

New Zealand Skill Standard Primer

This primer is intended as a practical guide for writing New Zealand skill standards. It draws on listing and operational rules, guidance published by NZQA, and background reading recommended by NZQA.

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Part 1: The skill standard template

This section uses the NZQA skill standard template to provide high-level guidance about the standard components. More detailed guidance can be found by following the hyperlinks sections in this document and to external documents.

1XXXXX [Title]

- The title reflects the outcomes in the standard and is meaningful to stakeholders. If there is only one learning outcome, it will also be the title.
- Titles must not be more than 120 characters, including punctuation and spacing.
- Names of trademarked products, training and assessment material, tertiary education organisations, or commercial organisations must not be used as part of the title.
- For a new standard, NZQA will assign an identification number when the standard is submitted for registration. If the standard is reviewed or revised, the standard setting body should designate a new version. For a republication, leave the version number the same.

Kaupae Level	The assigned level must align with the New Zealand Qualifications and Credentials Framework level descriptors, which can be found here .
Whiwhinga Credit	The credit value is an indication of how much time it would take a learner to achieve the learning outcomes and become proficient in the skills in the standard. One credit represents ten hours of learning.
Whāinga Purpose	The Purpose states who the standard is for and what that person will be able to do. It may also include information about where the standard fits in a qualification or credential. Skill standards may be applicable to more than one industry, community or sector. The purpose statement can outline the multiple contexts in which the standard may be used.
Whakaakoranga me mātua oti Pre-requisites	A standard may specify other standards as pre-requisites. Mandatory pre-requisite standards typically relate to health and safety or legislative requirements. They should be followed by the phrase, 'or demonstrate equivalent knowledge and skills.' For example, unit standard 3800, <i>Use a radio remote or pendant controlled gantry crane to lift and place regular loads</i> , lists the pre-requisite: Unit 30072, <i>Demonstrate and apply knowledge of slinging regular loads safely</i> , or demonstrate equivalent knowledge and skills. A standard can also list other pre-requisites related to health and safety, such as a current first aid certificate. For example: A current first aid certificate at the time of assessment. A standard can also give recommendations for pre-requisite knowledge or skills, but these should be included in the Assessment specifications section rather than here. If no pre-requisites are specified, delete this row.

Hua o te ako me Paearu aromatawai | Learning outcomes and assessment criteria

Hua o te ako Learning outcomes	Paearu aromatawai Assessment criteria
1. The learning outcomes describe the skills a learner will have once they have achieved the standard. Learning outcomes must include an action verb, content, and context. More information about learning outcomes can be found here.	a. Assessment criteria describe the required levels of performance of the skills in the standard.
	b. Assessment criteria are aligned with the learning outcomes associated with each skill.
	c. Assessment criteria should usually be written in active, plain language.
	d. More information about assessment criteria can be found here .

Pārongo aromatawai me te taumata paearu | Assessment information and grade criteria

Assessment specifications:

The assessment specifications can include additional context for assessment, such as:

- the boundaries of the assessment
- critical contexts
- evidence to be used in assessment, and
- clarification using examples.

More information about assessment specifications can be found [here](#).

Definitions

Definitions should be included where a term is used outside of common understanding. More information about definitions can be found [here](#).

Ngā momo whiwhinga | Grades available

Achieved / Merit / Excellence

Paetae Achieved	Kaiaka Merit	Kairangi Excellence
This is the minimum required to achieve the standard	Performance at a higher grade must include the evidence of performance at a lower grade.	Higher grades cannot require a learner to demonstrate extra skills. They are intended to recognise higher quality, greater effectiveness, or greater depth of understanding of the same skill set.

Grades are optional and should be treated with care. Do not assign a grading scheme without a clear mandate from the industry representatives. More information about grades can be found [here](#).

Ihirangi waitohu | Indicative content

- The indicative content provides the framework for a provider to develop its specific learning activities and assessment tasks.
- The content is expressed at a high level as topics rather than tasks, and along with other skill standard details, helps inform the credit value.
- Indicative content is not mandatory for assessment purposes.

More information about indicative content can be found [here](#).

Rauemi | Resources

Standards can include references to resources such as relevant legislation, rules, Codes of Practice, textbooks, definitions, links to online material, and other useful guidance.

This information can also be published elsewhere (in an accessible resource maintained by the standard setting body) so it can be kept up-to-date without the need for a new standard version.

More information about resources can be found [here](#).

Pārongo Whakaū Kouna | Quality assurance information

Ngā rōpū whakatau-paerewa Standard Setting Body	Use the full name of the organisation. For example: Muka Tangata, People Food and Fibre Workforce Development Council
Whakaritenga Rāangi Paetae Aromatawai DASS classification	Field > Subfield > Domain Refer to the NZQA website to find a suitable classification for the standard. The classification system can be searched by selecting, 'Classification System', from the dropdown box on the right.
Ko te tohutoro ki ngā Whakaritenga i te Whakamanatanga me te Whakaōritenga CMR	This the identification number of the standard's <i>Consent and Moderation</i> <i>Requirements</i> document. Every standard must be lonked to a CMR, and you can find them by selecting, 'CMRs by ID' on the right drop-down box here .

Hātepe Process	Putanga Version	Rā whakaputa Review Date	Rā whakamutunga mō te aromatawai Last date for assessment
Rēhitatanga Registration	<type here>	[dd mm yyyy]	[dd mm yyyy]
Arotakenga Review	<type here>	[dd mm yyyy]	[dd mm yyyy]

Kōrero whakakapinga Replacement information	When a standard is designated as expiring, it can be replaced by a new standard. If so, use the format: ‘This skill standard replaced [unit standard/skill standard] nnnn.’ If there is more than one replacement relationship, use the format: ‘This skill standard replaced [unit standard/skill standard] nnnn, and [unit standard/skill standard] nnnn.’ To find a standard by its replacement identification number, search the NZQA website by selecting, ‘Unit replacements by ID’, in the right drop-down box here.
Rā arotake Planned review date	The planned review date is usually five years from the date of registration or review. If a standard is revised, the standard setting body can choose to change the review date to five years after the registration of the new version, leave the date the same, or choose a shorter review period.

Please contact <SSB> at <email address> to suggest changes to the content of this skill standard.

Part 2: How to write a skill standard

This section contains general advice about how to write a skill standard. It draws on guidance from NZQA and the background documents NZQA used to inform that guidance.

Hua o te ako | Learning outcomes

What are they?

There are various definitions for ‘learning outcome’, but they all express a similar concept; For example:

“Learning outcomes are an explicit description of what a learner should know, understand and be able to do as a result of learning.”

Bingham, J. (1999), *Guide to Developing Learning Outcomes*

“Learning outcomes are the skills and knowledge which it is intended that students should be able to demonstrate by the time the assessment processes for the course have been completed.”

Queen Mary Academy: *Guidance for Writing Aims and Learning Outcomes*

The basic structure of learning outcomes should:

- use an action verb to signal the level of learning expected
- indicate the object and scope (the depth and breadth) of the expected learning, and
- clarify the occupational and/or social context in which the qualification is relevant.

NZQA provides the following example to illustrate the correct format:

Active verb	Content	Context
Evaluate	the implications of multiculturalism	in Aotearoa New Zealand's exercise industry

The outcome must express what a person knows or can do at the end of the learning process rather than what they do to get there. Consider:

- *Learn* about Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development.
- *Understand* Te Whare Tapa Wha.

Learning and *understanding* are things one would do as they seek to achieve an outcome. They are not the outcome itself. That is to say, they express the journey rather than the destination. This is why these verbs, while active, are not found in Bloom's taxonomy. If one were to express these learning aims as outcomes, they might be expressed as follows:

- *Apply* knowledge of Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development in youth work.
- *Explain* how Te Whare Tapa Wha underpins early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Is my learning outcome actually a task?

It can be difficult to differentiate between tasks and outcomes. After all, a task is something a person does and a learning outcome specifies, among other things, what a person will be able to do.

A task is a specific activity or set of actions that an individual is instructed to complete to achieve a particular goal or fulfil a requirement. Tasks often focus on the *process* and the *steps* involved in completing an activity. A learning outcome focuses on the *end result* of learning.

Some guidelines for making sure your outcome is not a task include:

- Avoid listing specific tools or assignments.
Instead of focusing on the tool (for example, 'Create a presentation using PowerPoint'), emphasize the skill or knowledge being developed (for example, 'Demonstrate an understanding of effective communication techniques through a visual presentation').
- Describe the desired competence, not the means of assessment.
For example, instead of saying, 'Write an essay on the causes of the New Zealand wars – Ngā pakanga o Aotearoa,' focus instead on the understanding or skill: 'Explain the causes of the New Zealand wars – Ngā pakanga o Aotearoa, and evaluate their significance.'
- Allow for flexibility in demonstration.
By avoiding prescriptive tasks, learners can show their understanding in diverse ways, such as a presentation, written report, or generation of natural evidence through the course of their work.

If you're not sure, check [Bloom's list](#).

If the learning outcome uses an action verb from Bloom's taxonomy, there is a greater likelihood that it will focus on an outcome rather than a task.

More on verbs

Because learning outcomes are concerned with what the learner can do at the end of the learning process, the verbs must be active (action) verbs.

"Action verbs play a key role in defining and articulating [the level of a skill] but need to be supported in this by clarifying the object of learning and the occupational and/or social context in which the learning takes place and where the outcomes are to be used. The same verbs can appear [at different] levels so the object and the context matter."

European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training. (2022),
Defining, writing and applying learning outcomes

NZQA also makes the following points about verb use in learning outcomes:

- When writing learning outcomes with two or more active verbs, unless both actions are significant and work together, it is better to use only one verb.
- Learning outcomes *should not* include unnecessary adverbs or modifiers such as, 'accurately', 'correctly', or 'successfully'. It can be assumed that a person who has met an outcome has met the implicit conditions for accuracy, correctness, and success.

But what about, 'Demonstrate knowledge of'?

On this subject, NZQA points out, "*Demonstrate knowledge of* as an active verb is vague and does not specify how the knowledge will be measured through the assessment."

Therefore, the phrase has, mercifully, gone the way of the moa and the pouākai. We thank it for its service.

Some more on Bloom

According to Bloom, there are three learning domains¹ *Cognitive* (understanding), *Affective* (attitudes, feelings, and values) and *Psychomotor* (doing). Each learning domain has an

¹ These aren't the same as the domains used in the NZQA classification systems for assessment standards and qualifications.

associated set of verbs. Most guidance in Aotearoa New Zealand focuses on the *Cognitive* domain because those verbs lend themselves most readily to the expression of outcomes.

Verbs from the *Affective* domain (embrace, participate, and support, for example) can be more difficult to use when expressing outcomes because they tend to be difficult to measure consistently. (NZQA places a particular emphasis on measurability.) When developing a learning outcome based on these verbs, the measurability should be identified in the assessment criteria.

The *Psychomotor* domain, which emphasises physical skills involving co-ordination of the brain and muscular activity, is commonly used in areas like laboratory science subjects, health sciences, art, music, engineering, drama and physical education. The NZQA sample standards (at the bottom of the page [here](#)) use verbs from the *Psychomotor* domain, but care must be taken when doing so because the verbs tend to lean towards the expression of tasks (construct, execute, and operate, for example) rather than outcomes.

Help! I'm not sure which verb would be the best for my learning outcome.

Verbs for the **Cognitive**, **Psychomotor**, and **Affective** domains can be found starting on page 24, [here](#).

How many learning outcomes are too many?

The number of learning outcomes in a skill standard will somewhat affected the credit allocation, but this does not mean that high-credit standards must necessarily have more. Scholarly sources agree that somewhere between four and eight is about right and ten is too many. Learning outcomes should be few enough and significant enough to be memorable and meaningful.

Sometimes, if a standard appears to have too many, try subsuming theory components into the practical outcomes. While theory components can be appropriately expressed in discrete learning outcomes, but the writer should always consider whether theory can be assessed validly as an expression of a practical outcome.

Sometimes a theory standard or outcome is appropriate.

In standards where the assessment of a practical outcome involves risk or danger, it may be better to establish a separate theory outcome (or even a standard) which should be assessed before the practical component. For example, it is vitally important that a person being assessed against a diving standard has a thorough theoretical grounding in underwater safety **before** they jump in. This is why standards such as Unit 4415, *Recognise and respond to diving related ill-health conditions and injuries*, use discrete theory and practical outcomes.

Paearu aromatawai | Assessment criteria

Assessment criteria describe the required levels of performance of the skills in the standard. They are aligned to the learning outcomes. They represent the minimum evidence required to show that a learning outcome has been met.

In practice, assessment criteria can look a lot like learning outcomes. The background reading recommended by NZQA acknowledges the similarity:

“[Assessment] criteria, **using learning outcome statements**, are often formulated as threshold levels which must be met by the candidate. Assessment standards and the criteria they use are more detailed than qualifications standards and curricula, in the sense that they must describe the requirements precisely to the learner.”

[European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training. \(2022\). Defining, writing and applying learning outcomes \(p.36\)](#)

However, among other things, learning outcomes and assessment criteria differ in their intention. Where a learning outcome recognises what a learner will know or be able to do at the conclusion of the learning process, the assessment criteria specify what the learner must know or be able to do to pass an assessment.

NZQA does, however, allow more latitude in the use of task-oriented verbs in the construction of assessment criteria. The sample skill standards provided by NZQA use verbs such as, ‘[carry out](#)’, and, ‘[mark out and cut](#)’.

Passive and active voice

Unless there is a good reason for not doing so, write assessment criteria in active, plain language. The type of active construction used in skill standards is called the **imperative** voice. The subject of an imperative sentence (You) is implied. For example:

“Design an exercise programme to meet participant goals.”

The subject of the imperative is the learner. Assessment criteria may not prescribe requirements that are not within the learner’s control or would not be completed by the learner themselves.

Previously (for unit standards), it was common to use the passive voice, which also has an implied subject but is constructed differently. For example:

“An exercise programme is designed to meet participant goals.”

Sometimes the passive voice expresses an assessment criterion more clearly, but in most cases it is easier to comprehend a sentence written in active imperative voice. There is no published guidance on mixing voices in assessment criteria; but in practice the quality assurance process usually requires a standard to be written using a consistent voice.

Assessment specifications

Assessment specifications set out additional context for assessment. Among other things, they can include the categories given below.

The boundaries of the assessment

Where an assessment could apply to contexts which appear similar but are delineated by such things as professional standards or regulations, the specification can clarify those boundaries. For example, ‘Assessment against this standard is limited to non-notifiable scaffolding under five metres high.’

Critical contexts

These define the context under which a valid assessment can take place. They may relate to standards of professional competence or to health and safety requirements, among other things. For example, ‘Assessment against this standard must be undertaken in a working food processing factory’, would clarify that the skills and knowledge can only be validly assessed in the workplace.

Alternatively, 'This standard can only be assessed against under simulated conditions', may indicate that it would not be safe, or it could be impractical, to assess the skills in a realistic environment. Hazardous activities such as earthquake recovery techniques would fall into this category.

Evidence to be used in assessment

This category is somewhat similar to a clarification (as discussed below) in that it clarifies the types of evidence that would engender a valid assessment. NZQA provides the following example in [sample 2](#) (at the end of the Guidelines):

"Learners must use an approved exercise industry pre-screen. This is accessible from [the name of the organisation and their website address]."

Clarification using examples

Sometimes an example will help to guide the assessor where broad terms such as, 'basic', or 'complex', are used in the learning outcomes or assessment criteria. For example:

"Assessment [items] can be a *basic* garden furniture item including, a stepped planter box, a free-standing planter or wall mounted planter boxes, raised gardens, or stepladder-style plant ladders, or an item of similar complexity."

The section on range statements (below) provides more information about this type of clarification.

Definitions that support consistent assessment where the term defined is outside of common understanding

Some standards use terms in unexpected ways. For example, the unit standard, "Pig a gas pipeline," provides the following definition:

"Pigs are devices for insertion into pipelines for the purpose of cleaning or inspecting the lines or separating products."

This type of definition is used where a learner may be confused by unfamiliar terminology.

New Zealand skill standards often use te reo Māori terms. These can have a specific meaning for te ao Māori that may not be immediately clear to a person who is not fluent in Māori culture. Even Māori words commonly used in Aotearoa New Zealand may have a meaning that differs from or expands upon what is commonly understood. A definition can help to clarify such terms for assessment purposes and to make the standard more accessible for those not fluent in te reo Māori. When including definitions for Māori terms, **always** consult with a subject matter expert.

Range statements

A range provides guidance on the evidence that needs to be considered for assessment. It can specify the context or scope within which performance criteria must be demonstrated.

The NZQA document, [Skill standards – Frequently Asked Questions – October 2022](#), gives the design principle:

"We are encouraging a more holistic approach to standard design, with larger credit values where appropriate, transferable competencies, **and less prescriptive ranges.**"

Therefore, ranges remain available as a tool for use in skill standards, but, where unit standards used complicated constructions with stems taken from legal drafting (such as, 'may include but is not limited to'), skill standards should ensure that ranges are simple and relate directly to competence rather than repeatability. That is to say, the range should not require the standard to function as a pseudo-assessment schedule by specifying arbitrary repetitions of an assessment requirement.

Ranges can be useful for expressing standards of professional competence, such as line speed in a processing factory or typed words per minute, or to give examples of things that could be suitable for meeting an assessment criterion. If the intention is to clarify the scope of the learning content, that information should be placed in the [Indicative content](#) section. Range statements themselves should only be included in the Assessment specifications section (and should not include stems).

For example, sample 2 from the [NZQA Guidelines](#) gives the range:

“Assessment will include the construction of two different items of garden furniture. The first item can be a basic garden furniture item including, a stepped planter box, a free-standing planter or wall mounted planter boxes, raised gardens, or stepladder-style plant ladders, or an item of similar complexity.

The second item must be a Cape Cod chair, picnic table, bench seat with garden tool storage, or an item of similar complexity.”

In this example, the levels of competence are basic and complex construction. The specific items are given as examples only – *stepped planter box* etc for basic construction, and *Cape Cod chair* etc for complex construction. (Although the second range uses the modal verb ‘must’, it is clear from the phrase, “or an item of similar complexity”, that these are only examples to help ensure a consistent standard of assessment.)

Ngā momo whiwhinga | Grades available

All skill standards have a minimum passing grade of ‘achieved’, where the learner must meet the assessment criteria for each of the learning outcomes specified in the standard.

Merit and excellence grades can be specified where there is a clear reason and support from stakeholders to recognize different performance levels of the same skill or learning outcome. Because skill standards use competency-based assessment, higher grades may not require extra outcomes. They may only require the same outcomes to be performed better.

Grade criteria must clearly describe the performance expected for each grade and ensure that performance at a higher grade includes the evidence of performance at lower grades.

For example, grade criteria may be based on the:

- quality/level of performance of the skill
- effectiveness of the ways to achieve the same performance level, and
- depth of understanding and application of concepts.

Some examples of grade criteria can be found in the samples at the end of the NZQA Guidelines [here](#).

Indicative content

Skill standards include indicative content. Along with the learning outcomes, the indicative content provides the framework for a provider to develop its specific learning activities and assessment tasks, while also supporting portability of learning and consistent graduate outcomes. The content is expressed at a high level as topics rather than tasks, and along with other skill standard details, helps inform the credit value.

The indicative content section is used to provide learners and programme developers with information about the things one would expect to learn on a course or programme which includes the standard. Because the content is *indicative*, every item listed need not be included in a course or programme and neither does every listed item need to be assessed against. Consider, for example, the New Zealand driver’s license theory and practical tests.

For a skill standard, the indicative content allows the programme developer to construct a course suitable to a particular context, and it allows an assessor to assess within that context by applying professional judgement rather than working through a prescribed sheet of check boxes. This approach emphasizes broad learning outcomes and assessment criteria and specifications that aren't overly prescriptive. It fosters a flexible assessment environment and allows skill standards to be used in a broad range of contexts.

Rauemi | Resources

This section should include references to resources including relevant legislation, Rules, Codes of Practice, textbooks, definitions, links to online material, and other useful guidance to tutors, assessors and learners.

SSBs may also choose to publish this information elsewhere so it can be kept up-to-date, without the need for a new standard version. Make sure any external resource publication is accessible and provide a link to it in the standard. If there is a resource critical to the assessment of the standard, it is recommended that it be cited in the Resources section.

To cite using the American Psychological Association (APA) format, provide the author, year of publication, *title*, and publisher of the book. Use the same format for both print books and ebooks. Provide a URL if the book is available on line.

Jackson, L. M. (2019). *The psychology of prejudice: From attitudes to social action* (2nd ed.). American Psychological Association. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000168-000>

For online video citations, use the name of the account that uploaded the video as the author and the name of the platform (YouTube, for example) as the publisher.

Harvard University. (2019, August 28). *Soft robotic gripper for jellyfish* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guRoWTYfxMs>

More APA citation formats can be found [here](#).

Part 3: Useful guidance and information sources

- [Writing Learning Outcomes: structure and considerations](#)
- [Guidelines for listing skill standards on the Directory of Assessment and Skill Standards](#)
- [Skill standards – Frequently Asked Questions – October 2022](#)
- [Directory of Assessment and Skill Standards Listing and Operational Rules 2022](#)

- [The skill standard template](#)
- [The skill standard style guide](#)
- [The NZQA Framework search page](#)
- [NZQA Change Reports](#)

- [European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training. \(2022\). *Defining, writing and applying learning outcomes*.](#)
- [Queen Mary Academy. \(2020\). *Guidance for Writing Aims and Learning Outcomes*.](#)