



Grading Scheme Handbook

Section B: The Grade Descriptors

September 2020

1 Introduction to Section B

The seven grade descriptors are not subject specific. They can, however, through careful selection and in appropriate combinations, be used on all courses, with all units and for all assignments.

The descriptors to be used with a particular unit are selected with reference to the main aspects of student performance that need to be considered when grading decisions are made for that unit. They are formally assigned to the unit when it is validated.

Each of the seven grade descriptors comprises two sets of components, one which describes characteristics or qualities typical of performance at merit, and a parallel set of components which describes typical performance in the same areas at distinction. (There are no components for pass because a pass grade is gained when a student meets the learning outcomes but does not achieve the standard required for merit.) Some of these components are more relevant to certain subjects than others and some particular terms are also more relevant for use with particular types of assessment than others. In order to ensure the grade descriptors are relevant for specific assignments, tutors identify the components of the descriptors being used that are most relevant for the particular assignment. The selected components of the descriptors (at merit and distinction) are then included in the assignment brief(s).

The grading scheme is not based on an assumed one-to-one relationship between the grade descriptors and learning outcomes (although it is possible that in some units, because of the way the learning outcomes have been structured, something close to a one-to-one relationship may emerge). In general, however, judgements about student work in relation to grading apply across the work for a unit, whether that unit is assessed through one, or more than one, assignment.

2 Guidance about terms used in the descriptors

The grade descriptors make use of a number of general terms such as 'very good' and 'excellent' which are commonly used in assessment situations as a shorthand to summarise a standard of performance. The precise meaning of these terms varies slightly between different subject areas and assignments, but some general principles should be observed.

- All of the merit descriptors relate to performance that is 'significantly better than pass (learning outcomes have been achieved), but not as good as distinction'.
- The word 'generally' often features in the components for merit, and the word 'consistently' for distinction. Tutors using the descriptors containing this language should take 'generally' to mean 'in most cases/instances' and 'consistently' to mean 'all the time/in almost every case/reliably'.
- The word 'excellent' is used a number of times within the descriptors to denote 'distinction'. This should not be interpreted to suggest that absolute perfection is required in a student's work before a distinction grade can be awarded. It would be more appropriate to look for work that is outstanding, even though it contains some small mistakes, omissions or imperfections.

3 The grade descriptors in detail

Grade descriptor 1: Understanding of the subject

Using this descriptor

Choose one or more of the components (choices must be consistent across merit and distinction).	
Merit	Distinction
<p>The student, student's work or performance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a demonstrates a very good grasp of the relevant knowledge base b is generally informed by the major conventions and practices of the area of study c demonstrates very good understanding of the different perspectives or approaches associated with the area of study. 	<p>The student, student's work or performance:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a demonstrates an excellent grasp of the relevant knowledge base b is consistently informed by the major conventions and practices of the area of study c demonstrates excellent understanding of the different perspectives or approaches associated with the area of study.
There is no grade descriptor for pass. Students achieve a pass by meeting the requirements of all the assessment criteria of a unit.	

Interpreting this descriptor

- This descriptor provides the opportunity to recognise the extent to which a student has acquired the knowledge relevant to the given unit. **Knowledge** includes facts, theories, models, perspectives, practices and conventions.
- The **knowledge base** should be defined in relation to the particular subject and the focus of the unit. For example, in an IT unit the relevant knowledge base would be the knowledge needed in order to be able to achieve the unit, rather than a detailed knowledge of all aspects of a complex programme.
- **Area of study** could include the related area of work or practical application where appropriate: for example, music performance, media production, forensic science investigation.
- In some mathematics, IT and science units there is a discrete aspect of knowledge needed for the unit which a student either knows or does not know. Where a unit is of this type, grade descriptor 3 (Application of skills) is a more appropriate descriptor to use for grading, in that students apply intellectual **skills** associated with mathematics or science to solve problems.

Grade descriptor 2: Application of knowledge

Using this descriptor

<p>Choose one or more of the items in a, with:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • either b • and/or one or more of the items in c (choices must be consistent across merit and distinction). 	
Merit	Distinction
<p>The student, student's work or performance:</p> <p>a makes use of relevant</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ideas • facts • theories • perspectives • models • concepts <p>with either</p> <p>b breadth or depth that goes beyond the minimum required to pass</p> <p>and/or</p> <p>c very good levels of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consistency • precision • accuracy • insight • analysis • synthesis • creativity 	<p>The student, student's work or performance:</p> <p>a makes use of relevant</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ideas • facts • theories • perspectives • models • concepts <p>with both</p> <p>b breadth and depth</p> <p>and/or</p> <p>c excellent levels of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • consistency • precision • accuracy • insight • analysis • synthesis • creativity
<p>There is no grade descriptor for pass. Students achieve a pass by meeting the requirements of all the assessment criteria of a unit.</p>	

Interpreting this descriptor

- This descriptor provides the opportunity to recognise a student's ability to apply the knowledge that they have acquired. This may be in a wide variety of ways, through vehicles such as essays, projects, experiments or case studies. This ability is distinct from the student's demonstration of the acquisition of knowledge and the actual structure and presentation of the work. This descriptor is likely to be relevant to a large number of units.
- The range of items in component c is designed to capture the different qualities valued in different subjects. Tutors should use only those terms which are appropriate to the subject of the unit and where, therefore, a student has the opportunity to demonstrate those abilities through the assessed work. In a science unit, for example, it is unlikely that it would be appropriate to require both 'accuracy' and 'creativity'.
- Interpretation of 'breadth **or** depth' (for merit) and 'breadth **and** depth' (for distinction) needs careful consideration, and tutors will need to use their professional judgement to define how this applies to their subject area and the assignment. For example, the merit grade could relate to an in-depth discussion of a concept, but with only the minimum number of examples required, whereas the distinction grade would reward both the in-depth discussion combined with a comprehensive set of examples. In such an example, the overall judgement might well also be augmented by the inclusion of a requirement for insight and analysis from component c.
- In some mathematics, IT and science units, grade descriptor 3 (Application of skills) is the more appropriate descriptor to use for grading, in that students apply intellectual skills associated with mathematics or science to solve problems.

Grade descriptor 3: Application of skills

Using this descriptor

<p>Choose:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • one or more of the items in a <p>and/or</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • one or more of the items in b, with any of the items in c <p>(Choices must be consistent across merit and distinction: where a and b are both used, the skills, techniques or methods applied in b must be those also selected in a).</p>	
<p>Merit The student, student's work or performance:</p>	<p>Distinction The student, student's work or performance:</p>
<p>a generally selects appropriate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • skills • techniques • methods and/or <p>b applies appropriate (selected or given)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • skills • techniques • methods with <p>c very good levels of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • confidence • consistency • creativity • innovation • precision • accuracy • efficiency 	<p>a consistently selects appropriate</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • skills • techniques • methods and/or <p>b applies appropriate (selected or given)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • skills • techniques • methods with <p>c excellent levels of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • confidence • consistency • creativity • innovation • precision • accuracy • efficiency
<p>There is no grade descriptor for pass. Students achieve a pass by meeting the requirements of all the assessment criteria of a unit.</p>	

Interpreting this descriptor

- This descriptor can apply to intellectual, technical or practical skills. It should not be used for skills covered by other descriptors such as research skills (covered in grade descriptor 4), communication skills (covered in grade descriptor 5) or personal management skills (covered in grade descriptor 6). In mathematics, the ability to solve mathematical problems is regarded as an intellectual skill.
- When considering the appropriateness of this grade descriptor to a unit, it is important to focus only on the performance required to achieve the learning outcomes and assessment criteria and not to be influenced by other factors that are not relevant. For example, in a science unit, students are required to discover some information through experimentation. The skills of the student in carrying out the experiment should only be graded as a 'skill' if there is a learning outcome which

explicitly asks for demonstration of such skills, as opposed to the student being required to demonstrate their ability to apply a theory (Application of knowledge) to generate information through experimentation.

- The choice of items from component c should be relevant to the subject of the unit and the type of behaviour or performance that the assessment is designed to encourage. For example, in one subject, innovation may be more important than accuracy; in another subject, precision may be more important than creativity.

Grade descriptor 4: Use of information

Using this descriptor

Choose one or more components from the list a to f (choices must consistent across merit and distinction).	
Merit The student, student's work or performance:	Distinction The student, student's work or performance:
a identifies new information from sources which are generally appropriate b makes some use of new information c generally appraises the relevance and value of new information accurately d shows a very good grasp of the meaning and significance of new information e generally combines or synthesises information with outcomes that are accurate and appropriate In practice-based/practical work: f is informed by research that draws on a range of sources and resources that goes beyond the minimum required for the work	a identifies new information from sources which are consistently appropriate b makes extensive use of new information c consistently appraises the relevance and value of new information accurately d shows an excellent grasp of the meaning and significance of new information e consistently combines or synthesises information with outcomes that are accurate, appropriate and <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • succinct • innovative • creative In practice-based/practical work: f is informed by research that draws on an extensive range of sources and resources
There is no grade descriptor for pass. Students achieve a pass by meeting the requirements of all the assessment criteria of a unit.	

Interpreting this descriptor

- This descriptor provides the opportunity to recognise a student's ability to work with new information. It describes a number of the skills associated with research and the effective use of information and is therefore a more appropriate and detailed descriptor for this kind of activity than the less defined coverage of grade descriptor 3, Application of skills. Research skills of this nature are regarded as particularly important for students aspiring to progress to higher education in certain disciplines (for example, social science) but may be less important in other disciplines.
- **'New information'** is information not already provided to the student as part of a core resource for the unit (handouts, textbooks and so on). It will often be information that the student has identified or generated through their own research (for example, articles in journals, press stories, data from interviews). It may also be information that is additional to the core resources provided for the unit, which the tutor has supplied (such as sets of data, links to reports on a website) but which has not been examined or discussed in any detail with students. In either case, it is relevant to this descriptor **if** the student is required to make judgements about the academic value of the information (that is, to what extent it is relevant, authoritative, reliable, valid and so on) and therefore about whether or not they would make use of it, and if so, how.
- **'Sources and resources'** can be taken to include a wide range of types and could include personal reflection and experience.
- Tutors need to consider carefully which aspects of a student's work, in terms of identifying and using new information, are important for grading purposes. The extent to which the whole process, as described, is undertaken will vary between subjects and units.

Grade descriptor 5: Communication and presentation

Using this descriptor

Choose one or more of the listed items (choices must be consistent across merit and distinction).	
Merit The student, student's work or performance:	Distinction The student, student's work or performance:
<p>shows very good command of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • format • structure • use of images • language (including technical or specialist language) • syntax • register • spelling • punctuation • referencing 	<p>shows excellent command of</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • format • structure • use of images • language (including technical or specialist language) • syntax • register • spelling • punctuation • referencing
There is no grade descriptor for pass. Students achieve a pass by meeting the requirements of all the assessment criteria of a unit.	

Interpreting this descriptor

- This descriptor provides the opportunity to recognise a student's ability to structure and present their work in ways that aid the effective communication of their thinking and the reader's and viewer's ability to understand it. It therefore extends beyond basic literacy skills, and includes all forms of presentation: written, visual, and oral.
- The ability to communicate in a literate, articulate and appropriate way is critical for all disciplines and it is therefore likely that a large number of units will provide opportunities for the use of this descriptor.
- To enable all students to benefit from the use of this descriptor, centres should ensure that tutors apply their centre's policy and practices with regard to support for students with any special learning needs, such as dyslexia, that could disadvantage them in this assessment context.
- The descriptor does not limit the choice of assessment methods for a tutor delivering the unit, as it encompasses oral and written forms of communication. However, it does not extend to the vocal and performance skills associated with oral presentation, which, if significant in an assessment, should be covered by grade descriptor 3 (Application of skills). In relation to visual communication, it is concerned with the use of forms and structures which aid understanding but does not extend to the visual appeal or design quality of such forms, unless these are explicitly required by the unit.
- In some disciplines (for example, law, mathematics) the use of technical language is an essential aspect of a pass standard of work and will therefore be required by the learning outcomes and/or assessment criteria of the unit. However, this descriptor could be used in such situations to recognise the accurate and effective use of non-technical language to convey meaning. It is therefore for each discipline to decide what aspect of the use of language this descriptor should cover.
- This descriptor is not intended to cover the symbolic representation of ideas and information used in aspects of mathematics, IT and science. It should only be used for units within these disciplines where there is a clear requirement for a significant piece of work that would involve communication as described by the descriptor, such as a substantial investigation or project.
- Work should demonstrate that it is designed to meet the needs of its intended audience and to comply with the conventions of the subject.
- The term 'image' should be widely interpreted; it may include, for example, drawings, photographs, charts and diagrams and, therefore, is relevant to many subjects.
- The term 'register' should be widely interpreted; it includes several aspects of the use of language to convey a particular tone, style and level of formality. While Access to HE students will be expected to develop an appropriate 'academic register', this will mean different things in different subjects and for different kinds of task.

Grade descriptor 6: Autonomy and/or independence

Using this descriptor

Choose one or more components from the list a to e (choices must be consistent across merit and distinction).	
Merit The student, student's work or performance:	Distinction The student, student's work or performance:
<p>a makes generally sound judgements about how to complete work</p> <p>b in most cases takes opportunities to initiate appropriate actions</p> <p>c specifies problems for completing work and promptly seeks clarification and/or guidance</p> <p>d responds promptly and effectively to guidance</p> <p>e demonstrates very good time management</p>	<p>a makes consistently sound judgements about how to complete work</p> <p>b nearly always takes opportunities to initiate appropriate actions</p> <p>c specifies problems for completing work and independently generates and pursues solutions</p> <p>d works effectively with a high level of independence</p> <p>e demonstrates excellent time management</p>
There is no grade descriptor for pass. Students achieve a pass by meeting the requirements of all the assessment criteria of a unit.	

Interpreting this descriptor

- This descriptor is about students' ability to take responsibility for how they carry out their work. One of the aims of all Access to HE courses is to help students become independent and autonomous learners. All units will require a degree of self-management from students, but this may not be explicit or amenable to reliable assessment. This descriptor is most appropriately used with units that are designed specifically with the intention that students should demonstrate independence and self-management, such as units which relate to major projects or extended research essays.
- Any combination of components can be used to reflect the different ways in which students may take responsibility for undertaking their work, whatever its nature.
- 'Specifies' here means that the student both identifies one or more problems and articulates the nature of that/those problems or challenges. This may be done through conversation and discussion, if recorded in some appropriate way to support assessment, or through a formal written process of planning and review. Clearly, the student should not be rewarded for responding to problems which they themselves have created (such as failing to plan their work or leaving work until the last minute).
- Tutor judgements about the levels of student autonomy and independence should be made with reference to the behaviour expected of Access to HE students, and to the degree of independence possible in the context of specific assignments.

Grade descriptor 7: Quality

Using this descriptor

Choose one or more components from the list a to c (choices must be consistent across merit and distinction.)	
Merit The student, student's work or performance:	Distinction The student, student's work or performance:
<p>a is structured in a way that is generally logical and fluent</p> <p>b puts forward arguments or ideas which are generally unambiguous but which are in a minor way limited or incomplete</p> <p>c taken as a whole, demonstrates a very good response to the demands of the brief/assignment</p>	<p>a is structured in a way that is consistently logical and fluent</p> <p>b puts forward arguments or ideas which are consistently unambiguous and cogent</p> <p>c taken as a whole, demonstrates an excellent response to the demands of the brief/assignment</p>
There is no grade descriptor for pass. Students achieve a pass by meeting the requirements of all the assessment criteria of a unit.	

Interpreting this descriptor

- This descriptor is used in all units and all assignments. It is deliberately of a different nature and character compared with other descriptors, as it allows for a tutor to make a holistic judgement about a student's work, reflecting the quality of the totality of that work in a way that the grades awarded against individual descriptors may not entirely achieve.
- 'Demands' might be:
 - technical
 - creative
 - practical
 - academic.
- It is generally expected that units will create a range of types of demands on students, and consequently involve assessment using a number of different grade descriptors. However, it is recognised that in some subjects, such as mathematics, a small number of units are entirely concerned with one specific principle or technique, and assessment requirements are purely the repeated skillful application of that technique to mathematical problems to demonstrate secure understanding and mastery of the technique. Because such units do not require students to demonstrate any other skills, the evidence against which to judge the work for the Quality descriptor is limited to precisely that used for any other assigned grade descriptor (which in most cases will be grade descriptor 3). In this circumstance, the grade for descriptor 7 can probably only be informed by, and therefore the same as, the grade awarded for the other grade descriptor(s).
- This grade descriptor is not intended to capture or reward aspects of student work that should more appropriately be graded through the application of a grade descriptor not currently assigned to the unit. If it seems necessary to use grade descriptor 7 in this way, the grade descriptors for the unit may need to be reviewed. Access Validating Agencies (AVAs) have formal procedures for changing the grade descriptors assigned to units.

- If the principles and processes of the grading scheme have been followed correctly, the grade awarded against this descriptor should be similar to those awarded against any other descriptor(s) used. If a tutor finds a significant difference between the grade(s) awarded against this descriptor and those awarded against the other descriptors used, they should reflect on the way in which those descriptors, and this descriptor, have been applied in order to confirm their judgement.

4 Assigning grade descriptors to units

Within the process of validating level 3 academic units, AVAs must ensure that the following requirements are met in relation to the assigning of grade descriptors.

- Those involved in identifying the descriptors to be used with particular units have subject expertise which is relevant to the units being considered and are fully informed about the operation of the grading scheme.
- Grade descriptor 7 (Quality) is assigned to every unit and assignment within the unit.
- A maximum of seven, and a minimum of two, descriptors, in any combination, are assigned to every unit; in most cases, the number of descriptors for a unit will be greater than the minimum of two.
- Although it is not a requirement that all seven descriptors are used, they have all been considered as potentially eligible for inclusion among the descriptors to be assigned to a unit.
- The appropriateness of the descriptors for a unit has been identified through considering which aspects of performance differentiate students' achievement for that unit, as defined by the unit's learning outcomes.
- The group of descriptors identified for the unit will allow tutors, in grading student work, to reward the full range of types of performance inherent for the achievement of the learning outcomes.
- Decisions about which descriptors to assign have been based on capturing all the grading opportunities offered by the unit, and not on any other consideration.
- No conditions are specified as to the choice of components, which is properly made by tutors when delivering and assessing the unit.

Once the unit has been validated, and the assigned descriptors approved, the AVA must ensure that:

- the approved descriptors are specified on unit templates and form part of the formal course documentation
- the approved descriptors are applied whenever and wherever that unit is delivered
- any subsequent change to a unit's assigned descriptors is approved by the AVA through a formal process which is made known to providers/centres.

5 Questions to ask when considering which descriptors should be assigned to units

Please note that Grading descriptor 7 is to be applied to all units and assignments within a unit.

	If answer 'yes', consider this grade descriptor
Do the learning outcomes of this unit require a student to demonstrate their understanding of the subject? If so, does the type of understanding required offer opportunities for students to demonstrate understanding beyond that needed for pass?	1
Do the learning outcomes of this unit require a student to demonstrate that they are able to apply their knowledge? For example, does it require them to apply theories; to provide explanations; to apply models to solve problems?	2
Does this unit require a student to demonstrate the application of one or more skills? If so, what are those skills and are they most appropriately covered by any other descriptor?	3
Does this unit require a student to work with new information? (This may include any or all of the stages of the process, from finding the information to evaluating and validating it.)	4
Does this unit require a student to communicate information in order to demonstrate their understanding of a subject, their ability to apply their knowledge, use information or manage their learning?	5
Does this unit explicitly require the student to demonstrate their ability to manage their own learning, including planning, looking for and responding to guidance?	6

6 Further information

Full details of the Access to HE Grading Scheme, and all associated guidance documents for AVAs, course providers and HE admissions staff, are available on the [Access to HE website](#).

Version number	Date issued	Author	Update information
V1.0		J Farmer	
V2.0	December 2018	J Mizon	Addition of statement about removal of numerical marking under grade descriptors 1 and 3
V3.0	January 2020	A Karadia	Document links updated
V4.0	September 2020	A Karadia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grade descriptor 1, Interpreting descriptor updated to reflect cessation of numerical marking from 1 September 2020 • Grade descriptor 3, Interpreting descriptor updated to reflect cessation of numerical marking from 1 September 2020

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QAA manages the national framework for the recognition and regulation of Access to HE Diplomas.