%	3rd (pass or threshold) 40–49%	Not successful 0–39%
Criterion 1	level descriptor	level descriptor	level descriptor	level descriptor	level descriptor	level descriptor
Criterion 2	level descriptor	level descriptor	level descriptor	level descriptor	level descriptor	level descriptor
Criterion 3	level descriptor	level descriptor	level descriptor	level descriptor	level descriptor	level descriptor
Criterion 4	level descriptor	level descriptor	level descriptor	level descriptor	level descriptor	level descriptor

Broadly, there are two types of rubrics- 'analytic' and 'holistic.' **Analytic rubrics** provide an overall grade that is determined by students' performance across distinct criteria. **Holistic rubrics** assess tasks as a whole rather than breaking them down into individual criteria. They are therefore less effective in providing student feedback on performance in relation to each criterion.

Analytic rubrics, widely employed across the sector for their **formative potential**, are the **focus of this guidance** (hereafter referred to as 'rubric').

Benefits of rubrics

For colleagues

- demystify the marking process.

- ensure marking decisions are transparent and consistent.

- reduce time and administrative load associated with marking.

- check the assessment is fit for purpose.

For students

- focus their efforts.

- ensure the criteria and standards that are used to grade their work are explicit.

- builds trust in the assessment process and assures them that they are being assessed fairly.

- help them reflect on their current level of performance and what they need to do to improve.

- develops independent learning and self-efficacy skills in relation to assessment.

DEVELOPING CRITERIA & RUBRICS

INTRODUCTION

The **University-wide generic criteria** and level descriptors for Level 6 undergraduate and Level 7 taught postgraduate programmes are provided in [Section 10](#) of the Assessment Handbook. Please note that these were updated following the publication of the [Outcome classification descriptions for FHEQ Level 6](#) published by the QAA in 2019. It is imperative that **Schools contextualise these criteria according to their respective disciplines.**

Developing a **generic discipline-specific rubric** at School/Departmental/Programme level provides many benefits. For example, it enables teaching teams to reach a consensus on expected performance levels in key academic skills, such as critical thinking and communication. It can also serve as a benchmark for creating more specific rubrics for various types of assessments.

Effective practice denotes that rubrics should be tailored and agreed upon for each type of assessment (Worth, 2014). **Schools must adopt a transparent approach to determining when their generic discipline-specific rubric will apply and when module convenors should devise their own based on this,** recognising that for many assignments the generic assessment criteria will be applicable.

Where different modules within a programme use **similar types of assessment** (e.g. lab reports or presentations), **collaborative efforts to develop and review rubrics are recommended**. This collaborative approach ensures **continuity and progression** of assessment expectations across a programme. Additionally, it enables students to self-assess their progress and leverage feedback to formulate action plans to improve their performance against the same or similar criteria in subsequent assessments of that type.

We outline below four steps to support the development or review of rubrics.

STEP 1: DECIDE IF A RUBRIC IS APPROPRIATE

Deciding if a rubric is suitable depends upon the nature of the assessed task. Tasks like essays and presentations, which are inherently subjective, benefit from the use of rubrics as they help **transition marking from a subjective to an objective activity**. For more objective tasks, such as multiple choice or short answer questions, a checklist or mark scheme may be more appropriate.

STEP 2: IDENTIFY ASSESSMENT CRITERIA

Assessment criteria articulate the specific characteristics/ aspects of an assessment task that students will be measured against to demonstrate their achievement of the learning outcomes ([Aligning teaching, learning, and assessment to learning outcomes](#), Figure 1).

The criteria are informed by both the learning outcomes and the nature of the task. For instance, if the learning outcome is to 'communicate ideas in a logical way' and the assessed task is a presentation, five general criteria could be identified: 1. content; 2. argued course of action; 3. organisation; 4. verbal presentation aspects; and 5. non-verbal presentation aspects.

Evaluating rubrics: an evidence-based approach

The development of rubrics is an **iterative** process. Module Convenors and Programme Directors should take an **evidence-based approach** to regularly reviewing rubrics through the following channels:

Student voice
Existing student survey questions capture the extent to which assessment and marking expectations are transparent, for example:

-University of Reading core module evaluation question:
I understood what was required of me to complete my assessment.

-NSS questions on assessment:
How clear were the marking criteria used to assess your work? How fair has the marking and assessment been on your course?

Reflecting on the reliability & validity of marking
When a team is responsible for marking the same assessment:
Does the rubric result in an acceptable degree of marker consensus?
Does the rubric capture effectively what is valued in the assessment task/discipline?

Peer review: Ask for constructive feedback on your rubrics from peers as part of the '[Reflecting on practice with colleagues](#)' process.

Each criterion can be assigned a **numerical value or percentage weighting** to explicitly convey to students the relative importance of different criteria.

Prompt questions for evaluating assessment criteria:

1. How well do the criteria align with module/programme learning outcomes?
2. How relevant are the criteria for the nature of the task/type and variety of assessments across the programme?
3. Are the criteria appropriate for the level of study?
4. Are the criteria observable and measurable?
5. Is the number of criteria manageable [between 3-6 criteria strikes a balance by avoiding overwhelming complexity and ensuring meaningful distinctions between criteria]
6. Are the criteria sufficiently differentiated or do they overlap?
7. Are the criteria stated simply and concisely (e.g. research skills, engagement with the literature), and is the language used accessible to students?
8. Do the criteria avoid references to quality (e.g., logically, effectively)?
9.. Are the criteria unpacked in the assignment brief?
10. If the criteria are used for similar tasks across the programme, is there consistency in the use of language, promoting students' ability to self-assess their progress?

STEP 3: DECIDE ON PERFORMANCE LEVELS

Before writing level descriptors you will need to decide how many levels of performance are appropriate. This number will depend upon the extent to which you can make **meaningful distinctions in performance quality across levels**. You should be clear about how the various levels align to the University's percentage marking ranges.

''Often language in grade descriptors repeats itself across different bands. This could potentially cause confusion.''
University of Reading student, 2021

STEP 4: WRITE LEVEL DESCRIPTORS

You could **begin by establishing the threshold for a pass** and writing the descriptor for this level. You could then use this as a reference point to work upwards and downwards to create **clear and logical progression across performance levels**.

To **pitch the levels appropriately** you should consult the **University-wide generic criteria** (Assessment Handbook, Section 10). These provide an overview of what a graduate should be able to do given their final degree classification (i.e. Levels 6 & 7). We would therefore also recommend consulting the **SEEC Credit Level Descriptors for HE** which focus on the characteristics and context of learning expected across Levels 3-8, given **descriptors need to be appropriate for the level of the module**.

The language used in the descriptors needs to be **clear, concise and accessible** to all students as well as markers. It may also be helpful to accompany the rubric with a glossary of common terms which could be co-created with staff working in partnership with students.

Level descriptors should **avoid subjective language**, such as *outstanding, excellent, very good, and good*. Instead, they should **describe what the work is expected to demonstrate at each level.**

The descriptors should not be overly prescriptive to avoid students taking a transactional approach to the assessment or constraining their creativity. For example, instead of specifying a minimum number of references, emphasise the range and relevance of the literature and how it is being used.

Phrase the descriptors positively focusing on what 'good' looks like at each level rather than 'what's missing.' Try to avoid value judgement terms such as 'poor' or 'weak,' as these may be internalised by students as personal judgments.

Descriptors should **strike a balance between generic and task-specific content**. For instance, the criterion 'critical understanding' could be applied across various assessments. However, the translation of this criterion for different types of assessments may necessitate different forms of evidence. For example, what constitutes 'critical understanding' in a creative portfolio might differ from that in a research paper. Including some generic content in descriptors helps students apply this to similar assessment tasks with the same criteria on their programme. This level of consistency is also useful to colleagues, especially in relation to marking and moderation.

"Most of the terms are very vague and ambiguous…Words like 'decent' and 'excellent' should be defined more." – University of Reading student, 2021

Rubric bank & Rubric audit tool

(Legacy resources from the University's Electronic Management of Assessment Programme)

USING CRITERIA & RUBRICS

LOCATION AND TIMING

Assessment criteria and rubrics are integral elements within an **assignment brief**. Ensuring these are available in the designated location for assignment briefs in the Blackboard Ultra course template means students can easily find them.

In **Blackboard**, rubrics should also be attached to the online submission point for the corresponding assessment. They can be attached to both Turnitin and Blackboard Assignments, via a .csv file upload or built directly in Blackboard. When setting up submission points, it is possible to edit release settings for students to view the rubric attached to the submission point. For more information, search 'rubrics' on the Blackboard Support for Staff website.

You must ensure students understand the criteria against which they will be marked at the **beginning of a module** in line with University policy on 'the Arrangements for setting coursework' (Assessment Handbook, Section 6.9.1).

FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

Actively **engaging students** with criteria and rubrics helps students internalise the assessment standards that will be used to mark their work. This is particularly important in the early stages of the programme to support transition into higher education (Jones et al., 2017) and/or when students encounter an unfamiliar task.

The guidance on assignment briefs (p5) includes formative activities you can use or adapt throughout your module to engage students with criteria and rubrics (e.g. Self and/or peer assessment where students review their own/each other's work against the criteria prior to submission; use of exemplars).

MARKING & FEEDBACK

Actively **engaging the marking team** with criteria and rubrics develops a shared understanding of expectations and standards. This provides the basis for **consistency** of academic judgement/parity of marking and feedback practices, thus improving students' perceptions of fairness.

University policy on '**Internal moderation**' (Assessment Handbook, Section 13.1) sets out a range of practical strategies for '**calibration' activities** (e.g. blind marking of a small sample of selected scripts early in the marking period with subsequent discussion) that you can use to engage marking teams with rubrics.

Effective feedback makes explicit reference to the assessment criteria. This helps students understand the mark they have been awarded, but also provides the basis for developing their understanding of what is valued in their discipline. This can be achieved by providing a highlighted rubric for each student showing how they performed against the criteria in Blackboard and making explicit reference to the criteria in feedback comments.

"When it came to support to understand the assessment criteria, it is clear that the mere provision of criteria/a rubric is insufficient… Instead active engagement with the rubrics is required e.g. self-assessment activities which demand interaction with the rubric" (Laville et al., 2023, p. 116).

Useful Resources

-Laville et al. (2023) provide three University of Reading case studies that capture practical recommendations to actively engage students with rubrics.

-T & L Exchange video case study [14 minutes] on 'Improving student assessment literacy & engaging students with rubrics' by Professor Allan Laville.

-Heriot Watt's The Biscuit Game: Exploring Criteria for Assessment, is a fun activity to support staff and students in discussing criteria for biscuits and how to apply them to assess biscuit quality.

Co-creation of rubrics

Rather than presenting a 'polished' assessment rubric, are there opportunities in particular modules to work in partnership with students to **co-construct** the criteria and rubric at the start of a module?

7 Cs of effective feedback

The University has identified seven key characteristics of effective feedback, one of which is that feedback is Criterion-based: "Feedback should reference assessment criteria to promote assessment literacy and build confidence in the fairness and consistency of academic judgement."

SUMMARY

This guidance emphasises the importance of criterion-based assessment using well-designed rubrics to ensure clarity and transparency in assessment requirements as part of an Assessment *for* learning approach. The guidance provides practical advice on creating and using rubrics, encouraging a collaborative approach for their development and review and highlights the value of actively engaging students in the assessment process.

To contact us and explore other guides in our Focus On: series, please visit https://www.reading.ac.uk/cqsd/teaching-resources

References and further reading

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