

---

## Tip sheet – Designing holistic rubrics

### What are holistic rubrics?

[Rubrics](#) provide information on assessment criteria and how these can be demonstrated at different levels of performance within an assessment task (Biggs, 1982). Accordingly, it is important to design rubrics to be clearly understood by both students and markers. Although rubrics may exist in multiple forms, this tip sheet provides some guidance on designing holistic rubrics (which assesses the whole of a students' assessment item) rather than [analytical rubrics](#) (which assess components of each assessment).

### Reasons for using holistic rubrics

Compared to analytical rubrics holistic rubrics are much more generalised, and may be preferred when:

- it is important to provide an overall summary of the performance, understanding and quality of the student work
- it is more prudent to focus on performance capabilities rather than deficiencies

### Features of holistic rubrics

Holistic rubrics are defined by the fact that all assessable criteria are combined into a single achievement level, meaning that only a single point within the rubric is marked. This defining feature means that holistic rubrics are often quicker to construct than analytical rubrics, but at the same time do not provide as much specific information to students on their performance. To counter this, it is essential that a holistic rubric is accompanied by student feedback that may be general and/or personalized, is rich in detail, promotes reflection and enhances dialogical exchange between students and teachers (for further information refer to the Good practice guide [Feedback](#) and the tip sheet [Providing constructive feedback in FLO](#)). Depending on the task at hand, holistic rubrics may also have numerical values attached to them (described further below).

Holistic rubrics have three components: assessment description (i.e., the task), achievement levels (usually as a scale) and performance descriptors (descriptions of the levels of achievement or each criterion in each performance level). Figure 1 gives an example of a basic format.

#### Rubric title

Assessment description

Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory
Performance Descriptor	Performance Descriptor	Performance Descriptor	Performance Descriptor

: Basic rubric format

### Components of holistic rubrics (a specific example is provided below)

1. Assessment description – this should ideally be placed at the top of the rubric to remind students of the task without having to look in several places for all the assessment information. At a minimum, a summary of the task should be provided.
2. Achievement levels - a continuum which describes the level of performance on the task. The number of different levels is variable and influenced by many considerations, although 3 – 5 is commonly used. Descriptions should be clear, use unambiguous language and explicitly relate to achievement. Depending on needs and/or preferences, numerical values may or may not be attached to achievement levels. Different kinds of indicative labels or even grades may be used, with some potential examples including:
  - Advanced, Proficient, Satisfactory and Unsatisfactory
  - Highly Competent/Sophisticated, Competent, Partly Competent, Not Yet Competent

- Exemplary, Accomplished, Developing, Beginning (not met criteria /not attempted/unsatisfactory)
  - Excellent, Good, Satisfactory and Unsatisfactory
  - Outstanding (HD), excellent (D), good (C), satisfactory (P) and unsatisfactory (F)
3. Performance descriptors – these should describe the relative differences in performance between the levels. In holistic rubrics, given that all assessed criteria are added to a single cell, it is essential to ensure that descriptors are concisely written and make sense within the context of the assessment, are mutually exclusive and are not ambiguous. In cases where numerical values are attached to either achievement levels or criteria, the wording of the descriptors needs to be prioritized. Approaches to construction might include:
- adverbs or adjectives to describe an aspect of the performance where the task is the same across each criterion but how well it is done changes (e.g., *comprehensively describes...*). Avoid simply repeating the achievement level title in the descriptors (e.g., don't use the word 'excellent' as a descriptor within the scale level titled 'Excellent' as this does not explain to the student, or the marker, what excellent work is).
  - be consistent and use the same adjective throughout each column of the achievement scale. For example, if the 'Outstanding' scale level includes descriptors using the adjective 'comprehensive' then this same adjective should be used throughout that descriptor'
  - specific aspects of the task that will differ across different performance levels (e.g., *critically analyses the impact of.../analyses the impact of.../lists the impacts of...*)
  - a numeric component that differentiates the levels (e.g., *includes three or more examples/includes 1-2 examples/includes no examples; discusses several strategies.../discusses some strategies.../discusses few or no strategies...*)
  - a description of the degree of assistance needed (e.g. in a practical assessment)

As with analytical rubrics, when developing the performance descriptors, it is often easiest to complete each end of the scale and then the middle (i.e., determine the highest and lowest characteristics of achievement, and then describe the performance in between). These should be as precise and unambiguous as possible to provide students with usable information. You might also consider including descriptions of consequences in relevant rubrics (e.g., *this work demonstrates competencies at a level appropriate for a beginning practitioner to deal with simple client case / this work contains calculation errors that are likely to have significant negative consequences in the workplace*). An example is given in Figure 2.

Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory
All key elements of the issue have been comprehensively and accurately documented. The impact of the intervention has been critically analysed and considered from the perspective of all key stakeholders.	Many of the key elements of the issue have been recorded, generally with accuracy. The impact of the intervention has been analysed and considered from the perspective of most key stake holders.	Some attempt has been made to identify key elements of the issue, although accuracy levels may be variable. Some attempt has been made to analyse the impact of the intervention as well as consider perspectives from a selection of key stakeholders.	The identification of key elements of the issue have either largely not been done or have been recorded with very high levels of inaccuracy. The impact of the intervention as considered from the perspectives of key stakeholders, has largely not been analysed or considered.

Holistic rubrics are generally faster to craft than analytical rubrics, but time and careful thought should be taken in their construction.

---

## References

Biggs, J, and Collis, K. (1982) Evaluating The Quality Of Learning: The SOLO Taxonomy New York: Academic Press

Orrell, J. (2020). Designing an assessment rubric. Online learning good practice series.

Available: <https://www.teqsa.gov.au/sites/default/files/designing-assessment-rubric.pdf?v=1588032735>

Stevens, D. D. (2013). Introduction to rubrics: an assessment tool to save grading time, convey effective feedback, and promote student learning. In A. Levi (Ed.), (2nd ed. ed., pp. 21-30). Sterling, Va.: Stylus Publishing.

ProQuest Ebook Central, <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/flinders/detail.action?docID=1108395>.

Education Services Australia n.d. Assessment for learning: Success criteria and rubrics viewed 16 January 2021

[https://assessmentforlearning.edu.au/professional\\_learning/modules/success\\_criteria\\_and\\_rubrics/success\\_design\\_rubrics.html](https://assessmentforlearning.edu.au/professional_learning/modules/success_criteria_and_rubrics/success_design_rubrics.html)