



Marking Criteria and Beyond: Sharing strategies for developing inclusive assessment and academic literacies

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Outline

SMLC Marking Criteria Project: Introduction

Step 1: Student Feedback on our existing criteria

Step 2: Pedagogical research and staff discussion

Step 3: Making the change

Initial feedback

Limitations and outstanding questions

Marking Criteria in SMLC

Rationale for change

- Adapted from the 20-point marking criteria
- Problems:
 - Proliferation of marking criteria as a result of new assessment modes
 - More diverse and fragmented student body
 - NSS: “How clear were the marking criteria used to assess your work?”

62	<p>A mostly good piece of writing Mostly good command of syntax. Complex sentence structures are attempted but are not always executed competently. Good range of vocabulary and idioms, but some imprecision may occur. Generally accurate and fluent but with occasional slips. There are isolated major grammatical and/or lexical errors. For the most part, these do not compromise clarity of meaning. Few spelling errors.</p>
58	<p>A reasonable piece of writing Reasonable command of syntax. Reasonable manipulation of the language with some awkwardness of expression. Some interferences from first language may be present in syntax and vocabulary. Reasonable range of vocabulary and idioms, but some imprecision occurs. Complex sentence structures are attempted but may be error-prone. Or largely accurate but rather simple sentences. Or mostly accurate but with occasional</p>

Step 1: Student consultation

Unitu surveys (term 2, 2024-25, 26 respondents; term 1, 2025-26, 72 responses)

Focus groups (term 3, 2024-25, 5 participants; term 3, 2025-2026, 4 participants)

Several positives, but ...

- Distinctions between (e.g. high 2.1 and low 1st) and within grades (e.g. between a 62 and a 65) not adequately explained
- ‘Evaluative’ language (exceptional, very good, outstanding) not useful and open to interpretation by individual tutors
- Lack of clarity about key terms (e.g. ‘independent research’ and ‘research skills’)
- Criteria less useful at the higher end of the scale
- Language marking criteria in particular is ‘more helpful to markers than to students’;
- Overly generic feedback; too little or too much feedback (difficult to filter out what has most influenced the grade)

Step 1: Student suggestions

Remove descriptors such as 'good' / 'excellent' / 'outstanding'

Provide more specific and concrete descriptions of expectations

- They liked the more descriptive criteria used in Modern Languages at Royal Holloway.
- They preferred that way that a comparable department at UCL differentiated between the top and bottom of the grade boundary.

Use hyperlinks to a glossary to explain key terms such as 'critical analysis'.

Feedback should indicate what has had the biggest impact on the grade – both negative and positive.

Feedback should indicate what their priority should be for future assignments.

Step 2: Pedagogical research and discussion

Keyword 1: “Fuzzy” descriptors (Sadler, 1987)

“Fuzzy standards are implied, for example, when it is said that a dissertation is highly original, that a solution to a problem is elegant, that a student's understanding of entropy is thorough, or that a teacher is competent. In each of these cases, the standards are designated by linguistic terms. [...] Ultimately, the fuzziness is traceable to the fact that interpretations of the standards specifications are not universal but depend on the assessment context” (p. 202).

- Context dependent
- Fuzziness about whether the verbal descriptor refers to the whole range (Upper Second) or a specific point in the range (e.g. 62, 65, 68)
- Subjective and open to interpretation
- Inconsistent





Keyword 2: “Tacit knowledge”

Connoisseur approach to assessment:

“I could not describe it, but I know a good piece of work when I see it.”

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Fuzzy standards: A barrier to inclusive education?

“The standards reside, essentially in unarticulated form, inside the heads of assessors, and are normally transmitted from expert to novice by joint participation in evaluative activity” (Sadler, 1987, p. 199).

Entrenches educational hierarchies and power dynamics: “dependency relationship between learner and teacher” (p. 199)

“Shared understandings of an **academic elite** are insufficient as a basis for standards in a mass system of higher education” (Brennan, 1996, p. 16)

“Guild knowledge” (Sadler, 1989, p. 126)

Shaped by experience, context, and values

Lack transparency

“elusive” (Yorke, 2008, p. 83); “hidden curriculum” (Sambell & McDowell, 1998); support “secretive business” of assessment (Boud, 2014, p. 28)

Fuzzy standards (2): A barrier to inclusive education?

“[...] interpretation takes place through cultural and linguistic lenses (Rossiter 2023). **A lack of clarity in assessment criteria has a disproportionate effect on already disadvantaged groups of students** (Balloo et al. 2018), such as **widening participation students** (Butcher et al. 2017). Gonsalves (2023) found that **international students** (for whom English may be not their first language) can struggle with interpretation of assessment rubrics and that consideration is needed in how criteria are presented and used within task to enhance accessibility” (West et al., 2024, p. 2).



Work in this category addresses all aspects of the [assignment brief](#) and shows proficiency in relation to the [learning outcomes](#). The work demonstrates sound understanding; however, there may still be some minor factual inaccuracies, generalising tendencies, and/or scope for refinement in many areas. Work may fall into this category if it is otherwise skilful but contains minor inaccuracies or omissions, or if it lacks [critical rigour](#). Work at the lower end of this category may require refinement in most criteria.

Argumentation and Structure	Analysis and Depth of Knowledge	Critical Thinking and Originality	Academic Research, Engagement & Practice	Communication and Presentation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clear approach to the assignment brief. The introduction accurately anticipates what follows. Generally, the discussion progresses logically towards a well-founded conclusion. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrates broad and accurate understanding of relevant material and the concepts/principles underpinning the module. Acknowledges relevant developments, debates and/or aesthetic contexts. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May show appreciation for the nuances, challenges, and broader implications of issues raised in the assignment brief. May draw on examples not discussed in class or secondary sources. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engages purposefully with the module reading list. Effectively draws on a variety of high-quality and complex secondary sources to provide background information, definitions, and/or inform close analysis. Generally describes key arguments in secondary sources accurately. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clearly communicated and holds the attention of the recipient. Limited linguistic and grammatical slips, though more precise language might clarify and enhance the message. Style and register are almost always appropriate for the target audience. Professional presentation: minimal typographical and

Work awarded a lower II.1:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May not always convincingly justify claims. May contain ineffective transitions or elements that appear repetitive or out of place. May not always effectively integrate and combine 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Demonstrates broad-based understanding, although the work is likely to contain several minor inaccuracies or oversimplifications. Surface-level analysis may predominate. The work may 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May take a straightforward or narrow approach to the assignment brief. May sometimes lead with secondary literature rather than own stance. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> May not engage in detail with secondary sources or use them with a clear purpose. May contain errors when it describes complex arguments in secondary sources. There may be lapses and inconsistencies when presenting quotations and references 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Some unclear phrasing, hesitation, or repetition may make the communicational performance less engaging in places. The technical execution may not be consistent throughout, with minor production issues (e.g. audio, layout) slightly distracting from some content.
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Our new approach

- Reduce number of criteria.
- Focus on skills used across different assignment types
 - Use ‘assignment brief’ to tease out specific task requirements.
- Minimise ambiguous and subjective language (insecure, promising) and replace with specific observable actions/behaviours.
- Produce glossary of key terms and insert hyperlinks in criteria to provide further examples and explanations.
- Descriptive and relatable rather than evaluative language to aid **assessment for learning**.

Assessment for learning

Assessment Literacies

Assessment literate students “are familiar with assessment and feedback approaches, concepts, purposes and techniques, understand the nature, meaning and level of assessment criteria and standards, interpret assessment expectations and tasks in the same way as their tutors, and can evaluate their own work and that of their peers, and thereby are **more effective learners**” (O’Donovan et al., 2016, 940–941)



Student Feedback

Focus group and free-text comments

- The new criteria
- “helps you translate the feedback.”
- [help to] “make us fluent in how work is marked and what is expected.”
- “more accessible to understand.”
- “I definitely prefer that it explains what it means.”
- “I can understand it a lot better than previous criteria I have looked at.”
- “It goes into detail ... which is super helpful.”

Take it back to practice

THE CORE IDEA

Students often struggle to use marking criteria to support their own learning



A FIRST STEP TO TRY

Actively engage with marking criteria as part of teaching and learning

ADAPT IT FOR YOUR CONTEXT

Marking criteria to be viewed holistically as part of broader efforts to improve feedback and assessment literacy through e.g. skills training.

How do marking criteria fit within and relate to broader strategies for enhancing assessment literacy?

How can we support students from a wide range of backgrounds to negotiate the emotional aspects of assessment and feedback?

Thank you



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Outstanding questions

- “A single-minded focus on explicit articulation falls short of providing students and staff with common and meaningful knowledge of standards and criteria. No one method of knowledge transfer, either explicit or tacit, by itself is robust enough to deliver meaningful knowledge” (O’Donovan, Price & Rust, 2004, p. 333)
 - How else to achieve shared understanding? E.g. exemplars, class discussion, modelling, peer-review, self-review)
- How to provide transparency without becoming overly prescriptive, reductive, or providing “check lists” that suggest a “recipe” for success?
- Explicit criteria “can provide a fruitful **starting point** for productive discussion and shared sense-making between students and staff. However, problems arise when they are instead misconceived as being the opposite: as a finishing point in our communication, after which students are expected to simply ‘implement’ what we have advised them to do” (Lorber et. al, p. 490).

Potential limitations

- **Limits of language:** “Fuzzy standards cannot be transformed into sharp standards simply by using more detailed or elaborate language, for much the same reason that there are practical limits to the degree of improvement that can result from using a magnifying glass on a blurred photograph. [...] The concrete existential referents that make up the **context** are essential to its proper interpretation” (Sadler, 1987, pp. 205-6).
- **Inconsistency inevitable?**
 - Do all markers use the criteria in the same way to come up with a holistic judgement?
 - Importance of embedding “shared standards through dialogic communities” (Bloxham, 2012, p. 196).
- **Resource / workload**

Further reading

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More further reading

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- Yang, Min, and David Carless, 'The feedback triangle and the enhancement of dialogic feedback processes', *Teaching in Higher Education*, 18.3 (2013), pp. 285–297