

Considerations for Quality Online Course Design

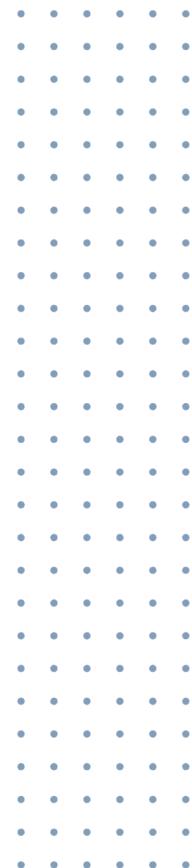
A Guide to Using Open Access Rubrics



Contributing Authors

Nicole Schmidt

Assistant Director of Research, Innovation, & Quality Assurance
University of Arizona



Cindy Schanke

Instructional Designer
Online Learning Consortium

Josh Herron, PhD

Director of Professional Learning
Online Learning Consortium

Angela Gunder, Ph.D.

Chief Academic Officer
Online Learning Consortium

Thank you to our reviewer:

Phil Denman

Quality Scorecard Suite Coordinator
Online Learning Consortium

Recommended citation:

Schmidt, N., Schanke, C., Herron J., & Gunder, A. (2024, January 1). *Considerations for Quality Online Course Design: A Guide to Using Open Access Rubrics*. Online Learning Consortium.

The work was undertaken on behalf of the Every Learner Everywhere network, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons, <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

About the Organizations



The **Online Learning Consortium (OLC)** is a collaborative community of education leaders and innovators dedicated to advancing quality digital teaching and learning experiences designed to reach and engage the modern learner — anyone, anywhere, anytime. OLC inspires innovation and quality through an extensive set of resources, including best-practice publications, quality benchmarking, leading-edge instruction, community-driven conferences, practitioner-based and empirical research, and expert guidance. The growing OLC community includes faculty members, administrators, trainers, instructional designers, and other learning professionals, as well as educational institutions, professional societies, and corporate enterprises. Learn more at <https://onlinelearningconsortium.org/>.



Every Learner Everywhere (ELE) advocates for equitable outcomes in U.S. higher education through advances in digital learning. Our mission is to help institutions use new technology to innovate teaching and learning, with the ultimate goal of improving student outcomes for Black, Latino, and Indigenous students, poverty-affected students, and first-generation students. Learn more at <https://www.everylearnereverywhere.org/>

Table of Contents

Contributing Authors	2
About the Organizations	3
Table of Contents	4
Five Open-Access Rubrics	6
Ten Quality Course Design Considerations	9
Use Cases for Implementing Quality Rubrics at Your Institution	15
Planning for a Quality Rubric	17
Conclusion	19
Rubric Resources	20



Introduction

This guide offers ten considerations that are consistent across online course quality evaluation instruments, including rubrics and scorecards. Exemplary criteria from five open-access course review rubrics will demonstrate these considerations throughout this guide. Use this guide to inform your decisions about your own course review practices or the course review process at your institution. You may find a rubric that works for your context as-is, or you may decide to adapt or remix with your own standards. This guide is suitable for any educator, course designer/developer, or administrator who is developing quality assurance practices for online and blended courses.

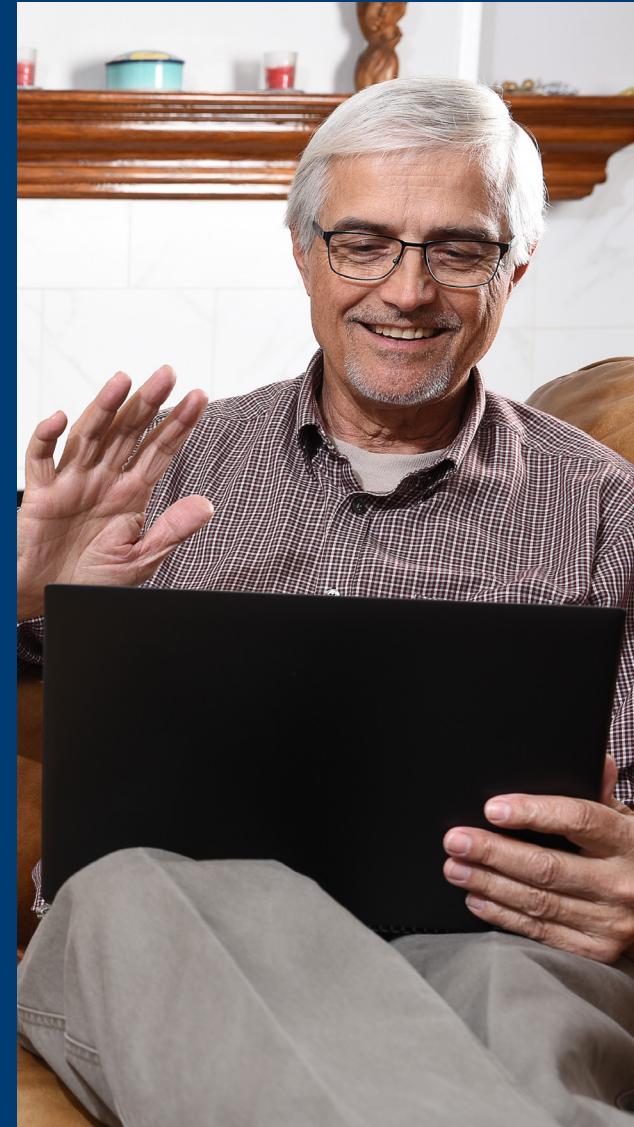
Who is the intended audience of this guide?

This guide is intended for any educator or course designer/developer who would like to review online, blended, or digitally-enhanced courses, and any administrator charged with developing quality assurance practices. While the rubrics presented are geared toward a higher education context, it is possible to use most of them in other adult education sectors where online or blended courses are taught, and several can be used in digitally-informed face-to-face contexts.

What can I expect from this guide?

Each institutional context is unique, and it can often be difficult to find or develop a quality rubric that perfectly suits your quality assurance and continuous improvement initiatives. In the following pages, you'll see highlights from five open-access course review rubrics covering ten important areas of consideration. In addition, contained in this guide is a planning table that can be used to identify rubric criteria that best fit your goals, allowing you to adapt or remix rubrics.

The rubrics used in this guide are open and freely available to the public so that you can adopt them as-is or customize to your context as needed. Additionally, we offer a series of use cases for how these rubrics can be adapted and combined to support you and your institution in your quality journey.



Five Open-Access Rubrics

Five quality rubrics were evaluated during this process. Rubrics were selected based on the criteria of free, open-access, and updated in the last seven years. Most rubrics selected include a Creative Commons License that allows for remixing and adapting for non-commercial purposes with attribution.

Some institutions may use an in-house rubric or benefit from a robust rubric subscription service, such as Quality Matters. You may still benefit from this guide as you continually reflect on the landscape of quality assurance in digital learning environments.

In these five rubrics, ten consistent criteria for a quality assurance instrument were identified: Course Content; Learning Objectives; Course Organization; Assessment & Feedback; Technology & Resources; Instructor Presence; Collaboration & Interaction; Accessibility; Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; and Student Support.

Below are brief descriptions of the rubrics analyzed in the development of this guide..

Peralta Online Equity Rubric

The Peralta Online Equity Rubric is focused primarily on evaluating whether online courses are inclusive and equitable. It consists of eight different standards, with three levels of mastery (i.e., Incomplete, Aligned, Additional Exemplary Elements). The standards are as follows:

- E1: Technology
- E2: Student Resources & Support
- E3: Universal Design for Learning
- E4: Diversity & Inclusion
- E5: Images & Representation
- E6: Human Bias
- E7: Content Meaning
- E8: Connection & Belonging

The Peralta Rubric was developed by the Peralta Community College District's Distance Education team, in Oakland, California. It is based on equity research and is updated periodically by the Peralta Equity Team.

SUNY OSCQR Rubric

The [SUNY OSCQR](#) rubric is focused on the continuous improvement of online courses. It ensures that online courses are built according to best design practices, incorporating accessible design features and student-centered approaches. The rubric is comprised of six different sections and 50 items:

- Section 1: Course Overview and Information
- Section 2: Course Technology and Tools
- Section 3: Design and Layout
- Section 4: Content and Activities
- Section 5: Interaction
- Section 6: Assessment and Feedback

OSCQR was developed by a team of staff and campus stakeholders across multiple campuses of the State University of New York (SUNY). A main feature of the rubric is that it is non-evaluative, and thus appropriate for generating formative feedback for instructors on both new and established courses.

Quality Course Teaching and Instructional Practice (QCTIP) Scorecard

The [Quality Course Teaching and Instructional Practice](#) (QCTIP) is a scorecard that instructors can use to ensure that they are following the best course design practices. It was developed by a panel of experts at the Online Learning Consortium as part of a suite of open scorecards, including scorecards for Student Support, Online Administration and Blended Learning. The QCTIP contains 97 criteria across ten sections:

- Section 1: Course Design
- Section 2: Accessibility, ADA Compliance and Universal Design
- Section 3: Course Learning Outcomes
- Section 4: Course Content
- Section 5: Assignments
- Section 6: Instructor Role
- Section 7: Class Discussion and Engagement
- Section 8: Building Community
- Section 9: Communication
- Section 10: Continuous Course Improvement

Designed to evaluate the overall course experience, this tool can be used to evaluate teaching effectiveness in several areas, including Course Fundamentals, Learning Foundations, Faculty Engagement and Student Engagement.

Quality Learning and Teaching (QLT) Rubric

The Quality Learning & Teaching (QLT) Rubric was developed by the Online Course Services team at California State University to support the use of best practices for the design and delivery of online and blended courses. This rubric, now in its 3rd edition (2022), consists of nine sections and 52 items (or “objectives”) across those sections. A subset of 24 of those QLT “objectives” are identified as “CORE” elements. The sections include:

- Section 1: Course Overview and Introduction
- Section 2: Student Learning & Assessment
- Section 3: Instructional Materials and Resources Utilized
- Section 4: Student Interaction and Community
- Section 5: Facilitation and Instruction
- Section 6: Technology for Teaching and Learning
- Section 7: Learner Support and Resources
- Section 8: Accessibility and Universal Design
- Section 9: Course Summary and Wrap-Up

The QLT rubric has been updated every few years since its creation in 2011. A distinguishing feature of this rubric is that 24 of the 52 objectives have been designated as “CORE,” or essential, elements.

UCI Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Course Design Rubric

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Course Design Rubric was originally developed by a working group in the School of Education at the University of California, Irvine. This rubric comprises eight standards (or dimensions) of course design. Each standard includes rich descriptors and no additional items.

- Standard 1: Syllabus & General Course Design
- Standard 2: Student Support
- Standard 3: Content, Activities, and Engagement
- Standard 4: Building Relationships
- Standard 5: Implicit Bias
- Standard 6: Technology
- Standard 7: Access
- Standard 8: Continuous Improvement and Self-evaluation

UCI-DEI was revised by a team of instructional designers and graduate students in the summer of 2021, and is reviewed regularly. The purpose of this rubric is to ensure that courses are designed in a manner that supports diverse, equitable, and inclusive learning experiences.

Ten Quality Course Design Considerations

Below are ten key course design considerations that are represented in the rubrics discussed in the previous section. Below are general descriptions of the key considerations and exemplary criteria from the selected evaluation instruments.

Consideration 1: Course Content

The relevance, depth, and organization of the course materials. Content is relevant to students' needs and/or instructors' learning goals. Content is appropriate to the level of the course and is properly cited, following academic conventions of the field. Content is well-written, consistently labeled, and information is logically organized within each content item.

Exemplary Criteria

The Peralta Online Equity rubric addresses this consideration through specific criteria such as the ones highlighted:

- Criterion E3 = Course content and activities are aligned with core principles of UDL.
- Criterion E7 = Communications and activities draw connections among course content, students' lives, and students' futures.
- Criterion E8 = Communications and activities foster care and connection among students, and with the instructor.



Consideration 2: Learning Objectives

Course objectives/outcomes/competencies align with course content, are measurable, and are clearly defined.

Exemplary Criteria

The Quality Course Teaching and Instructional Practice (QCTIP) Scorecard addresses this consideration through an entire section on “Course Learning Outcomes” and through specific criteria such as the ones highlighted.

- Criterion 1.3 = Course design is cohesive and aligns the course objectives, assessments, and activities.
- Criterion 1.8 = Course module or unit outcomes are stated.
- Criterion 4.1 = Course content provided covers all course objectives/competencies.

Consideration 3: Course Organization

The structure, flow, and course level organization is logical and conducive to student learning. Course content is presented in a logical format (i.e., into weeks/modules) and arranged evenly across modules, resulting in a regular cadence. Modules are evenly weighted in the amount of work assigned to students.

Exemplary Criteria

The SUNY OSCQR rubric addresses this consideration through specific criteria such as the ones highlighted.

- Criterion 1.2 = providing an overview of course navigation.
- Criterion 1.3 = course syllabus organized in designated course info are provided
- Criterion 3.16 = logical, consistent layout and easy navigation

Consideration 4: Assessment & Feedback

Assessed activities are clearly explained, the grading system is transparent, and high quality feedback is provided to learners on a regular basis. The purpose of assignments, assessment criteria, and course grading policy are clearly explained.

Exemplary Criteria

The Quality Learning and Teaching (QLT) Rubric is comprehensive in its treatment of this consideration, covering the grading policy, assessment instruments, and quality of feedback with specific criteria such as the ones highlighted.

- Criterion 2.2 = Grading policy is provided in a manner that clearly defines expectations for the course and respective assignments.
- Criterion 2.4 = The assessment instruments (e.g., rubrics, grading sheets) are detailed and appropriate to the student work and respective outcomes being assessed.
- Criterion 5.6 = The instructor demonstrates commitment to students' learning by providing clear feedback in a timely manner.

Consideration 5: Technology & Resources

There is a clear explanation of, and universal access to, online tools, resources and course technology.

Exemplary Criteria

The Quality Course Teaching and Instructional Practice (QCTIP) Scorecard addresses this consideration through specific criteria such as the ones highlighted.

- Criterion 1.13 = Course is fully prepared and available to students by the first day of the term.
- Criterion 4.7 = Instructor provides information for students regarding computer, hardware, and software requirements, as well as where to receive technical assistance.
- Criterion 6.15 = Instructor uses tools within the LMS to facilitate the learning experience in an effective manner.

Consideration 6: Instructor Presence

The instructor's engagement, responsiveness, and availability to students is clearly presented within the course design.

Exemplary Criteria

The UCI Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (UCI-DEI) rubric addresses this consideration through specific criteria such as the ones highlighted.

- 2.2 Course instructors explain the nature and purpose of office hours.
- 3.4 The instructor acknowledges the lack of diversity in the discipline or topic under study, and provides a platform for discussion around representations and stereotypes.
- 4.2 Make intentional efforts to learn who students are individually, including learning how to pronounce their names and giving students the opportunity to share their pronouns.

Consideration 7: Collaboration & Interaction

Opportunities for peer interaction and collaborative learning exist within the course. Expectations for interaction are clearly explained.

Exemplary Criteria

The SUNY OSCQR rubric addresses this consideration through specific criteria such as the ones highlighted.

- Criterion 4.29 = Course offers access to a variety of engaging resources to present content, support learning/collaboration, and facilitate regular and substantive interaction with instructor.
- Criterion 5.41 = Course provides activities intended to build a sense of class community, support open communication, promote regular and substantive interaction, and establish trust.
- Criterion 5.43 = Course provides learners with opportunities in course interactions to share resources and inject knowledge from diverse sources of information with guidance and/or standards from the instructor.

Consideration 8: Accessibility

Materials within the course are accessible to all students, including those with disabilities.

Exemplary Criteria

The University of California at Irvine's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (UCI-DEI) rubric addresses this consideration through specific criteria such as the ones highlighted.

- 7.1 The instructor makes sure that content and activities are clearly aligned with all institutional accessibility guidelines and the course reflects Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles.
- 7.2 A disability statement providing clear instructions for how to request an accessibility (disability) accommodation is included in the course syllabus.
- 7.3 The instructor provides options for students to access the content based on technological, WiFi, and/or time zone limitations faced by some students in the course.

Consideration 9: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

Ensuring the course design and facilitation is welcoming, considerate, and celebrates all students, regardless of race, culture, origin, age, religion, gender, orientation, location, abilities, or background. Particular attention is paid to employing techniques that allow and encourage students of all backgrounds and abilities to learn and be assessed on their knowledge.

Exemplary Criteria

The Peralta Online Equity rubric addresses this consideration through specific criteria such as the ones highlighted:

- Criterion E4 = Communications and activities demonstrate that students' diverse identities, backgrounds, and cultures are valued.
- Criterion E5 = Images and representations in the course reflect broad diversity; exceptions are explained and discussed.
- Criterion E6 = Human biases are identified in course content and activities.

Consideration 10: Student Support Services

Availability of support services like tutoring, technical assistance, and academic advising.

Exemplary Criteria

The Quality Learning and Teaching (QLT) Rubric addresses this consideration through an entire section and specific criteria such as the ones highlighted.

- 7.1 The instructor states their role in the support process and what type of things they can support.
- 7.3 Course syllabus and LMS include links with descriptions to campus academic support services and resources available to support students in achieving their educational goals.
- 7.4 Course syllabus and LMS include links with descriptions as to the type of support students may receive from to the institution's non-academic and non-technical student support services and resources can help students succeed and how they can access these services.



Use Cases for Implementing Quality Rubrics at Your Institution

Before planning how you will remix, adapt, or develop your own rubric in the next section, take a step back to consider the various use cases of a quality rubric. The following is a series of use cases illustrating how course improvement instruments, such as the open access rubrics highlighted in this guide, can be pivotal in centering quality and equity in course design. These use cases demonstrate diverse ways in which these tools can be employed to enhance the educational experience, ensuring courses are not only academically rigorous but also inclusive and equitable.

- **Facilitating Discussions Around Your Institution's Defining of Course Quality**

Implement structured dialogues among faculty and instructional designers to align on standards of course quality, using rubrics to identify shared values and expectations for course design and delivery.

- **Advancing Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging, and Accessibility (DEIBA)**

Implement rubrics to foster a culturally affirming curriculum, ensuring courses are inclusive, equitable, accessible, and resonate with a diverse student body, promoting a sense of belonging and community.

- **Encouraging Peer Review and Collaboration**

Encourage a collaborative process where educators use rubrics for peer-to-peer course evaluations, facilitating shared learning and collective enhancement of teaching practices.

- **Norming Rubrics to Your Institutional Contexts**

Adapt rubrics to fit the specific context, priorities, and values of your institution, ensuring relevancy and applicability in evaluating and improving courses.

- **Remixing Rubrics to Make Customized Evaluation Tools**

Combine open-access rubrics with institution-specific criteria to create tailored evaluation tools that reflect unique educational goals and teaching approaches.

- **Creating Professional Development Around the Usage and Remix of Rubrics**

Design professional development sessions to train educators in effectively using and customizing rubrics, emphasizing the importance of ongoing learning and adaptation in course design.



- **Creating a Culture of Empowerment Around Course Improvement**

Foster an environment where educators are motivated and supported to regularly review and enhance their courses, using rubrics as a tool for positive change and professional growth.

- **Making Data-Informed Decisions on Institutional Strategy**

Collect and analyze data from rubric assessments to inform strategic institutional decisions, enhancing the overall quality and effectiveness of educational offerings.

- **Benchmarking and Conducting Comparative Analyses**

Use rubrics to compare courses against industry standards, identifying strengths and areas for improvement in the context of broader educational trends.

- **Preparing for the Accreditation Process**

Utilize rubrics to assess and enhance course offerings, ensuring alignment with accreditation standards and demonstrating a commitment to continuous improvement in educational quality.



Planning for a Quality Rubric

Instrument Purpose

As you evaluate and plan to use a quality rubric, it is important to consider your primary purpose related to your unique course design needs and context. Consider the data you have available from students, faculty, staff, and accreditors on the current state of your online and blended courses.

Some institutions are starting from scratch, but others may want to focus on improving just a handful of course design considerations. Consider the previous section on *Use Cases for Implementing Quality Rubrics at Your Institution* for ideas as you develop your purpose for using a quality rubric.

Each open-access rubric highlighted in this guide has particular strengths that you can use for either purpose, but knowing the purpose is important in your planning process and will guide how you adapt, remix, or develop your own evaluation instrument.

Implementation Information

Many of the quality rubric developers highlighted in this guide provide additional resources to support institutional buy in, adoption, and success. These resources may include professional development which guides course reviewers on how to apply the rubric to evaluate their courses, examples of how each rubric criterion looks in an actual course site, or additional information (i.e., research) which further contextualizes the rubric and supports any corresponding course review practices.

Take note of available resources as you adopt, remix, or develop your own rubric. It will be also helpful to consider the resources you have available, staff size, and the type and amount of training that you will need for your quality improvement initiative.



Rubric Planning Table

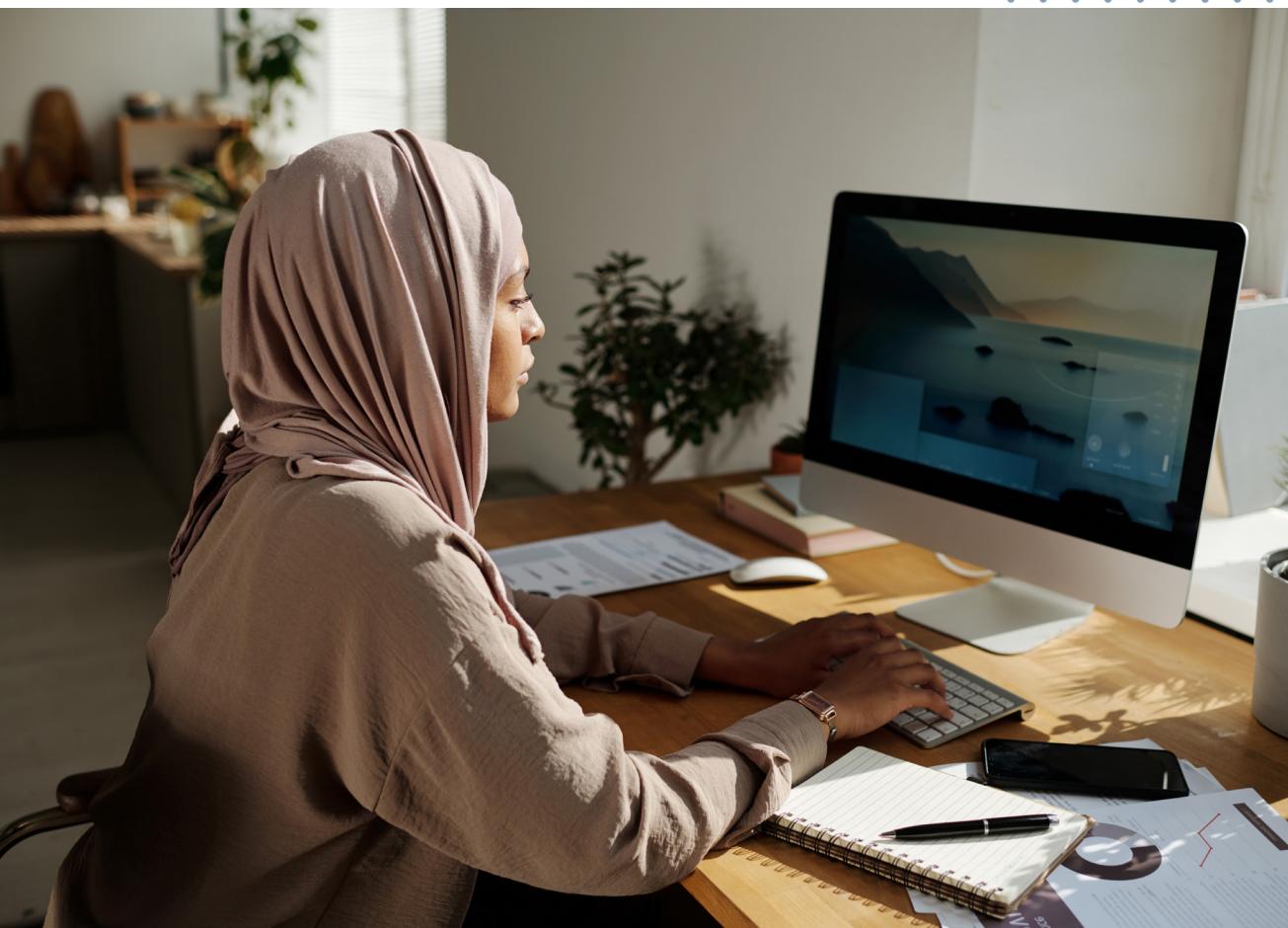
The table below allows you to note the specific standards (internal or external) that meet these ten course design considerations as you choose, remix, or develop your own evaluation instrument.

Institution	<i>All Students College (ASC)</i>	
Instrument Purpose	<i>E.g., improve inclusivity of course content, meet accreditation requirements, improve learner experience, etc.</i>	
Quality Rubric	<i>E.g., QLT, Peralta, QCTIP, OSCQR, UCI-DEI, remix, internally developed</i>	
Implementation / Support Notes	<i>E.g., training requirements, staff size, availability of annotations, etc.</i>	
Course Design Consideration	Specific Criteria and Source	Comments or Unique Institutional Notes
Course Content	<i>E.g., Standards 2.A, 2.B, 2.C.</i>	<i>E.g., needs more, needs pared down, etc.</i>
Learning Objectives		
Course Organization		
Assessment & Feedback		
Technology & Resources		
Instructor Presence		
Collaboration & Interaction		
Accessibility		
Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion		
Student Support Services		

Conclusion

In this guide, we have determined ten key course design considerations by highlighting five free and openly available course review rubrics intended to support the development and continuous improvement of online and blended courses. We have showcased exemplary criteria from each rubric as they relate to the ten design considerations and offered use cases for quality rubrics.

We hope that this guide and the planning materials support informed decision-making about which rubric(s) might best serve your course design quality assurance needs.



Rubric Resources

Peralta Rubric

- [Rubric Homepage](#)
- [Downloadable Rubric](#)
- [Online Equity Training](#)
- [Peralta Online Equity Conference](#)

OSCQR Rubric

- [Rubric Homepage](#)
- [Rubric Download page](#)
- [Explanations, Evidence, & Examples \(for each standard\)](#)
- [Community Resources](#)
- [Implementation Google Folder](#)
- [Fee-based Online Courses](#)

QCTIP Rubric

- [Rubric Homepage](#)

QLT Rubric

- [Rubric PDF](#)
- [Additional explanation & tutorial videos \(for each section\)](#)

UCI-DEI Rubric

- [Rubric Homepage](#)