

A Primer on Criterion-Referenced Assessments and Rubrics

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Whereas normative assessments discriminate between, and rank, students' performance in comparison with their norm or peer group, criterion-referenced (or performance-, or standards-based, assessments, as they are also known), indicate how well students have learned and are progressing towards mastery in a particular domain or module. Performance criteria are aligned with core competences in knowledge, skills and conceptual understanding taught in modules.

What this means in practical terms is that any number of students can excel or do poorly on a criterion-referenced assessment; all, or none, of the students may score 100%, a grade A or a H1, for instance. Because we use absolute, rather than relative, grading (as is employed in norm-reference based assessment), one student's achievement has no bearing on that of another. Assuming the assessment is fair, all students have an equal opportunity to perform optimally and be rewarded accordingly. When performance standards and the relative competences expected of students at each level are communicated clearly and are readily available to students (e.g., in the form of rubrics), opportunities for success are further enhanced, as is validity and reliability.

Rubrics

Rubrics are scoring guides that categorise performance along an incremental continuum of quality. Designed primarily to support criterion-referenced assessment, they can also serve developmental, diagnostic, self- and co-regulatory functions if integrated meaningfully with teaching and learning. Key elements of a rubric include:

- (a) assessment/performance criteria or indicators
- (b) descriptions of the different standards (which may be detailed or sparse depending on the type of rubric developed)
- (c) an underlying scoring system, with or without weighted elements.

Related documents of potential interest include:

A Primer on Differences between Norm-reference based and Criterion-referenced Assessment

A Primer on Norm-reference based Assessment and Grading on the Curve

A Primer on Performance Standards, Cut Scores and Weights

An Example of a Weighted Rubric

A PowerPoint on Rubrics.