



2.4.9 Writing Performance Criteria for a Course

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Performance criteria are powerful statements that describe expectations in explicit detail. Performance criteria for a course are important to students who are taking the course, but they are also useful to faculty who can use them to motivate, facilitate, assess, and evaluate strong performance. They serve as the basis for selecting course activities, designing performance measures for the course, establishing the course assessment system, and determining the course evaluation system. Therefore they are useful to faculty, adjunct faculty, teaching assistants, and instructors of parallel course sections, and faculty who are planning subsequent courses. Ideally these criteria should distill a wide spectrum of learning outcomes for a course into a minimum set of student behaviors that are meaningful and relevant beyond the course. This module outlines a process for writing performance criteria for a course, drawing on examples from three different courses to illustrate the process.

Performance Criteria in a Course

Writing performance criteria for a course is a process that is parallel to the ones used in **4.1.7 Writing Performance Criteria for Individuals and Teams** and **1.5.4 Writing Performance Criteria for a Program**. From a program perspective, performance criteria for a course communicate the added value that the course contributes to program-level outcomes and to the cultivation of long-term personal and professional behaviors (Banta & Palomba, 2001). The set of performance criteria for a course should serve as a statement about what these students should know and be able to do in subsequent courses. The **Methodology for Course Design (2.4.8)** weaves performance criteria for a course into the fabric of a program while it promotes a shared understanding between learners and facilitators of what students are going to learn in a specific course, what challenges they will attempt, what support structures they can expect, and how their successes will be measured (**4.1.3 Mindset for Assessment**). From the faculty perspective, these criteria make it possible to prioritize alternative course activities, they serve as touchstones for beginning learning activities, and provide a framework for course assessment (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). From the learner perspective, these criteria suggest the particular skills and work products that they should focus on, both inside and outside of class, and provide criteria for them to use in self-assessments (Stiggins, 1996). For both faculty and students, performance criteria serve as a contract between students and faculty, translating implicit expectations into explicit statements about what levels of effort and achievement are expected and what types of performance will be valued and recognized in the course (**1.4.8 Mindset for Evaluation**).

Method for Developing Criteria

Table 1 outlines steps for developing performance criteria for a course. Each step is illustrated with examples of this process being used to write performance criteria for a foundations course, a basic math course, and an introductory engineering course.

Table 1 **Method for Developing Performance Criteria for a Course**

1. Brainstorm qualities that describe top performing students.
2. Minimize redundancy and overlap between the qualities
3. Select and describe the critical aspects of each quality.
4. Articulate connections among the aspects of each quality.
5. Synthesize these connections and then draft clear statements of performance.
6. Sequence the statements to form a logical set.

Step 1—Brainstorm qualities of top performing students.

Identify and construct performance criteria for a course by considering the qualities of your top students. At the same time, visualize the set of **Learning Outcomes (2.4.5)** that you have written for the course. Begin the discussion by reflecting on a few basic questions:

- What is the profile of the best students in the course?*
- What skills do faculty want students to bring to the next course?*
- How will this course prepare students to be better life-long learners?*
- Can the course integrate multiple disciplines or specialties in an authentic way?*

To successfully complete this step, it is necessary to review the essence of the program, to ensure a clear understanding of the role of the course within the program, to analyze similar courses in the program, and to identify best practices in the

field that are supported by the course. Think about the tasks, work products, processes, skills, and attitudes exhibited by students in the course. To ensure a complete and robust list of qualities, generate and edit the list of qualities so that they meet the following criteria:

Descriptive	they should convey an image of strong performance
Specific	one should be able to imagine how students will manifest that quality in the context of the course
Explicit	they should leave very little room for misinterpretation
Simple	novices in field should be able to understand them
Motivational	they should communicate a goal that everyone would like to strive for
Linked	each should connect to one or more learning outcomes for the course
Professional	they should align with the core values of the discipline
Authentic	that is, relevant to day-to-day practice in the discipline

Table 2 lists qualities of top students in each of the three courses. It is very important that Step 1 results in a comprehensive list that can be prioritized and detailed in subsequent steps without the risk of missing a major source of added value achieved through the course.

Step 2—Minimize redundancy and overlap among qualities.

Each of the qualities should be unique enough to describe dimensions of quality that are different from the others so that the list can be as concise as possible. When qualities have a significant overlap, one should be removed, or qualities should be merged into a third quality that captures the essence of the original pair. Once redundancy has been eliminated, the qualities should be prioritized (Table 3). A useful tool to help in prioritizing qualities is a matrix you create that maps each quality to the learning outcomes for the course. At the end of this analysis, six to eight qualities should emerge that account for over 90% of the value that the course adds to a program.

Step 3—Select and describe critical aspects of each quality.

Qualities should be analyzed to identify key aspects that clarify what is essential in each quality. The resulting list of aspects is helpful in visualizing performance associated with each quality, and generate alternatives for better

Table 2 **Qualities of Top Performing Students in Sample Courses**

Foundations Course	Basic Math	Introduction to Engineering
Strong Identity	Problem Solver	Communicator
Fully Engaged	Persistent	Critical Thinker
Committed to Success	Risk Taker	Team Player
Diligent	Self-Directed	Designer
Self-Assessor	Confident	Tool User
Connected	Neatness Oriented	Problem Solver
Persistent	Thinker	Quantitative Thinker
Collaborator	Reader	Ethical
Visionary	Growth Oriented	Documenter

Table 3 **Prioritization of Desired Qualities in Example Courses**

Foundations Course	Basic Math	Introduction to Engineering
Strong Identity	Self-Directed	Designer
Committed to Success	Persistent	Critical Thinker
Self-Assessor	Confident	Team Player
Diligent	Risk-Taker	Quantitative Thinker
Fully Engaged	Problem-Solver	Communicator
Collaborator	Neatness Oriented	Tool User

labeling of the quality. Table 4 enumerates aspects of a top-rated quality in each of the three sample courses.

Step 4—Articulate connections among aspects of each quality.

Begin to synthesize the aspects by understanding the relationships among the qualities identified. These connections can be made relatively quickly by drawing a concept map that connects the aspects to the area of quality. Possible schemas to organize such a map are sequential, hierarchical, inferential, or spoke and wheel. The quality of “designer” lends itself to a sequential map, as each aspect follows from the previous one. The quality “self-directed” is inferential: certain conditions lead to a solid outcome. The quality of having a “strong identity”

Table 4 **Analysis of a Top-Rated Quality from Example Courses**

Foundations Course	Basic Math	Introduction to Engineering
Strong Identity	Self-Directed	Designer
Appreciates Past	Personal Outcomes	Needs Analysis
Clear Vision	Learning Plan	Prototyping
Values Clarified	Exceeds Expectations	Iterating
Strong Connections to Self	Seeks Ways to Succeed	Testing
Actions Aligned	Aware of Resources	Clear Specifications

is hierarchal: higher-level behaviors depend on a solid foundation of lower-level behaviors.

Step 5—Draft clear statements of performance by synthesizing connections.

The goal of this step is to articulate a set of performance criteria that clearly defines expectations for a course. Clear your mind and look at the relationships uncovered in the previous step. Using these relationships, visualize (from the point of view of an observer in your classroom) how those relationships combine to create strong performance by one of your best students. Keeping this image in mind, write a single sentence that captures these relationships within a credible course context. Edit your statements for clarity and completeness using the following descriptor words:

Strategic	it should support shared learning outcomes for the course
Results Oriented	it should add value to work products and skills
Extends Capabilities	it should challenge even the best students
Rewarding	it should motivate students and stakeholders in the course
Achievable	it should be appropriately scoped for the course
Time-Bound	it should be achievable within time frame for the course
Measurable	it should suggest a context for measurement

Review the entire set of criteria to ensure that redundancy has not crept into your thinking since Step 3. Table 5 gives performance criteria for the three qualities cited in Table 4.

Table 5 **Examples of Performance Criteria Statements**

Strong Identity: Learners appreciate their own past, family, community, and culture; have set out a clear vision of where they are headed so that life's meaning is enriched daily as they walk the walk of their beliefs and values.

Self-Directed: Learners have clear direction because they have created their own learning outcomes, allowing them to develop personal plans for obtaining these outcomes with the help of available resources; they persevere until their outcomes meet their expectations in a real-world context.

Designers: Learners are able to interpret a client's needs to produce a basic set of specifications; are able to build a prototype that captures the basic essence of the design, and, through testing and iterating, evolve the design until clients sign off on the specifications; they can then package the design in a professional way and provide documentation so that others can use it.

Step 6—Sequence the statements to form a logical set.

Package the performance criteria clearly so that all stakeholders in the course understand them. The following questions can help in determining an order that has a nice flow.

Which area of performance is the most central?

Which areas of quality might you observe first?

Which areas of quality are related?

Which areas of quality are more specific?

Table 6 does this for an introductory to engineering course that features a first experience in product realization. The entire set of performance criteria for a course should appear in the course syllabus, should receive attention early in the course, should guide the design and implementation of course learning activities, and should anchor the course assessment and evaluation systems.

Concluding Thoughts

It is just as important to clearly communicate performance criteria for a course as it is to develop them thoughtfully. These performance criteria need to be meaningful and able to be processed by key stakeholders such as current and future students, teaching assistants, co-instructors, and faculty associated with pre-requisite, concurrent, and subsequent courses. Well-crafted criteria should reflect knowledge, skills, and attitudes required for academic as well as professional success. As such, they should be

Table 6

Set of Performance Criteria for an Introductory Engineering Course

Designers: Learners are able to interpret a client's needs to produce a basic set of specifications; are able to build a prototype that captures the basic essence of the design, and, through testing and iterating, evolve the design until clients sign-off on the specifications; they can then package the design in a professional way and provide documentation so that others can use it.

Critical Thinkers: Learners consistently seek to know more about related ideas and to know them in greater depth by formulating strong inquiry questions, experimenting and asking "what if," and by acquiring additional resources and connections to experts.

Quantitative Thinkers: Learners easily grasp new mathematical concepts, manipulate and analyze data effectively, and model scientific and engineering phenomena mathematically, as well as graphically, by using careful, precise, and logical thought.

Team Players: Learners value others whether they are working in formal teams or small groups, they value their perspectives and contributions, will play their designated role, and will leave others wanting to engage more in the future because the experience has been so rewarding.

Communicators: Learners carefully listen to the intended audience, accurately judge which discipline-specific vocabulary to use and which to translate into layman's language, and meet published guidelines so that people can comprehend and connect to the message.

Tool Users: Learners are comfortable in a variety of engineering environments, grasping the features and functions of new tools; they value the way an expert or craftsman would use the tool; they know the limits of the tools in terms of gaining the precision desired; and they keep accurate and detailed observations in an engineering notebook.

formulated and introduced in a way that is motivating to all course stakeholders. An annual review of performance criteria by the faculty team responsible for a course is an ideal way of reaffirming their relevance within the program. During these reviews, faculty should address issues such as changing student demographics, faculty teaching experience, and the emerging needs of modern society including capabilities associated cutting edge technology.

References

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- Stiggins, R. J. (1996). *Student-centered classroom assessment* (2nd ed.). Old Tappan, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Wiggins, G. P., & McTighe, J. (2005). *Understanding by design* (2nd Expanded edition). Baltimore: Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development.