

Build Your Own Performance Criteria

Sample Topic: Self-Reflection Letters

Here's how you build generalized performance criteria. I will illustrate the steps using student self-reflection as an example. Remember, we are *not* developing these performance criteria so we can "grade" student self-reflections. We are doing it as an exercise in clear thinking about what good self-reflection looks like.

Step 1: Gather samples of student performance

Gather samples of student performance that you feel illustrate the skill or behavior in question. In our case we are trying to assess student self-reflection skills, so we might collect things that students have written in answer to questions like: "Select a piece of work that you feel illustrates your best effort. Why did you select this piece?" "What does the piece you selected show about you as a _____?" (The blank would be filled by: writer, math problem solver, life-long learner, or whatever skill students are self-reflecting about.) Other questions that might elicit student self-reflection might be: "How have you changed this year in your ability to _____?" or "What do you currently understand about _____? What do you still need to understand?"

Step 2: Sort student work into stacks; write down reasons

Place the samples of student work into three piles: strong, middle and weak. For our example we might have three piles that illustrate levels of sophistication with respect to self-reflection. As you sort the student work, write down your reasons for placing pieces in the various stacks. In other words, if you place a piece in the "sophisticated" pile, why? What cues you that the work is sophisticated? What are you saying to yourself as you place a piece of work into a pile? What might you say to a student as you return this work? These reveal criteria.

Keep sorting work until you are not adding anything new to your list of attributes. Try to create as large and diverse a list as possible. Recent lists have included such things as:

High: detailed, many things covered, insightful, self-revelation, examples provided, the student seemed motivated, sets goals for the future, looks at more than one thing, considers content as well as process, takes risks, accurate, discussion is related to criteria, growth supported with examples, organized well, sincere, honest, there are comparisons over time, shares feelings, looks at both strengths and weaknesses, there is depth to the analysis, there are good reasons and explanations, revealing, voice, easy to read, looks at skill improvement, there is ownership, there is a personal reaction, it is specific, it looks ahead, it is thorough, ideas are synthesized, it is readable, it is neat, ...

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Middle: shows then hides, beginning of ownership, two-dimensional, some specifics, describes performance but leaves a lot out, few insights, focuses on only a few things, considers content or process but not both, is somewhat accurate, doesn't seem completely honest, there are descriptions of individual pieces of work but no comparisons over time, I have to make some inferences as to what the student meant, ...

Low: Vague, simple restatements, mechanical, focuses mainly on surface features, obvious, same old same old, no examples, purposeless, I like it/I don't like it, one-dimensional, superficial, does not seem to be aware of the need to set goals, takes no risks, doesn't seem honest, is not accurate, there seems to be no ownership, I can't follow what the student is trying to say, hard to read, not organized well

Step 3: Cluster the reasons into "traits" or important dimensions of performance

Cluster similar attributes together and begin to form important "traits" or "dimensions" of self-reflection. For example, the above attributes *might* be clustered into the traits of: **SKILL ANALYSIS, SINCERITY, GOAL SETTING, and PRESENTATION**. Number each trait and place next to each comment in the high, middle, and low categories the number of the trait to which it relates.

Make sure that your "traits" cover everything of importance. For example, **SKILL ANALYSIS** at the HIGH level might include: detailed, many things covered, insightful, examples provided, looks at more than one thing, considers content as well as process, accurate, discussion related to criteria, growth supported with examples, looks at both strengths and weaknesses, depth of analysis, revealing, specific, thorough, and synthesized ideas.

Be prepared for frequent changes, at least at the initial stages of building the criteria. Ideas have to have time to gel. We get new perspectives and insights as we attempt to "make sense" of our criteria.

Step 4: Write a value-neutral definition of each trait

Write a definition of each trait. For example:

Sincerity reflects how serious the student is about the self-reflection process. It is the degree of ownership, effort and honesty in the self-reflection. It is the degree to which the student makes a real effort to self-analyze.

Handout A2.1,H4, p. 2

These definitions should be "value neutral"—they describe what the trait is about, not what good performance looks like. (Descriptions of good performance on the trait are left to the "high" rating.) Here is an example of the definition above converted to a statement that is *not* value-neutral: *Sincerity is taking ownership for work, really trying hard and being very honest; the student has made a sincere effort to self-reflect.*

Step 5: Find samples of student performance that illustrate each score point on each trait

Find samples of student work which are good examples of strong, weak and mid range performance on each trait. Be sure to have several sets representing typical ranges of performance at each level of: early elementary, late elementary, middle school, and high school. These can be used to illustrate to students what to do and what "good" looks like.

Step 6: Make it better

Criteria evolve with use. Try them out. You'll probably find some parts of the criteria that work fine and some that don't. Add and modify descriptions so that they communicate better. Choose better sample papers that illustrate what you mean. Revise traits if you need to. Let students help—this is a tool for learning.