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Assessment Criteria – A Guide

The Section for Higher Education Development

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These recommendations and examples are taken from *Att sätta praxis på pränt*, Lund University, and our own examples from SeHp unless otherwise stated (see reference list).

Why Assessment Criteria?

Examinations in higher education are ultimately governed by (1) the degree ordinance, which is then broken down and specified in the university's program objectives, (2) course objectives, and finally (3) assessment criteria, which are presented to students at the start of the course. Below is a summary of the key principles of assessment criteria related to legal certainty and our local regulations.

- Assessment criteria and grading criteria communicate what we, as teachers, expect in terms of student knowledge.
- By communicating assessment criteria and grading criteria, Linnaeus University meets one of the requirements of the government for fair examinations.
- In our local regulations, assessment criteria is used as a broad term for various types of assessment situations (final grade are sometimes determined after a combination of different assessments).
- Grading criteria refers to the more specific criteria that apply to the aggregation of result from all examinations in a course to a particular grade (see local regulations).

All student assessment criteria should share the **common goal of providing students with guidance on how to focus their studies** so they will be able to demonstrate the knowledge that teachers expect. Accordingly, assessment criteria can also help reduce emails asking, *"What will be on the exam?"*

Fair Examinations

Fair examinations mean that students must know the basis by which they are being assessed and that the assessment is fair. Additionally, we must ensure that we are examining the correct student and that they have acquired the knowledge we require them to demonstrate. Assessment criteria can be used to strengthen the validity of an examination, ensuring it reflects the student's genuine knowledge. Linnaeus University has therefore established local regulations stating that the **grounds for assessment must be communicated to students at the start of the course.**

Since assessment criteria aim to capture what students must demonstrate in an examination, they also serve as feedback to ensure that the examinations are designed in a way that allows students to showcase the required knowledge, and that this knowledge aligns with the course objectives. Some course objectives may need to be assessed through different examination formats (e.g., lab work and a written exam).

Assessment criteria may take the form of more precise grading criteria, guidelines for weighing multiple grades, rubrics, or clarifying descriptions of an assessment.

It is within the professional responsibility of teachers (within their academic disciplines) to determine what knowledge should be examined in relation to course objectives. It is up to the university and its examiners to decide what constitutes an examination in a specific context and how it should be conducted.

The ability to articulate assessment criteria as a foundation for fair examinations is necessary to:

- Ensure that no external factors influence the assessment of student performance.
- Help students understand the basis of their assessment (both as guidance for their studies and so they may better understand the feedback provided by teachers.
- Counteract grade/assessment inflation.
- Facilitate the transition between course coordinators and teaching teams.
- Support student independence.

No matter how well-formulated and detailed the assessment criteria of a course or program may be, they cannot fully capture the complexity of knowledge within a subject. However, they provide clarity compared to an unspoken and uncommunicated basis of assessment. If requirements and expectations remain unstated, the foundation for assessments risks becoming unclear even to the teacher, leading to potential issues in communication with students and other teachers.

These guidelines are based on the belief that teachers, with experience and time, develop an intuitive sense of what they expect from student performance within their field of knowledge—but that this understanding needs to be communicated.

Things to Consider When Formulating Assessment Criteria

It is important to ensure that:

- The chosen examination formats provide students with the opportunity to demonstrate the knowledge that the assessment criteria require, thereby specifying the course objectives.
- Assessment criteria are used for communication and feedback to students, reinforcing fair assessment and clarifying any gaps in their knowledge. This guidance helps students in their continued studies or in their preparation for retaking an exam.

Foundations for Formulating Assessment Criteria

The following guiding principles are summarized first and then elaborated on with examples:

> **A.** Strive for subject-specific assessment criteria rather than general and holistic criteria. Ensure criteria are explicitly linked to the course's learning objectives.
> **B.** Be cautious with quantitative assessment criteria—aim to describe meaningful aspects of learning objectives using action-oriented verbs.
> **C.** Clearly distinguish between grade levels by identifying key differentiating aspects—what should be decisive?

A. Subject-Specific Assessment Criteria Linked to Course Objectives

Subject-specific assessment criteria capture students' understanding of disciplinary knowledge in specific contexts. The connection to course objectives means that commonly used action verbs must be translated into qualitative indicators within the examination. For example, if the objective states that the student must "describe" something, then assessment criteria should clarify the qualities required in that description to achieve a passing grade. These criteria help students focus their studies in preparation for assessment.

Example:

- *Explain political science theories and analytical approaches* (undergraduate level, A-F scale).
- *Explain the history and key concepts of sociology of law* (undergraduate level, U, G, VG).

What is required in these explanations for them to be considered passing, and should they be assessed at all different grade levels (A-F or U-VG)? What knowledge should be captured?

In the first example, "theories" is plural—are there clues about which theories must be included to achieve a passing grade? If the entire grading scale is applied, what should distinguish different levels of performance?

In the second example, it is implied that there is a history and a set of concepts being referenced. Should students independently identify which historical aspects and concepts are relevant, or should these be indicated in some way? One approach is to require students to both *identify and justify* their choices. Another alternative is to explicitly state which historical framework should be included for a passing grade.

Example:

- *The assignment is considered passing if it identifies key developments in the history of sociology of law and justifies their significance.*
  Or:
- *The assignment is considered passing if it clearly describes events A, B, and C and explains their significance in the history of sociology of law.*

Start with the key terms in the learning objectives, which are often formulated with action verbs or reference specific concepts (such as theory selection). Consider the essential concepts in the learning objectives and how students should demonstrate their understanding.

Avoid comparative adjectives such as *good* and *better* and vague terms like *satisfactory, excellent,* and *outstanding*—these offer little guidance for students on how to focus their studies or what to improve for a retake. They also risk being applied subjectively by different teachers. Additionally, avoid checklist-style grading rubrics that may lead to superficial, mechanical learning (see Elmgren & Henriksson 2010: 20ff, 265f; Nordrum et al. 2013).

We aim to communicate knowledge and course content in ways that foster student independence and ability to participate within their field, prepared for complexity and changing knowledge objects rather than prescriptive communication.

Linking assessment criteria closely to the actual course content—for example, specifying expectations for a particular lab—enables teachers to integrate assessment criteria effectively into their teaching. The criteria should be formulated by those who teach the course, as they are most familiar with its content and pedagogical structure. Additionally, strong alignment with course content makes it more difficult for students to misuse generative AI.

Course Objective	Example Assessment Criteria	Comment
Be able to describe the carbon cycle	- To pass, the response must include a description of the cycle	The student understands that they need knowledge of

Course Objective	Example Assessment Criteria	Comment
	across multiple ecosystems and encompass a variety of processes and organisms. - To pass, the student must be able to explain how the laboratory exercise represents the carbon cycle in water. - To pass, the description must present different carbon storage alternatives within the carbon cycle.	ecosystems and must vary their explanation. The student must relate course components to the required knowledge. For more advanced knowledge, the focus could be on an critical arguments, assessment, or discussion of various storage options, which also impacts the examination format.
Be able to interpret and discuss various historical movements	- To pass, the student must discuss and evaluate historians' interpretations in example texts using simple yet well-founded reasoning. - To pass, the student must be able to analyse the historical narrative and highlight the historian's perspectives, interpretations, and evaluations. - To pass, the student must discuss the historian's role in historical writing using simple but logical reasoning.	
Be able to explain pedagogical and didactic arguments underlying some commonly used teaching methods in higher education	- To pass, the explanation of the teaching plan must justify the didactic choices made and how they may influence learning conditions for the entire group. All arguments must be supported by relevant references.	

B. Qualitative Rather Than Quantitative Performance Aspects

Using quantitative assessment criteria or grading rubrics carries the risk of ambiguity and may overlook the relative weight of different components in an evaluation. Some simpler objectives—such as formalities, structure, and content-related goals like listing, describing, or recognizing—may only need to be assessed at a pass/fail level. It is also essential to consider the weighting of course objectives. More complex and advanced aspects of knowledge should have a greater impact on final course grades. When numerical and percentage-based grades are used, problems often arise in aligning course objectives with students' achievement across all learning goals. This approach can also make it harder to communicate which aspects are included in the final assessment and their relative importance. In such cases, instructors must

put extra effort into explaining grading criteria and converting numerical scores into meaningful feedback for students. However, this caution should not be confused with the need to assess quantitative knowledge (e.g., requiring students to demonstrate an understanding of numerical values, quantities, or measurements).

When combining assessment criteria into a final course grade (grading criteria), the weighting of different assessed components must align with the course objectives, course content, and examination format.

C. Clear Distinctions Between Grade Levels

The effort required to articulate and define distinctions between grades increases with the number of grading levels included on a scale; it is important they are clear for all involved. In multi-level grading scales, it is crucial to determine what differentiates the various levels and to capture these distinctions in the qualitative aspects of student performance.

A useful approach is to start by defining the criteria for failing grades. It is often easier to determine what constitutes the minimum required level—what absolutely must be included, what cannot be missing, and what must be clearly understood. These formulations are particularly helpful for students near the pass/fail boundary, as they clarify what may be lacking in their work.

Example: Criteria for Failing (U)

- *The assignment will receive a failing grade if it does not include photosynthesis and carbon storage (key processes that must be understood in relation to each other).* This formulation is relatively strict and may be suitable at a foundational level. It could also be a shared agreement among instructors.
- *The assignment will receive a failing grade if justifications are missing and/or lack supporting arguments and references.*

By reversing these formulations, you can establish the criteria for passing (G).

References

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