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The Three Grading Standards

# Introduction

The revised [Access to HE Grading Scheme Handbook](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/access-to-he/access-to-he-resources/access-to-he-grading-scheme), which applies to all new students registering on Diplomas from 1 August 2024, outlines the full process of assessment, grading and awards for the Access to HE Diploma. Tutors, centres, providers and AVAs should familiarise themselves with the Handbook before setting assignments or writing assignment briefs.

In addition to the full Handbook (Sections A-E) there is also a Tutor’s Quick Guide to Grading which provides a summary of the process. The three Grading Standards and how they are used is outlined in Section B of the Handbook.

To aid the revision of current assignment briefs and/or the writing of new briefs, the three Grading Standards have been reproduced in this Word document for ease of use.

Access to HE Diploma colleagues involved in setting assignments and writing assignment briefs **are advised to exercise caution** when using this Word document and ensure they use **only** the original version of the three Grading Standards (as provided here) for each assignment brief to avoid errors or omissions.

The titles, components and sub-components of the three Grading Standards, as published, are the only approved version of the Grading Standards. Care should be taken not to change the content or wording of the Grading Standards (other than selecting the relevant subcomponents and in the case of Grading Standard 3, the relevant components and subcomponents) as this could result in a student not having the opportunity to be awarded credit for the unit being assessed.

**If in doubt, refer to the PDF copy of the Grading Standards as presented in Section B of the** [**Grading Scheme Handbook**](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/access-to-he/access-to-he-resources/access-to-he-grading-scheme)**.**

**Grading Standard 1: Knowledge and Understanding**

**Using this standard**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Utilise both components. For component (b) for 3 credit units, select a **minimum of 2** and **maximum of 4** of the most **relevant** sub-components; for 6 and 9-credit units, select a **minimum of 2** and **maximum of 6**. Choices must be consistent across merit and distinction. | |
| **Merit**  The student, student’s work or performance: | **Distinction**  The student, student’s work or performance: |
| 1. **generally** demonstrates the ability to apply knowledge appropriately in a given context showing breadth **OR** depth of knowledge in responding to the demands of the unit,   with   1. a **very good** understanding and use of (choose from):  * facts * concepts * theories * models * methods * perspectives * ideas * principles * practices * procedures | 1. **consistently** demonstrates the ability to apply knowledge appropriately in a given context showing breadth **OR** depth of knowledge in responding to the demands of the unit,   with   1. an **excellent** understanding and use of (choose from):  * facts * concepts * theories * models * methods * perspectives * ideas * principles * practices * procedures |
| There is no grading standard for pass. Students achieve a pass by meeting the requirements of the learning outcomes of a unit | |

**Interpreting the standard**

* This standard provides the opportunity for assessors to judge the extent to which a student has acquired and applied the subject-specific and subject-related knowledge relevant to the learning outcomes and assessment criteria for a given unit.
* The knowledge base should be defined and applied in relation to the particular subject and focus of the unit. This acknowledges that there are different types of knowledge in different subjects (see examples below).
* Examples in different subjects: Biology - homeostatic mechanisms; Business - accounting theories and principles; Psychology - different theories/perspectives; Health care - hallmarks of professional practice and evidence-based practice; Mathematics - the basic concepts, for example, algebra, geometry, statistical concepts and tests; History - different types of conflict, the concept and examples of ‘hidden voices’, models for structuring historical arguments; English literature - different types of literature and linguistic terminology; Creative arts - the different forms, basic elements, tools used, criteria used to judge creativity, tactile art and experimentation, materials exploration, art technology and the internet, history of art, studio practice.
* Summative assessment of the knowledge base and its application should be based only on the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of the unit.

**Grading Standard 2: Subject Specific Skills**

**Using this standard**

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| --- | --- |
| For all units irrespective of size, select a **minimum of 2** and **maximum of 4** of the most **relevant** sub-components in (b). Choices must be consistent across merit and distinction. | |
| **Merit**  The student, student’s work or performance: | **Distinction**  The student, student’s work or performance: |
| 1. **generally** demonstrates an ability in selecting and using skills as required by the unit,   with   1. **very good** levels of (choose from):  * accuracy * precision * efficiency * creativity * innovation * reasoning * insight * focus * interpretation | 1. **consistently** demonstrates an ability in selecting and using skills as required by the unit,   with   1. **excellent** levels of (choose from):  * accuracy * precision * efficiency * creativity * innovation * reasoning * insight * focus * interpretation |
| There is no grading standard for pass. Students achieve a pass by meeting the requirements of the learning outcomes of a unit. | |

**Interpreting the standard**

* The premise of component (a) is that all assessment criteria pose a problem/challenge of varying degrees of complexity, requiring the student to use different skills in responding to them. Therefore, assessors will need to make a judgment on how well the student has analysed and responded to the requirements/demands of the learning outcomes and assessment criteria within the assessed evidence. Skills may be intellectual, technical or practical.
* Discipline-specific intellectual skills include: critical thinking, use of information, analysis, synthesis, evaluation, reasoning, argumentation and problem-solving in line with the requirements of the assessment criteria command verbs.
* An example of an intellectual skill in history could be analysing causation and consequences of a conflict. In English literature an example could be a textual analysis. For an independent project it could be generating a hypothesis or research question.
* An example of a technical skill in computing could be designing a computer programme. In research it could be using tools for data analysis (for example, Microsoft Excel). In education/teaching an example could be designing online learning resources. In accounting an example could be using accounting software. In art and design an example could be using different pencils to show line, tone and texture.
* An example of a practical skill in science could be undertaking an experiment.
* Summative assessment of the skills required should only be based on the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of the unit.

**Grading Standard 3: Transferable Skills**

**Using this standard**

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| --- | --- |
| There are 3 **components** for this grading standard; (a), (b) and (c). A **minimum of 2** components must be selected for all graded units (irrespective of size of unit).  All 3 components **must** **be used at least once** across the assessment of the Diploma  Components (a) and (b) each have a set of sub-components. Select a **minimum of 2** and **maximum of 4** of the most **relevant** sub-components for both (a) and (b). | |
| **Merit**  The student, student’s work or performance: | **Distinction**  The student, student’s work or performance: |
| 1. demonstrates **very good** communication and/or presentation skills evidenced by the use and/or selection of (choose from):  * format * structure * grammar * syntax * spelling and punctuation * imagery * artefacts * digital software * number * metrics * paralanguage  1. demonstrates autonomy and/or independence evidenced by a  **very good** ability to (choose from):  * plan, organise and complete work * respond appropriately to supervision * conduct independent research * manage time * collaborate with others * take responsibility for own contributions * reflect on own performance  1. **generally** adheres to academic and/or professional conventions in use of technical/specialist language and/or format in responding to the instructions set out in the assignment brief (see below for examples). | 1. demonstrates **excellent** communication and/or presentation skills evidenced by the use and/or selection of (choose from):  * format * structure * grammar * syntax * spelling and punctuation * imagery * artefacts * digital software * number * metrics * paralanguage  1. demonstrates autonomy and/or independence evidenced by an **excellent** ability to (choose from):  * plan, organise and complete work * respond appropriately to supervision * conduct independent research * manage time * collaborate with others * take responsibility for own contributions * reflect on own performance  1. **consistently** adheres to academic and/or professional conventions in use of technical/specialist language and/or format in responding to the instructions set out in the assignment brief  (see below for examples). |
| There is no grading standard for pass. Students achieve a pass by meeting the requirements of the learning outcomes of a unit. | |

**Interpreting the standard**

* Component (a) is a crucial transferable skill for university and/or professional practice. It allows assessors to make a judgement on how well the student has communicated and/or presented their response to the requirements of the assessment - be it an essay, report, exam, portfolio or other assessment mode. In assessment requiring student presentations, paralanguage refers to verbal and non-verbal communication.
* Component (b) is based on the premise that autonomy and independence are also crucial pre-requisites for university and/or professional practice. These can be evidenced by an assessment of performance against selected sub-components which will vary depending on the nature and scope of the assessment task(s). For some assignments this may include a judgement of a student’s ability to work with others as well as taking responsibility for their own contributions, for example for group presentations.
* Component (c) allows assessors to make a judgement on the degree to which students have followed the instructions set out in the assessment brief, for example it may be that the student has evidenced very good or excellent knowledge and skills but not followed the brief. If students were asked to show their calculations in a maths exam but failed to do so, they will not have followed the instructions even though their calculations may be correct. For academic conventions, if a student was required to write an article for publication, the correct acknowledgement of all published sources used would be expected. For a business report, an executive summary, table of contents, introduction, body and conclusions/recommendations would be expected. For an art exhibition, assessors would expect that it should be characterised by a prominent theme that ties the pieces together and makes them feel like part of a larger whole. For subjects such as Healthcare, Medicine, Engineering and Education, professional conventions indicate the student’s awareness and understanding of the expectations of that profession.
* Summative assessment of these transferable skills should only be based on the learning outcomes and assessment criteria of the unit and requirements of the brief.

These Grading Standards replace the equivalent Standards in *The Access to Higher Education Diploma Grading Scheme, September 2020*. They apply to all new students registering on Diplomas from 1 August 2024.

For students registered before 1 August 2024, please visit the QAA website to access  
[*The Grading Scheme, September 2020*](https://www.qaa.ac.uk/access-to-he/access-to-he-resources/access-to-he-grading-scheme)*.*

Published - 19 October 2023

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