

Steps for Designing a Criterion-Referenced Assessment

Adapted with permission from Alverno College Institute, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. *Teaching for Competencies. Using Performance Assessment 2015*. Section 3, pp. 37-4

Step 1: Specify the Course Outcome(s) Related to the Assessment

- I. **Identify the specific course outcome(s)** that are related to the assessment you're designing.
- II. **Think about the specific assessment you're designing:**
 - a. What are the key concepts, disciplinary frameworks, methods, etc. to be integrated in this assessment?
 - b. What will serve as evidence of accomplishment of the course outcome(s) related to this assessment?

Step 2: Design the Assessment

- I. **Identify the assessment context or situation** (e.g. having a conference with parents; safely using appropriate chemicals in a lab; being an effective citizen by communicating views to elected officials; observing kindergarten students; videotaping a group interaction in a communication course; collaborating with others to create a survey instrument and conduct a survey; talking with 8th grade students about their reading goals).
- II. **Identify a mode for student response** (e.g. written, oral, visual, process) and what you want students to do/produce (e.g. write a research report, make an oral presentation; contribute to a blog; write a script; do a role-play in front of the class; create a poster; write a self and peer assessment of own and others' effectiveness in accomplishing a group project; create an I-movie capturing elements of a specific historical time period; do a written analysis of a conflict depicted in a movie and suggest alternative approaches; create a written lesson plan and orally discuss the rationale).
- III. **Create the assessment prompt and instructions.**

Questions to consider in designing an Assessment Prompt

- How close is the assessment to what the students actually do when they complete this programme/course?
- Does the assessment bring the student close to a situation within which the student will be using the outcome(s) outside the classroom?
- Is the assessment clearly related to the course outcome(s)?
- Does the assessment fit the level of the student? Of the course?
- Does the assessment elicit the most advanced performance of which each student is capable? Is the assessment expansive in nature?
- Will the assessment engage the student?
- Will the assessment give the student an opportunity to demonstrate sufficient indicators of the outcome(s)?
- Does it include directions distinguished from criteria?

Step 3: Develop Criteria to Judge Student Performance

- I. **Develop criteria to judge student performance.** Based upon how you determine you will elicit the outcome(s), and from your experience of past student performances, articulate the specific criteria you will use to evaluate student performance. Students will use the criteria to guide their work and for self-assessment. Faculty will use the criteria to judge student performance. Think about how you will share the criteria with your students.

Criteria

- Criteria are qualitative indicators of an integration of ability and knowledge as seen in performance.
- Criteria result from breaking open an outcome into specific components.
- Criteria need to be specific enough for a student at a given level to understand and use, without being so specific that the performance is limited to following directions.
- Criteria must include qualitative dimensions of performance.
- The number of criteria for a single task needs to be suitably small in order for students to understand what is expected of them.

Criteria define the *characteristics* of the performance, but they do not how well the students must demonstrate those characteristics – that is the job of the *descriptors*.

Examples of Effective Criteria for Specific Assessment

Course Outcome	Criteria for Specific Assessment
Course on Experimental Psychology: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create a research design that represents one of the methodological paradigms of experimental psychology and is appropriate to the research question. 	In the research design, demonstrates full and accurate application of the principles of operant conditions for the purpose of increasing or decreasing target behaviours.
Course on Literary Criticism: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicates an understanding of literary criticism, questions its assumptions and uses its frameworks to analyze and evaluate literature. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accurately identifies the organizing concepts and assumptions of 2 schools of literary criticism. • Explains how 2 schools of criticism differ in assumptions about the nature of literature. • Draws interpretive conclusions about the assigned novel that clearly illustrate the assumptions of a selected school of criticism.

Examples of Less Effective Criteria

- The criteria do not adequately reflect essential learning outcomes. Instead, they contain format requirements, directions, or steps, such as:
 - *Select a framework to analyze the work*
 - *Must be 3-5 pages*
- The criteria lack qualitative elements, such as:
 - *Present an analysis that includes your hypothesis, a graph of progress, and a summary of results.*

Questions for Critiquing Criteria

- Are they more specific than the outcome?
- Are they something you can observe?
- Do they capture what's important about the learning that we want students to demonstrate?
- Do they contain qualitative descriptors?
- Would they fit various approaches for doing the assessment? Could a student meet these criteria in a variety of ways?
- Together, do they give you a picture of the outcome(s)?
- Are they appropriate to the mode and purpose of the assessment?
- Could a student self-assess based on these criteria?
- Could another assessor judge the performance using these criteria?

Step 4: Develop a Rubric

An assessment rubric is used to measure performance against a pre-determined set of criteria. The rubric contains essential criteria for the assessment task and appropriate levels of performance for each criterion. Descriptors are used to indicate what is expected at each level of performance for each criterion.

Writing Descriptors

Develop your rubric by using the criteria you developed in Step 3 and write a description of what a student would need to do to meet the criteria sufficiently to demonstrate the achievement of the learning outcome(s).

Some examples of Pass descriptors:

Learning Outcome	Assessment Criterion	Descriptor - Pass
Contextualise the role of courts that deal with civil disputes	Advise a client about the options available to them within the civil justice and dispute resolution landscape	Provides advice about more than one dispute resolution process option that both accurately explains the process and applies the client's circumstances to justify the recommendation
Monitor and adapt performance skills in response to various audiences and non-theatrical spaces	Work with the director, text and production team during the rehearsal process	During rehearsals you adhered to all theatre rehearsal protocols and worked cooperatively with the director, other actors and production team by: -contributing ideas that related to the director's vision; and -taking direction

Taken from <http://www.teaching-learning.utas.edu.au/assessment/writing-assessment-criteria/writing-standards-descriptors-for-rubrics>

Note some of the characteristics of the descriptors.

- Use positive language to describe the demonstrations of learning
- The descriptors are of what is in evidence rather than what was lacking
- The focus is on the processes of learning not on content to be included

Once you have a descriptor for the Pass standard, the next step is to describe the standards that exceed the standard and to describe the performance or work that does not demonstrate achievement of the learning outcome. It's important to describe what the work does as opposed to what it does not do—i.e., it should be written using positive statements as much as possible.

Step 5: Develop Feedback

How will the feedback be given (oral/written/face-to-face/skype, electronic, individual/group)?

Purposes of feedback:

- Describe and judge the performance in relation to criteria in order to help the students better understand and analyze their performance using criteria.
- Document distinctive performance
- Diagnose and prescribe
- Motive students
- Plan for future success
- Warn students

Questions to consider in giving feedback:

- Will the feedback incorporate explicit behaviours from the performance? (Is the student able to make links between what s/he did and what you are communicating about the performance?)
How useful is the feedback over time?
- Will the feedback explain your judgments about performance, using criteria and explicit evidence?
- Will the feedback be timely?
- Will the feedback be focused, clear, and well organized? Will it communicate what the students needs to do next (what, when, where)?
- Will the feedback make suggestions that reinforce effective performance and that identify areas for development?
- Will the feedback focus on the amount of information that the student can use, rather than all the information you have?
- Will the feedback affirm, describe, suggest alternatives, and ask questions rather than scold, edit, or impose the instructor's style?
- Will the feedback be legible and written in words the student can understand?

Things to consider during course planning that affect assessment:

- How will course content offer opportunities for students to develop the learning outcomes?
- What learning experiences will you build into the unit/module/topic to integrate the knowledge and abilities students must demonstrate in the assessment?
- What activities or experiences will students need in the unit prior to doing the assessment?
- What assignments will be meaningful and contribute to the development of the learning outcomes?
- What diverse types of assessment prompts will be used across the course to give students ample opportunities to demonstrate the course outcomes? This is an important question, given that abilities are too complex to assess in a single context through a single mode.