

FIRST YEAR CORE COURSE LEADERS' COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE TOOLKIT

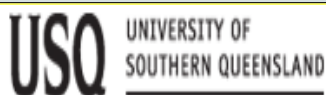
FIRST YEAR COURSE LEADERS TOOLKIT ITEM

Criterion Referenced Marking

THE USQ COPs PROJECT

Faculty of Arts CoP
and
Faculty of Business CoP

<http://www.usq.edu.au/cops>



Topic: Using criterion-referenced assessment in first year

Background

Grading in Australian universities has moved away from practices, such as [norm referencing](#) towards a [criterion-referenced assessment](#)¹ regime. This move has taken place because universities are increasingly required to demonstrate transparency and consistency in their assessment of student learning outcomes. The use of assessment criteria increases transparency and consistency because it can be used to make expectations about student performance clear to students and staff alike. This enables students to develop sound judgement about their own, and others', performance. Using criterion-referenced assessment also facilitates the development of shared understandings between teaching staff about student performance.

Challenge

The challenge for first year convenors is to design assessment criteria that clearly reflect desirable qualities of student performance for a chosen assessment task in their discipline. Criteria must also relate to identified learning outcomes for the course as a whole, and articulate different performance [standards](#)² or levels that are appropriate for first year.

Academic solutions for maximum transparency

On their own, marking criteria do not provide detail about different performance standards or levels. This is why convenors often combine criteria with [grade descriptors](#)³ when designing [marking rubric](#) for particular assessment tasks. The use of grade descriptors allows convenors to describe different standards of performance (grades, for example) for each assessment criterion. The use of grade descriptors allows for consistency in marking and moderation, and makes convenor expectations about student performance in assessment explicit for students.

The use of marking rubrics is often supplemented by [teaching, learning and peer review activities](#) designed to help markers and students understand how they are used. Used in this way, criterion-referenced assessment becomes a tool for developing students' judgement about their own, and others', performance.

Convenors often supplement marking rubric with [models or exemplars](#). These are particularly important where the use of marking criteria and grade descriptors is difficult because of the complex, higher-order nature of assessment tasks. Annotated student exemplars that include commentary about why the assignment meets the assessment criteria are particularly useful.

Key points for effective use of assessment criteria

- Assessment criteria should be aligned with stated learning outcomes
- Assessment criteria should reflect desired qualities or characteristics of the task being assessed
- To express different standards or levels of student performance, assessment criteria should be used in combination with grade descriptors
- Assessment criteria should be supplemented by the use of exemplars, practice and dialogue between staff and students
- Assessment criteria need to be reinforced and reviewed through moderation processes, which build shared understandings amongst teaching team members
- Assessment criteria within courses should articulate wider disciplinary and professional consensus about appropriate standards of student performance for first year.

Final word

The case studies and exemplars provided here represent the efforts of first year course convenors to create greater consistency and transparency in their assessment practice. Criterion-referenced assessment benefits both students and markers because it provides explicit information about what desirable qualities course convenors are looking for in student work. Supplementing assessment criteria with teaching and learning activities not only helps develop students' judgement about their own and others' performance, it also builds shared understandings within teaching and program teams about appropriate performance standards for first year and beyond.

Using assessment criteria to grade student performance

What is the intended outcome?

To design assessment criteria and supplementary materials/learning activities, which make desirable qualities and standards of student performance for assessment tasks explicit for both students and markers.

What is the established practice?

Many teachers already use marking guides and grading scales to communicate expectations about assessment tasks to students. Others use written feedback to communicate their expectations to students as part of the marking process.

What are the advantages for teachers and students in using criterion-referenced assessment?

If used in combination with grade descriptors and supplementary materials/learning activities, assessment criteria can also be used as learning tools that serve to develop students' judgement, and shared understandings amongst teaching team members about student performance in first year.

1. A criterion defines a desirable characteristic or quality of student performance for a particular type of assessment. For example, *appropriate structure* would be a criterion for an academic essay.

2. A standard is a level of achievement to be attained. Teachers of first year course can ask themselves: what level of learning should students attain by the end of my course. Program teams can ask themselves: what level of learning should students attain in their various courses by the end of first year.

3. Grade descriptors allow us to describe features of different attainment levels for a given assessment criterion. They are used in combination with assessment criteria to form a 'marking rubric'.