



Scoring Criteria

Design Guide [DRAFT]

Overview

In a proficiency-based system, teachers use common scoring guides that provide detailed descriptions, or scoring criteria, of what students need to know and be able to do to demonstrate proficiency. Scoring criteria are specified for each performance indicator, which is the expected outcome for student learning associated with a class or learning experience that guides students toward proficiency in the district’s identified graduation standards.

Clear, descriptive scoring criteria ensure that, for each performance indicator, all students understand what knowledge and skills must be demonstrated to reach proficiency. They also enable allow educators to design a variety of tasks to meet unique student learning needs while still providing a means for all students to show what they know and can do. In this way, scoring criteria are a means to achieve equitable opportunity within a personalized system.

Assumptions

The following beliefs underpin the principles and best practices described in this document:

- **Educators have developed professional learning groups, a culture of professional reflection, and routines that enable the regular review of student work.** To develop effective scoring criteria, staff must work collaboratively, productively, and efficiently, and with a focus on instructional improvement and student growth. Candor and collegiality are essential, especially given that the work of tuning scoring criteria is ongoing, as discussed at the conclusion of this document. Educators also must be able to analyze student work to determine what students know and are able to do, and to identify, based on this information, what to teach next and how to teach it with individual students and small groups.
- **Student work informs the creation of scoring criteria.** By using student work to articulate scoring criteria, educators can define with greater specificity and concreteness each level of the learning progression—*Emerging, Developing, Proficient, and Exceeds*—as students work toward, and beyond, proficiency. A student paper at the *Exceeds* level, for example, can powerfully illustrate that surpassing the expectations of a performance indicator entails critiquing an author’s claims, not just writing a longer paper. Precise scoring criteria enable educators, students, and parents to not only



understand the quality of work a student must demonstrate in order to achieve proficiency, but also the route the student must take to progress from *Emerging* to *Exceeds*.

- **Students and educators have developed a growth mindset.** When individuals have a growth mindset—which is the belief that a person’s skills and abilities are not permanent, fixed traits—they are inclined to work toward continuous improvement. A growth mindset lays the foundation for the iterative work of reviewing and refining scoring criteria and supports a major rationale for developing and using scoring criteria: to provide explicit signposts that guide students toward proficiency, which is attainable for all students regardless of their diverse learning needs.
- **A K-12 system of scoring criteria is optimum.** To ensure consistency of expectations for students, teachers, and parents, a district should strive to develop a systemic approach toward scoring criteria. Examples of scoring criteria in this document, which are all from high school, have been selected for the purposes illustrating scoring criteria consistently across one grade span. The use of scoring criteria, however, should not be limited to high school.

Principles and Best Practices

PRINCIPLE 1: Scoring criteria illustrate increasingly complex *cognitive demand*.

What it is: Scoring criteria reflect an intentional sequencing of cognitive demand, or thinking skills, that aligns to the skills embedded in the performance indicator. Language used to describe the cognitive demands at each level corresponds to an existing taxonomy, and clearly becomes more rigorous as students move from *Emerging* to *Exceeds*. Verbs are precise and skills-oriented, such as “compare,” “organize,” “solve,” and “justify.” The specific cognitive demand that the performance indicator requires is reflected in the *Proficient* level; the scoring criteria for each of the other levels reflect a thinking skill in the taxonomy that is one step more complex (for *Exceeds*), or one to two steps less complex (for *Developing* and *Emerging*), than the cognitive demand required by the performance indicator.

What it isn’t: Scoring criteria that incorporate increasingly complex cognitive demands do not expect students to simply perform more activities utilizing the same skill, apply the same skill in different contexts, or “go above and beyond.” The same cognitive demand is not repeated or multiplied across the progression of learning, but rather thinking skills are synthesized into overall higher-order demands in an appropriate sequence.



Example

Level: Secondary

Content Area: Visual Arts

Performance Indicator	Emerging	Developing	Proficient	Exceeds
Students will be able to evaluate the features of composition in the artistic discipline.	I can name the features of a composition.	I can explain the features of a composition.	I can judge the quality of the features an artist uses in an original or adapted work using appropriate terminology.	I can use appropriate terminology to propose a way to improve a composition by modifying its features, and I can defend my proposal.

Helpful considerations:

- Select one taxonomy of thinking skills (e.g., Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy or Webb’s Depth of Knowledge) and consistently reference that source as you create scoring criteria for each level of the learning progression.
- Using the selected taxonomy, identify the primary thinking skills embedded within the performance indicator and use those verbs to write the scoring criteria for the *Proficient* level. For instance, in the example above, the performance indicator requires that students evaluate. The skill that most closely corresponds with “evaluating” in Bloom’s Taxonomy is “judging,” and so “judge” is used to describe the *Proficient* level.
- To remain focused on the complexity of thinking associated with each level of the learning progression, consider the question, “What can a student do when they are (*Emerging, Developing, etc.*)?”
- Use verbs that indicate increasingly complex thinking skills for each level from *Emerging* to *Exceeds*. For instance, in the example above, the thinking skill that describes the *Emerging* level is “naming.” “Explaining,” the thinking skill used to describe the *Developing* level, is more complex than “naming” and corresponds with the next level of complexity within Bloom’s Taxonomy.



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PRINCIPLE 2: Scoring criteria are *task-neutral*.

What it is: Task-neutral scoring criteria directly reference the performance indicator and therefore may be used with any task or assessment that measures students’ proficiency on the associated performance indicator. When scoring criteria are task-neutral, they can be combined and recombined to assess the unique tasks a teacher creates for or with students.

What it isn’t: Task-neutral scoring criteria do not mention elements of a specific assignment, such as the required components of a research project (interview protocol, bibliography, presentation, etc.). They are not tied to a specific course, assignment, educator, or student.

Example

Level: Secondary

Content Area: Social Studies

Performance Indicator	Emerging	Developing	Proficient	Exceeds
Observe, compare, and analyze patterns of national and global land use over time to understand why particular locations are used for certain human activities; speculate as to which areas might be used in the future and the impact of that usage.	I can observe and explain historic and current land use.	I can observe historic and current land use patterns and explain the human impact of that land use, and I can compare land use and the human impact nationally and globally.	I can use knowledge gained through observation and comparison to speculate which areas might be used in the future and explain the impact of that use.	I can apply knowledge gained to make recommendations for a more sustainable world.



Helpful considerations:

- Scoring criteria should echo the language of the performance indicator, avoiding any reference to the details or requirements of a specific task (e.g., a persuasive essay or lab report).
- When evaluated against a performance indicator rather than a specific task, students have the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in various ways. In the example above, a student could demonstrate proficiency by explaining the impact of speculated future land use through an oral presentation, a written report, or a multimedia production. Such task neutrality ensures that the teacher consistently applies expectations for student work while honoring diverse learning needs, such as individualized education program (IEP) goals or assessment re-takes.

PRINCIPLE 3: Scoring criteria focus on the *quality* of student work.

What it is: Each of the scoring criteria focuses on the complexity and quality of student performance. As a student progresses from *Emerging* to *Exceeds*, the scoring criteria use objective language to illustrate increasingly sophisticated performance, with an emphasis on what a student knows and is able to do at each level.

What it isn't: Across levels, effective scoring criteria do not include language that quantifies the frequency of performance, such as “complete [a task] 3–5 times.” Likewise, scoring criteria that focus on the quality of student performance do not use subjective descriptors of performance, such as “rarely,” “never,” or “always.”

Example

Level: Secondary

Content Area: Math

Performance Indicator	Emerging	Developing	Proficient	Exceeds
Students will write expressions in equivalent forms to solve problems.	I can compare expressions to determine if they are equivalent.	I can organize expressions into different forms.	I can solve problems by organizing expressions into different forms.	I can justify the most efficient form of an expression to solve problems.



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Helpful considerations:

- Scoring criteria should emphasize quality, not quantity. Rather than referencing the number of times or the frequency with which a student demonstrates specific skills or knowledge (e.g., “I can usually organize expressions.”), the scoring criteria for each level should reflect the requisite complexity of that demonstration (e.g., “I can organize expressions into different forms.”).
- For tasks that include a certain number of required elements, such as a minimum number of citations in a research project, include the quantity required within the instructions associated with that assessment, rather than within the scoring criteria.
- The scoring criteria for *Proficient* and *Exceeds* should include all elements of the performance indicator. In other words, it must clearly reflect the skills and knowledge student work must demonstrate—which often are not explicitly stated in the performance indicator itself—in order to achieve a *Proficient* designation or higher.
- Scoring criteria for the levels that are below *Proficient* should not include all elements of the performance indicator, as *Emerging* or *Developing* student work does not demonstrate all elements of the performance indicator.
- The *Proficient* scoring criteria should not be a restatement of the performance indicator. Rather than simply mirroring the language of the performance indicator, write the intended outcomes for the *Proficient* level in student-friendly, clear, and descriptive terms.

PRINCIPLE 4: Scoring criteria emphasize student assets.

What it is: To emphasize students’ capabilities, scoring criteria use precise, affirmative language that clearly illustrates what students are able to accomplish at each level. Criteria focus on learning achievements and set students’ sights on reaching the next level by demonstrating new, more complex skills and knowledge.

What it isn’t: Effective scoring criteria avoid defining levels of the learning progression according to what a student is not able to do yet, such as: “I cannot create a plan and/or establish long-term health goals” (see example below). Such language emphasizes gaps in performance and does not clearly specify for students the marker of having achieved the next level.



Example

Level: Secondary

Content Area: Health

Performance Indicator	Emerging	Developing	Proficient	Exceeds
Formulate a long-term personal health plan, incorporating decision-making and goal-setting strategies.	I can list goals I have for my own health.	I can explain ways I can reach a goal I set for my own health.	I can create a plan to meet immediate and long-term health goals.	I can adapt my plan and evaluate my progress so I can continue to positively impact my personal health.

Helpful considerations:

- By focusing on what a student accomplishes at each level—as opposed to what a student cannot do—the teacher provides a more clear illustration of precisely what learning needs to take place in order for students to reach each level of the learning progression.
- Scoring students against criteria that highlight their assets reflects a growth mindset, which suggests that all students are capable of growing their knowledge and skills if they are given sufficient opportunities to receive feedback and practice.
- Asset-based scoring criteria help instill in students the belief that proficiency is achieved not through one’s fixed intelligence, but instead through perseverance in the face of incremental challenge. It is likely that student motivation and desire for learning will increase as students gain experience with such scoring criteria.

Refining Scoring Criteria

Once a school or district community has developed scoring criteria, educators should regularly review the criteria to ensure they are effective and that choices made during the design process are positively influencing student learning. When educators engage in the following practices, they can help ensure that scoring criteria remain relevant and powerful in driving student growth and facilitating



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communications among schools, parents, and community stakeholders about student performance.

- **Scoring criteria are tuned regularly and systematically.** A system of scoring criteria is a living framework that is intended to tightly correspond with the realities of classroom while setting aspirational—yet achievable—targets for student growth. In order to remain useful to students, educators, and parents, the criteria should be reviewed and refined to ensure that they are practical, understandable, and effectively guiding students toward proficiency.
- **Student work is reviewed as a way to tune scoring criteria.** Even as scoring criteria are developed through the review of student work, educators should regularly and systematically review the effectiveness of the criteria against student work, and adjust the criteria accordingly. As they examine student work, educators can frame the conversation by asking, “What do we see the student(s) doing here?” If student work does not consistently reflect effort toward the next level, it may suggest that the descriptions of the levels are unclear or inappropriately sequenced. Likewise, if different educators score the same student work at various levels, or if educators score student work of differing stages of proficiency at the same level, it may indicate that the scoring criteria need to be revised.
- **Scoring criteria are refined and clarified based on feedback from students and teachers.** Teachers should reflect on how efficiently and effectively they are able to apply the scoring criteria, and should come to decisions as a team about whether and how to make adjustments. Students also can provide perspective on how clearly they can understand the scoring criteria, and the extent to which scoring criteria present a clear expectation of what a student must know and be able to do in order to move toward, and beyond, proficiency.
- **While it’s important to write them down, scoring criteria truly live in teaching and learning discussions among students and educators.** Although educators should strive to make scoring criteria clear and understandable for students—in alignment with the four principles outlined in this design guide—a documented set of scoring criteria is no substitute for the relationship between teachers and students. It is only through this relationship that students gain a concrete understanding of the specific successes and areas of focus that will move them through increasingly proficient performance. No set of written scoring criteria can fully capture the nuances of student performance and how the criteria can apply to diverse students. To maximize the power of scoring criteria, a teacher must have facility with the concepts and



rationales that underlie the scoring criteria, as well as a strong relationship with individual students and knowledge of students' strengths, needs, goals, and interests.



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