

# Scoring Criteria Design Guide

“Clear learning goals help students learn better (Seidel, Rimmele, & Prenzel, 2005). When students understand exactly what they’re supposed to learn and what their work will look like when they learn it, they’re better able to monitor and adjust their work, select effective strategies, and connect current work to prior learning (Black, Harrison, Lee, Marshall, & William, 2004; Moss, Brookhart, & Long, 2011)... The important point here is that students should have clear goals. If the teacher is the only one who understands where learning should be headed, students are flying blind. In all the studies we just cited, students were taught the learning goals and criteria for success, and that’s what made the difference.”

—Brookhart & Moss, “Learning targets on parade,” *Educational Leadership*, October 2014

## Overview

In a proficiency-based system, teachers assess student learning progress and academic achievement using common scoring guides that include detailed descriptions—or “scoring criteria”—outlining what students need to know and be able to do to as they work toward, meet, and exceed proficiency on a given learning standard. Scoring criteria help teachers consistently evaluate work products and other evidence of proficiency as students acquire the essential knowledge and skills required for grade promotion and graduation.

Scoring criteria describe, in clear and precise terms, the characteristics of each stage of achievement along a proficiency continuum—from not meeting to exceeding a specific learning standard. Once schools have articulated scoring criteria for each of the learning objectives students are expected to meet, teachers can then assemble rubrics for assessing student work using a selection of appropriate scoring criteria.

## Why Scoring Criteria Matter

Scoring criteria improve assessment in several ways:

- Through collaborative work during common planning time or in professional learning groups, teachers develop a common understanding of what specific learning evidence constitutes not meeting, meeting, and exceeding proficiency.
- Scoring criteria enable educators to design a variety of assessments to meet unique student learning needs while applying rigorous academic standards—i.e., they balance the need to maintain high expectations for all students with the need for creative instructional approaches that allow students to demonstrate learning in a variety of ways.
- Evaluations of student proficiency are more consistent across teachers, courses, and learning experiences, and school leaders, teachers, and parents can be more confident in the accuracy, precision, and reliability of assessment results.
- When articulated clearly and descriptively, scoring criteria, and the resulting assessment scores, provide more detailed information about learning progress and achievement, which helps students understand the specific knowledge and skills they must demonstrate to reach or exceed proficiency, and helps teachers and parents identify specific learning needs, challenges, and strengths for each student.
- Once scoring criteria are established, teachers can quickly and efficiently assemble reliable rubrics for any given assessment.



# How Scoring Criteria Work

The Great Schools Partnership’s approach to proficiency-based learning articulates the following broad categories of learning outcomes for students:

- *Cross-curricular graduation standards* that describe the essential cross-disciplinary skills and habits of work that students will need to succeed in adult life.
- *Content-area graduation standards* that describe the essential knowledge and skills students need to acquire in each content area.
- *Performance indicators* that describe what students need to know and be able to do to meet either cross-curricular or content-area graduation standards.

Because performance indicators are more specific and measureable than graduation standards—and therefore more “assessable” in the classroom—teachers build assessments by combining performance indicators, and associated scoring criteria, within and across content areas and learning experiences.

In short, performance indicators are the learning expectations for any given assessment, and scoring criteria are the descriptions that articulate the continuum of evidence teachers evaluate to determine the extent to which students have achieved those learning objectives.

## Design Principles and Best Practices

### PRINCIPLE 1

Scoring criteria articulate a continuum of *increasingly complex cognitive demand*.

#### Do This

Scoring criteria should articulate an intentional sequencing of increasingly sophisticated and demanding thinking skills that are aligned with the knowledge and skills described in a performance indicator. The language used to describe the cognitive demand at each proficiency level should correspond to an existing taxonomy, and use verbs that are precise and descriptive (e.g., compare, organize, solve, or justify).

#### Avoid This

Scoring criteria should not expect students to simply produce more work products, apply the same skill in different contexts, or articulate the same level of cognitive demand but apply it to different tasks. The language used to describe the cognitive demands at each proficiency level should not be randomly selected or overly general and vague (e.g., stating that students exceed the standard by going “above and beyond”).

#### Illustrative Example

Level: Elementary  
Content Area: ELA

Performance Indicator	Emerging	Developing	Proficient	Distinguished
Write an opinion on topics or texts supporting a point of view with reasons and information.	I can state my opinion in writing about a topic or text.	I can explain my opinion in writing about a topic or text.	I can support my written opinion about a topic or text with evidence.	I can compare and contrast my written opinion with other opinions using evidence from a text.

## Best Practices

- An effective proficiency continuum must clearly delineate different levels of cognitive demand, which requires educators to use verbs that precisely articulate a progression of increasingly sophisticated thinking skills and academic abilities. To find the appropriate verbs, select a research-based taxonomy of thinking skills—the Great Schools Partnership recommends either Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy or Webb’s Depth of Knowledge—and consistently reference the terminology outlined in the taxonomy when creating scoring criteria for each level of the proficiency continuum.
- Begin by writing the desired learning outcomes for the proficient level in precise, descriptive, student-friendly terms. Using the selected taxonomy, identify the primary thinking skills that align with the performance indicator and use the most relevant and applicable verbs for that specific learning objective. In the example above, a student’s ability to *marshal evidence in support of a written opinion* is the most essential skill described in the performance indicator—consequently, the *proficient* description emphasizes the demonstration of this foundational skill.
- A simple way to begin articulating the different gradations of proficiency is to ask, “What should students be able to do when they are...*emerging, developing, etc.*?” In the example above, which is based on Bloom’s Revised Taxonomy, the *developing* level describes a specific cognitive and academic skill (*explaining* the rationale for an opinion) that is more sophisticated than the *emerging* description (merely *stating* an opinion without expressing a supporting rationale).

## PRINCIPLE 2

Scoring criteria focus on the *quality of student work* at each level of performance.

### Do This

Scoring criteria should use objective descriptions that articulate an increasingly nuanced progression of concrete evidence (i.e., what students specifically have to demonstrate at each level to show what they know and are able to do) that can be consistently measured and evaluated by different individuals across a variety of assessments and work products.

### Avoid This

Scoring criteria should not focus on the frequency of student performance (e.g., “I can complete [a task] 3–5 times”) or use frequency descriptors such as never, rarely, or always. Educators should avoid overly subjective descriptions that either cannot be measured or evaluated consistently (e.g., *poor, excellent, high quality*) or that focus on superficial features (e.g., *neat, colorful, visually appealing*).

### Illustrative Example

Level: High School

Content Area: Math

Performance Indicator	Emerging	Developing	Proficient	Distinguished
Use geometric shapes and their properties to model physical objects.	I can identify geometric shapes (e.g., triangles, quadrilaterals, and other polygons).	I can describe geometric shapes and their basic properties.	I can use geometric shapes to model physical objects.	I can evaluate the quality of models representing physical objects.

**Best Practices**

- Scoring criteria should emphasize quality, not quantity or frequency. Rather than describing the number of times a student should demonstrate knowledge or skill acquisition (e.g., “I can *sometimes* use geometric shapes to model physical objects”), scoring criteria should reflect the required complexity and sophistication of a specific demonstration of knowledge or skill at a given performance level (e.g., “I can use geometric shapes to model physical objects”).
- Scoring criteria for the *proficient* and exceeds levels should explicitly address all the core knowledge and skills articulated in the performance indicator. Likewise, scoring criteria for levels below *proficient* should not include all elements of the performance indicator, given that *emerging-* or *developing-*level work—by definition—does not satisfy the learning objectives articulated in a performance indicator.
- The language used in scoring-criteria descriptions should articulate evidence that can be objectively measured, assessed, and evaluated in a variety of learning contexts (if multiple educators fail to produce reasonably consistent assessments of the same evidence or work products, the scoring criteria are likely too subjective). To improve consistency from assessment to assessment, teams of teachers can simultaneously score the same student work product and then discuss why, specifically, their results either converged or diverged—these opportunities for collaborative professional learning are essential to developing effective scoring criteria, promoting high expectations, and increasing equity in educational outcomes for all students.
- Similarly, educators should use real-world examples of student work during the process of articulating, calibrating, and refining scoring criteria. When educators sort samples of student work into categories from *emerging* to *exceeds*, and then describe the objective features of the work at each level, scoring criteria will be more precise and educators will develop a stronger understanding of the kinds of evidence that match each performance level.

**PRINCIPLE 3**

**Scoring criteria describe *what students can do* at each level of performance.**

**Do This**

Scoring criteria should be written from the student’s point of view and reflect an asset-based approach to framing performance-level descriptions—i.e., they should focus on what students *can* do (not what they *can’t* do). The descriptions should use positive language that focuses on elevating student expectations, fostering continual improvement, and promoting learning growth over time.

**Avoid This**

Scoring criteria should not use deficit-based descriptions and framing—i.e., statements that articulate undesirable learning outcomes such as “I cannot [do something].” Negative language reinforces unhelpful mindsets, emphasizes learning deficits, and does not articulate an affirmative sequence of performance-improvement benchmarks that students can work to achieve.

**Illustrative Example**

Level: High School

Content Area: Health

Performance Indicator	Emerging	Developing	Proficient	Distinguished
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 to reach a goal I set for my own health.	I can create a plan to meet immediate and long-term health goals.	I can evaluate my progress and adapt my plan so that I can continue to positively impact my personal health.

## Best Practices

- While there are different ways to frame scoring criteria (e.g., the form known as SWBAT begins with “Students will be able to...”), the Great Schools Partnership recommends “I can” statements, such as “I can evaluate my progress and adapt my plan so that I can continue to positively impact my personal health.” Scoring criteria written from the student point of view helps students embrace the goals as their own personal learning goals (as opposed to viewing the goals as, say, something they only have to do because a teacher told them they have to).
- By articulating what students can accomplish at each level, asset-based scoring criteria describe the specific evidence students need to demonstrate to reach each level of proficiency. Similarly, teacher feedback should provide specific, actionable steps that students can take to improve the quality of their work and achieve proficiency.
- Scoring students against a set of asset-based criteria is a practical application of a growth-mindset approach to teaching and assessment—it communicates that students can improve their knowledge and skills with practice and appropriate support. Asset-based scoring criteria help instill the belief in students that proficiency is achieved not because of innate intelligence or talents (a “fixed mindset” belief), but through perseverance in the face of challenges. Supporting students to develop growth-mindset approach to learning has also been shown to increase their motivation and desire to learn and improve.

### PRINCIPLE 4

Scoring criteria can be *applied to a variety of learning experiences and work products.*

#### Do This

Scoring criteria should be written to assess specific performance indicators, not learning experiences or work products. When scoring criteria are written to be “task neutral,” they can be combined and recombined to assess any task that teachers assign to or create with students.

#### Avoid This

Scoring criteria should not be written for specific lessons, units, courses, projects, or assignments, and they should not address any required components of a specific learning task (e.g., the interview protocol, bibliography, presentation, etc. for a specific research project).

#### Illustrative Example

Level: Middle School

Content Area: Social Studies

Performance Indicator	Emerging	Developing	Proficient	Distinguished
Compare the major regions of the Earth and their major physical features and political boundaries using a variety of geographic tools.	I can locate the major regions of the Earth and their major physical features and political boundaries.	I can describe the major regions of the Earth and their major physical features and political boundaries.	I can compare the major regions of the Earth and their major physical features and political boundaries using a variety of geographic tools.	I can analyze and evaluate connections among the major physical features and political boundaries of the Earth using a variety of geographic tools.

## Best Practices

- Scoring criteria should mirror the language of the performance indicator, avoiding any reference to the details or requirements of a specific task (e.g., a research project or lab report). For tasks that include certain required elements—such as a minimum number of citations in a research project or labeling the parts of a diagram in a lab report—these requirements should be articulated in the instructions associated with that assessment (not in the scoring criteria).
- Because scoring criteria evaluate student work against a performance indicator—rather than a specific task—students have the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in a variety of ways. In the example above, a student could demonstrate proficiency by explaining the projected environmental impact of a land-use proposal through an oral presentation, a written report, or a multimedia production. When scoring criteria are “task neutral,” they help teachers meet diverse learning needs by consistently applying expectations for student work across diverse learning experiences and work products, including, for instance, individualized education programs (IEPs) or assessment retakes.

