

Framework for the Design and Use of Grade Descriptors

Background

Well-written grade descriptors are an essential tool in helping students to understand the marks that they have been awarded and why they have been awarded them. They also help inform what students need to do in order to achieve higher marks in future assessment. The language used in grade descriptors therefore needs to be clear, consistent, helpful and unambiguous.

Grade descriptors, along with intended learning outcomes and formal and informal feedback, are cornerstones in helping to articulate students' learning and progression and are also helpful to external stakeholders such as potential employers. An assessment and its intended learning outcomes should therefore be designed and written with grade descriptors in mind and, in turn, the language and terminology used in grade descriptors should be consistent with that used in any feedback given to a student on their performance.

This document sets out the principles for designing and using grade descriptors in order to facilitate the award of appropriate and consistent marks. It is not a guide on how to give feedback and should not be used for that purpose. These principles should be used flexibly to accommodate, fairly and transparently, the diverse nature of the programmes that the University offers and should complement tailored individual feedback that is designed to help students improve and progress academically. For example, when feeding back on a piece of work that contains elements that are of a higher standard than the overall mark would merit, those particular elements might be described using a language that would normally relate to the higher overall mark.

One of the most common problems with assessment and feedback is that the correspondence between a numerical grade and the language used to describe that grade is often inconsistent. In their simplest form, grade descriptors can be seen as a series of adjectives that map onto, or verbalise, points on the numeric 0-100 marking scale, logically and consistently. Just as 70 is a 'higher' mark than 55, 'excellent' is a 'higher' adjective than 'good' and their usage should always reflect that in a consistent manner. Colleagues are encouraged to use the following spine of key terms to promote the consistent use of language in grade descriptors throughout the marking range.

Range	Key Term
0-9	Profoundly inadequate
10-19	Severely inadequate
20-29	Inadequate
30-39	Insufficient
40-49	Sufficient
50-59	Good
60-69	Very Good
70-79	Excellent
80-89	Outstanding
90-100	Exceptional

Principles

The principles presented in this guidance are intended to ensure that practice across the University in designing and using grade descriptors is consistent and equitable for all students. However, the principles should be tailored to reflect the nature of the assessment, e.g. its level, whether it is written or practical, and so on.

Scope and purpose

Grade descriptors should:

- be developed for each 10-mark band throughout the full marking range (see Appendix 1 for examples)
- cover all aspects of performance, both areas of strength and of development
- indicate, where relevant, how performance and achievement in subsequent assessments might be improved
- reflect relevant intended learning outcomes
- cover skills and capabilities, both generic and professional
- cover content knowledge
- cover both academic and logistical areas (e.g. answering the wrong question in an exam)
- be broken down, either by reference to skills sets (either generic or specialist) and/or by the type of activity being assessed
- help students to understand and contextualise any feedback received
- reflect the [QAA Framework for Higher Education Qualifications](#).

Language

The language of grade descriptors should:

- be unambiguous and easy to understand: the adjectives and phrases in them should be meaningful and useful (see Appendix 2 for examples of phrases both to use and to avoid depending on the mark range)
- be consistent, particularly across assessment types and within cognate disciplines, and non-contradictory¹
- not include absolute terms at either end of the scale. For example, a ‘perfect’ or ‘flawless’ piece of work would imply that it would be impossible for any other to improve upon any aspect of it in any way²
- be linked to the relevant intended learning outcomes
- be consistent with that used in any feedback given to students on their performance/output
- normally be linked to the level of study in order to ensure consistency and reflect relative expectation and realistic achievement (i.e. a mark of 100 should theoretically be possible at all levels in all subjects, however work produced at Level 1 would not normally be ‘publishable’).

¹ Discipline areas may wish to liaise to ensure that all students experience broadly the same language.

² The exception to this may be in assessments when there can only be one correct answer, normally in scientific or mathematical disciplines.

Dissemination and review

Grade descriptors should:

- be publicised widely and made available to students through inclusion in handbooks and by other appropriate means, including online
- be supplemented as appropriate by subject or discipline-specific glossaries that define commonly-used terminology
- be discussed in the peer review of teaching.

Appendix 1

Examples of good practice 'long form' statements

The following are examples of 'long form' statements that relate to their respective grading bands. They are intended to provide examples of good practice that might help structure feedback or could be used, where relevant, as a template that could then be customised. They are not intended to be reproduced in their entirety.

0-9

Your work is **profoundly inadequate** and does not merit a pass mark. You have misrepresented or misunderstood thinking in the discipline and your use of sources is either non-existent or inappropriate. You have not demonstrated any significant awareness of the subject matter. Your work is confused and incoherent and does not address the question posed. To improve future marks you should seek to understand thinking in the discipline and engage critically with it. You should present and structure your arguments better and make sure that they are substantiated. You should seek to undertake, or demonstrate that you have undertaken, independent research.

10-19

Your work is **severely inadequate** and does not merit a pass mark. You show little or confused awareness of the appropriate principles, theories, evidence and techniques, and little evidence of critical engagement. Your arguments are poorly presented and misrepresent or fail to demonstrate an understanding of the subject. Your use of sources is inappropriate and your arguments are unsubstantiated and unstructured. To improve future marks you should improve your awareness of the appropriate principles, theories, evidence and techniques and engage more critically with them. You should present and structure your arguments better and make sure that they are substantiated. You should seek to undertake, or demonstrate that you have undertaken, independent research.

20-29

Your work is **inadequate** and does not merit a pass mark. It demonstrates only a basic awareness of the subject matter. Your awareness of principles, theories, evidence and techniques is insufficient, and you show little evidence of critical engagement with the material. You have not paid sufficient attention to the quality, range and appropriateness of sources used, and your arguments are partial and unsubstantiated. To improve future marks you should improve your awareness of the appropriate principles, theories, evidence and techniques and engage more critically with them. You should present and structure your arguments better and make sure that they are substantiated. You should seek to undertake, or demonstrate that you have undertaken, independent research.

30-39

Your work demonstrates **insufficient** knowledge and skills in the specific topic area and does not merit a pass mark. Your work does not demonstrate adequately the study skills required at this level. Although you show some awareness of the area, you have missed many important facts and concepts and made major errors. You have made no attempt to critically evaluate evidence and shown no evidence of independent research. Your work has minimal underlying structure and is frequently confused and incoherent. To improve future marks you should improve your awareness of the appropriate principles, theories, evidence and techniques and engage more critically with them. You should present and

structure your arguments better and make sure that they are substantiated. You should seek to undertake, or demonstrate that you have undertaken, independent research.

40-49

Your work has **sufficient** knowledge, coherence, use of appropriate resources and quality of presentation to warrant a basic pass. You have provided an answer that lacks detail and depth. It is very descriptive and does not fully address the issues raised by the question. Your arguments are often simplistic. To achieve a higher mark you need to make sure that all your points are fully supported with data or evidence from the literature. You also need to achieve greater analytical depth and take fuller account of opposing viewpoints or evidence in order to provide more substantial, comprehensive and nuanced support for your argument.

50-59

Your work is **good**, and of sufficient quality to be awarded a lower-range second class mark. You have demonstrated an understanding of the relevant principles, theories, evidence and techniques, and you have gone some way to meeting your aims through presenting a coherent argument in a competent manner. To improve future marks you should increase your level of critical appraisal and independent enquiry, and seek to demonstrate a deeper, and more fully researched, understanding of the subject.

60-69

Your work is **very good**, and of sufficient quality to be awarded an upper-range second class mark. It addresses the specific topic area very well, with a sound demonstration of knowledge and skills. You provide evidence of appropriate independent reading and thinking and draw upon the literature coherently to substantiate your claims. Your work is comprehensive and well-considered. To improve future marks you should consult a wider range of sources and deepen your analysis.

70-79

Your work is **excellent** and of sufficient quality to be awarded a lower-range first class mark. It has clear aims and largely achieves them. It draws upon an appropriately wide range of sources, displays considerable analytical depth with substantial evidence of genuinely independent thought, and is written and presented to a very high standard. To improve future marks you should attempt to identify any weaker parts of your argument and/or its presentation, ensure you have addressed opposing viewpoints or evidence decisively, and consider extending the range and use of supporting resources even further.

80-89

Your work is **outstanding** and of sufficient quality to be awarded a mid-range first class mark. Your response to the question is ambitious and perceptive. Your argument is very well structured. It is logical and convincing. You use extensive data and/or literature to support that argument and give very pertinent examples. You demonstrate a very high level of understanding of this topic. To improve future marks you should attempt to refine your analysis and arguments even further.

90-100

Your work is **exceptional** and of sufficient quality to be awarded an upper-range first class mark. It attains all learning objectives for the unit and adheres to all guidelines. The essential material is presented thoroughly and accurately and weighed appropriately. Moreover, the work is authoritative and amply

demonstrates very advanced knowledge and a very advanced ability to integrate the full range of principles, theories, evidence and techniques. The clarity and originality of thought and the way that it is expressed is very impressive for this level of work.

Examples of words and phrases to be used, or avoided, according to marking range

Range	Use	Avoid
0-9	Profoundly inadequate Highly Deficient	Wrong Rubbish Weak Poor ³
10-19	Severely inadequate Very Deficient Incomplete	Wrong Rubbish Weak Poor
20-29	Inadequate Deficient Some attempt Confused	Wrong Rubbish Weak Poor
30-39	Insufficient Partial Some awareness	Wrong Rubbish Weak Poor
40-49	Sufficient Adequate Basic	Weak Poor
50-59	Good Clear Fair Competent Reasonable Coherent	Very Good Excellent Adequate Moderate Descriptive Basic
60-69	Very Good Sound Effective	Good Excellent Outstanding Authoritative
70-79	Excellent Detailed Compelling Lucid	Accurate Good Very Good Outstanding Authoritative
80-89	Outstanding Sophisticated Innovative Insightful Ambitious Perceptive Advanced	Good Very Good Excellent Comprehensive
90-100	Exceptional Authoritative Very Advanced	Good Very Good Excellent Perfect Flawless Publishable Complete

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³ Note, however, that when qualifying comments on structure, phrasing, vocabulary, etc., the word 'poor' can be a descriptive and helpful tool. However, the word 'poor' should not be used in isolation.