

**CQSD**

CENTRE | QUALITY SUPPORT  
FOR | & DEVELOPMENT



**FOCUS ON: ASSESSMENT & FEEDBACK**

# **DESIGNING AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT**



# MAKING THE CASE FOR AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT

**Undertaking ‘authentic’ assessment tasks which develop meaningful and integrated application of academic knowledge and skills aligns with Assessment for Learning (AfL) principles and is fundamental to engendering the range of attributes expected for University of Reading graduates.**

This guidance defines what we mean by authentic assessment and provides practical advice for individuals and programme teams to enhance their current practice in designing and implementing more authentic and inclusive assessments.

## WHAT IS ‘AUTHENTIC’ ASSESSMENT?

We have adopted Lydia Arnold’s (2022) definition of ‘authentic’ assessment who emphasises that ‘authentic’ assessment is characterised by **one or more** of the following:

- Relevance to future employment
- Relevance to the advancement of the discipline
- Relevance to our collective future
- Relevance to individual aspirations

Additionally, authentic assessments:

- Often mirror real, complex challenges
- Results in diverse outputs
- Equips students to work with uncertainty
- Causes students to meaningfully reflect on their learning
- Focus on ‘process’ as well as product.

## BENEFITS OF AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT

- **Motivation & Engagement:** Assessing students’ ability to apply what they have learned in meaningful contexts fosters a greater sense of ownership, leading to deeper and increased engagement.
- **Higher-order thinking:** Authentic assessments typically require students to engage in tasks that go beyond simple recall of facts. These tasks often involve critical thinking, problem-solving, and creating innovative solutions.
- **Skills development:** Authentic assessments develop a wide range of life-relevant skills and attributes which have application within and beyond the classroom.
- **Academic integrity:** Authentic assessments help to avoid issues of academic misconduct (whether accidental or deliberate). This is because they often involve the application of knowledge and skills to specific and plausible contexts or scenarios. This encourages students to uphold the standards of academic integrity by discouraging practices such as copying from external sources.
- **Personalisation:** Authentic assessments can be tailored to match the unique interests and needs of students, making the learning experience more personalised, and the outputs more interesting to mark!

“Assessment defines what students regard as important, how they spend their time and how they come to see themselves as students and then as graduates....If you want to change student learning then change the methods of assessment.”  
(Brown et al., 1997, p. 7)

### Examples of some authentic outputs:

1. Information leaflet
2. Consultancy report
3. Business plan
4. Training session plan with resources
5. Marketing campaign with a rationale
6. Large data set analysis for a client
7. An exhibition / event
8. A community service project to address local issue
9. Journal article reporting experimental results
10. Grant application / research funding bid
11. Blog
12. Reflective commentary



## AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT IN PRACTICE

The table below highlights examples of authentic assessment together with a rationale for their design.

SUBJECT-SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE	AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENT TASK	RATIONALE
<b>Digital Marketing</b>	Create a digital marketing strategy for a not-for-profit organisation of your choice with an accompanying decisions log and rationale.	Students apply their knowledge of digital marketing and gain practical experience in digital marketing strategies. Outputs require the development of skills in communication and decision-making. Giving students scope to choose an organisation provides them with autonomy.
<b>UK Maritime History</b>	In groups, create an exhibition on UK maritime history targeted at post-16 history students visiting the University for a taster day. Groups will work together to collate the work for the event, and each student will submit an individual reflective account.	Students apply their knowledge of UK Maritime History and draw on their own experience of pre-university study / as prospective students to create an output for a specific audience through a hands-on project personalised to their study environment. Outputs require the development of skills in presentation, teamwork and metacognition. The collaborative nature of the task adds to its authenticity.
<b>Environmental sustainability</b>	Choose one building / area of campus to conduct an environmental sustainability assessment. Identify areas of good practice and select, justify and present three improvements to a member of the Estates team as a video presentation.	Students apply their knowledge of sustainability to engage in real sustainability practices in a familiar environment. Students are motivated to develop presentation and research skills as an audience / end-user has been explicitly identified. Outputs require the development of communication and digital skills.

For more examples from a range of disciplines across the sector, see:

- Kay Sambell & Sally Brown's [compendia of authentic assessments](#).
- Case studies from [Keele University](#) and the [University of Liverpool](#).

### Moving towards more authentic assessment







There are varying degrees of authenticity.

Adapting one aspect of an existing task by changing the **format of the output, intended audience or purpose of the task** may be a more realistic approach and help you and your students build confidence with authentic assessment.



# DESIGNING AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENTS

We outline below points for module convenors to consider when designing authentic assessments. Many of these apply to the design of assessments more broadly.

<p><b>Learning outcomes</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start with the learning outcomes your assessment is designed to assess. The assessment should <a href="#">align</a> with these outcomes.</li> <li>• Where necessary, adjust outcomes for higher-order thinking (i.e., emphasise application and synthesis over information recall).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Task Orientation</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify a plausible context or scenario for your discipline which relates to one or more of <a href="#">Arnold's four characteristics of authentic assessment</a>.             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ A good test of <i>relevance</i> is to ask: What is the <b>purpose</b> for the student in completing this assessment (beyond compliance and awarding a grade)?</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Provide enough detail to avoid ambiguity but leave room for independent interpretation and problem-solving.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Output</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Determine the <b>format of the output</b>.             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ A wide range of assessment types are listed in the University's <a href="#">A to Z of Assessment Methods</a> and Arnold's <a href="#">Assessment 'Top Trumps' cards</a>.</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Consider the <b>intended audience</b> for the assessment product (if it has an interested audience beyond the marker, it has <i>relevance</i>!).</li> <li>• If the assessment involves group work, consider whether you will assess the process and/or the final product.             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Further guidance on group work can be found in the University's guidance on <a href="#">Making the most of Groupwork</a>.</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<p><b>Skills</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify the skills and attributes students can develop by undertaking the assessment.</li> <li>• Check these skills and attributes are explicit in the learning outcomes.</li> <li>• Collaborate with your Programme team to identify if, and where, students have been introduced to these skills to ensure students are given appropriate support to enable them to succeed.</li> <li>• Determine whether you need to offer dedicated skill workshops (e.g., poster design, group work), particularly if these are not embedded elsewhere.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Workload</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Estimate notional learning hours and ensure the scope of the task is manageable for both students to complete and for staff to mark.</li> <li>• Manage workload by constraining word count, presentation duration etc. For more information see ADE's Guidance on <a href="#">Assessment volume and distribution</a>.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Assessment criteria</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish clear and specific assessment criteria to help ensure fairness, consistency, and transparency in the assessment process.</li> <li>• Consult the <a href="#">University's generic grade descriptors / marking criteria</a> and your school's specific implementation of these guidelines.</li> <li>• Consider how any reflective components / group work will be assessed.</li> </ul>

Kay Sambell & Sally Brown have also developed a [‘task generator’](#) to provide a pragmatic approach to designing authentic assessments.

## PROGRAMME LEVEL DESIGN

Taking a programme-level approach to the design of authentic assessments is necessary to allow for progression in the complexity of the task or method and to ensure students are given appropriate support to enable them to succeed. The latter is particularly important if you are introducing an unfamiliar task.

This necessitates co-ordination in the design and delivery of authentic assessment across the programme team to ensure an appropriate balance of continuity and [variety of assessment tasks](#) and mapping of skills development. As the University policy on employability states, “knowing and learning about, practising and reflecting on the skills students gain through authentic assessment will increase students’ employability and their self-awareness” (University of Reading, 2022).

Thinking programmatically also ensures resources can be directed appropriately. For example, while live projects involving external stakeholders can have a significant impact on student learning, they are also resource intensive.

### A note about collaboration

Leveraging external stakeholders (e.g. local businesses and community groups), academic, professional and student partnerships to co-create and sense-check your assessment design ensures a diversity of perspectives and collective expertise can be brought to the process.

Do not underestimate the value of early engagement with:

1. [Careers](#) for advice on employability skills and employer engagement
2. [Academic Library Liaisons](#) and [Study Advice](#) for advice on academic skills

## IMPLEMENTING AUTHENTIC ASSESSMENTS

Having designed an authentic assessment, we need to consider its implementation.

You should provide students with clear guidance on:

- ✓ The purpose of the assessment, including the skills they will develop.
- ✓ What they need to do, make or produce with an estimate of how long they should spend on the assessment.
- ✓ How the assessment will be marked.
- ✓ The [formative assessment](#) opportunities available to prepare students well for summative assessment.

### You can help your students with formative activities such as:

1. Hosting a bespoke introductory session about the assessment. Ensure it is recorded for accessibility to all students, whether they attend live or revisit it later.
2. Sharing exemplars of the expected output together with activities that promote close analysis and discussion of these.
3. Providing a comprehensive assessment brief that outlines the task, required format, and assessment criteria. Signposting relevant guides and videos developed by the University’s Study Advice team: <https://libguides.reading.ac.uk/study-advice-guides>.
4. Making time in the classroom for students to seek clarification and improve their work through formative peer and self-assessment.

For help in designing and implementing authentic assessments in your discipline, please contact the ADE (Academic Development and Enhancement) team.

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

Arnold, L. (2022). Expanded assessment top trumps. <https://lydia-arnold.com/2022/11/14/expanded-assessment-top-trumps/>

Brown, G. A., Bull, J., & Pendlebury, M. (1997). *Assessing student learning in higher education*. Routledge.

Brown, S. (2023). Assessment, learning and teaching in higher education. <https://sally-brown.net/>

- Sally's blog is continually updated and a scroll through the site will reveal a wide range of resources pertaining to authentic assessment, including a compendia of case studies and a "task generator." <https://sally-brown.net/kay-sambell-and-sally-brown-covid-19-assessment-collection/>

Sambell, K., & Brown, S. (2019). A step by step guide to designing more authentic assessments. Heriot Watt University. [https://lta.hw.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/GUIDE-NO31\\_A-step-by-step-guide-to-designing-more-authentic-assessments.pdf](https://lta.hw.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/GUIDE-NO31_A-step-by-step-guide-to-designing-more-authentic-assessments.pdf)

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University of Reading. (2023). A to Z of assessment methods. [https://sites.reading.ac.uk/curriculum-framework/wp-content/uploads/sites/35/2022/03/A-Z\\_of\\_Assessment\\_Methods\\_FINAL\\_table.pdf](https://sites.reading.ac.uk/curriculum-framework/wp-content/uploads/sites/35/2022/03/A-Z_of_Assessment_Methods_FINAL_table.pdf)

Talis reading list on authentic assessment. <https://rl.talis.com/3/reading/lists/EFD241B4-4D75-16EF-DA8F-A2C4AC571771.html?lang=en>

