

## Using Quality Matters™ (QM) to Improve All Courses

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### Framework

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Quality Matters is a program of quality assurance for online and hybrid education. The program has received national recognition for its process which includes peer review, faculty-centeredness and a focus on continuous improvement in online teaching and learning. Quality Matters is a subscription program whose current subscribers include community and technical colleges and universities in the United States, other countries, K-12, and other academic institutions. It is a systematic process for ensuring quality in the design of online and blended/hybrid courses and its rubric standards align with accreditation standards. Using Quality Matters also has implications for improving student outcomes and retention. I became involved with QM at its inception in 2003 since I worked at one of the original institutions involved with its development under a Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE) grant. I eventually became a certified Peer Reviewer, a certified Master Reviewer and now I help to train Master Reviewers. While not entirely sold on the process at first, I witnessed the improvements in my online courses once I applied the rubric to my courses. Students had fewer procedural questions, navigation was smoother, and I was able to focus more on interacting with the students. I became a believer in the rubric and the process.

### Making It Work

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Before discussing how I specifically use QM in my courses, let me give a bit of background on QM and some specifics about the process. QM was a collaboration of 14 community colleges, 5 four year institutions in Maryland, and nine external partners. The goal of the FIPSE project was to develop criteria (in a rubric) for quality assurance of online learning and to create training for online faculty. The rubric focused on course design, not delivery, and was not intended to resolve all quality issues in online classes. After the grant expired, QM became an independent subscriber-based organization under MarylandOnline. Subscribers include educational institutions of all levels as well as publishers of online courses. QM also offers online training for instructors and has to date, trained over 16,000 faculty and instructional design staff. The QM process which is researched-based involves a faculty-centered, peer-review process of online and hybrid (blended) courses. The rubric, now in its third iteration (since becoming a non-profit organization), focuses on course design and is a diagnostic instrument which faculty can use for continuous improvement of their courses. The expectation is that all courses can eventually meet QM expectations. Meeting QM expectations involves meeting the 21 essential standards I and receiving at least 85% of the possible points from the rubric. If a course does not initially meet expectation, the faculty member is encouraged to use the feedback from the review to improve the course which is then re-reviewed. The rubric focuses on eight areas: overview, objectives, assessment, materials, learner interaction, technology, learner support, and accessibility. Why worry about course design? Why use Quality Matters? Since the Department of Education changed the rules for federal financial aid in 2005 with the Higher Education

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Reconciliation Act of 2005 (HERA), the number of institutions offering online courses has increased dramatically. The Sloan Consortium reported a 10% growth in distance learning enrollments in 2011. The Instructional Technology Council which examined elearning at community colleges reported an 8.2% increase in online enrollments from Fall 2010 to Fall 2011. I now use the QM rubric in all my course designs, even for courses that have not been officially reviewed. As our institution has increased emphasis on assessment, I find using the rubric forces me to see how my course and chapter objectives align with my assessments and activities. Everything in the course has a purpose and that purpose is made clear and transparent to students. Students who read all of the objectives and explanations understand why they are doing particular activities or taking certain quizzes. Applying the rubric has made me really examine my choice of activities and assessments. They are much more purposeful now. Even weekly discussion boards link to specific objectives. I give students a course map that clearly shows this linkage. The research shows that better student outcomes result when a course design relates to the course objectives (Swan, Matthews, Bogle, Boles, & Day, 2011). It was a "duh!" moment when I looked at these rubric standards and the research. Students are also more satisfied when all the course components are clearly integrated (Ke & Xie, 2009).

The rubric has also helped me to make my courses more accessible to all students. I used to use all sorts of font style and colors, not realizing how difficult those can be for some students. Now my courses are more simple in design but they are easier to read. I recently had a visually impaired student who was able to use a screen reader in the course with no problems. The third area in which I have found the rubric most helpful is the Course Overview and Introduction (QM Standard 1). To meet the specific review standards in this area, I created "Start Here" areas for students with detailed directions on how to get started. I include information on my expectations and institutional policies relevant to online learners. I also include links to institutional tutorials on using our LMS. No longer do I assume students can just find these items. I have streamlined my navigation so there are fewer buttons. Students have to click fewer times to find course components. It does take a good deal of time before the course begins to create the designs that meet QM expectations. However, I found that once I completed one course and it met expectations, other courses took less time. There were many items that could be reused with slight edits such as the Start Here sections. I also found that by using the rubric for the design, I was better able to focus on content. Some faculty raise concerns about QM creating packaged courses with no room for individual teaching styles. I have reviewed over 90 courses from all types of institutions. I have not found anything that would resemble a "packaged" course. There are many design elements that can meet QM expectations. It does not tell any instructor how to teach a class. I have reviewed multiple classes on the same topic and have yet to find two that are just alike, even at the same institution. As mentioned above, by using the QM rubric to guide course design, the faculty member is free to focus on content and devising creative ways of presenting that content to students.

## **Future Implications**

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As the body of research literature on online courses continues to grow, the QM rubric will continue to be revised, to take into account new developments and new information on student success. Future iterations of the rubric will enable me to keep my courses up-to-date with the literature on student success. My institution requires that all online courses meet QM expectations. By using the rubric, the Department is better able to ensure that courses with

multiple sections are comparable. Not every instructor uses exactly the same activities but each instructor has to show how those activities align with our common course objectives. Students are learning the same things; they are just learning them in different ways. Using the rubric, especially the standards related to alignment of objectives and assessments/activities, has made it easier to extract data for our Department review and course assessment process. We are able to demonstrate precisely how each objective is being achieved. I think the next big use for the rubric is to assess face-to-face classes. The rubric's focus on accessibility, alignment and transparency to students is relevant to synchronous, in-person classes as well. The rubric really is a guide for good teaching. In my Department, we have already taken some standards and asked all faculty to use them in their syllabi and teaching. How can you use QM in your own course? Many institutions and state consortiums belong to QM. If they subscribe, you have access to the full rubric and can request a course review from the Institutional Representative at your school. If your institution does not subscribe, you can ask the eLearning or Distance Learning office to become a part of Quality Matters. If that is not an option, you can still look at the rubric at <http://www.qmprogram.org/rubric> and use it to help improve your own course. You can incorporate many of QM's principles even without an official review. You can also take QM courses at non-subscriber prices and learn to improve your course by applying some of the rubric to its design. In closing, I would recommend Quality Matters as a way to improve online (and hybrid as well as face-to-face) classes by focusing on design issues, thereby freeing the instructor to focus on content and on interaction with students. Ultimately increased student success and satisfaction can result.

### References

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