Introduction to Quality Matters

Quality Matters™ ([www.qualitymatters.org](http://www.qualitymatters.org)) is a research-supported approach to quality assurance and continuous improvement for online learning. The primary components are a set of standards (or Rubric) for the design of online courses and the online components of blended courses, a peer review process for applying these standards, and related professional development for faculty. The Quality Matters Rubric, with 5 different versions for post-secondary education, educational publishing for post-secondary, secondary education, educational publishing for secondary education and continuing and professional education, contains annotations for use cases including competency-based education, blended courses, and, soon, open courseware. These rubrics are based on recognized best practices, built on the expertise of instructional designers and experienced online teachers, and supported by distance education literature and research. The goal of the Quality Matters is to enable instructors and designers to increase student engagement, learning, and satisfaction in online courses by implementing better course design.

History

The Quality Matters project was initiated by the MarylandOnline (MOL) consortium, a voluntary, non-profit, association of post-secondary two and four-year institutions in the state of Maryland, U.S. MOL was established in 1999 to leverage the efforts of individual campuses whose academic leaders were committed to the expansion of online educational opportunities in Maryland through collaborative activities. In the spring of 2003, MOL submitted a proposal to the U.S. Department of Education’s Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) for the creation of a rubric for the design of online courses and a faculty-centered, peer review process for certifying the quality of online courses and of online components. The title of the proposal was “Quality Matters: Inter-Institutional Quality Assurance in Online Learning.” FIPSE awarded MOL $509,177 over three years (September 2003 – August 2006) to carry out the project. The agency was interested in this proposal among many that involved quality assurance in online education because the proposed standards would be inter-institutional and inter-segmental and because of the unique peer-to-peer structure of the proposed course review process. The project had the potential to yield a quality assurance tool that was both scalable and replicable, criteria that are fundamental to the FIPSE grant program.

In 2005, MOL received several awards, including the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) Cooperative for Educational Technologies (WCET) award for Outstanding Work ([WOW](http://www.wow.org)) and the United States Distance Learning Association award for 21st Century Best Practice for the
Quality Matters initiative. In the second and third year of the grant, peer reviewer training to develop a cadre of reviewers attracted participants from 158 different institutions spanning 28 states. During this period more than 700 faculty and instructional development staff were trained to conduct peer reviews using the Quality Matters Rubric. During the final year of the grant, September 2005 – August 2006, MOL conducted a study of options to continue the Quality Matters initiative beyond August 2006. The outcome of the investigation was a decision to continue Quality Matters as a self-supporting program of MOL through institutional subscription and fee-for-service revenues.

In July of 2014, Quality Matters became a separate nonprofit organization and a licensee of the Quality Matters material owned by MOL. Today, Quality Matters has more than 1000 institutional subscribers from 48 different US states and 7 other countries, has provided professional development for more than 45,000 faculty and staff, and has certified more than 5000 online courses.

**Underlying Principles of Quality Matters**

The goal of the Quality Matters project was to improve student learning, engagement, and satisfaction in online courses through better course design. The project was designed as a collaborative, faculty-driven initiative, in which online learning experts develop standards of quality course design and online teaching faculty carry out reviews, provide recommendations to peer instructors, and work in a collegial manner with these instructors to make existing online courses more effective. The project leaders did not envision the creation of “perfect” courses, or a perfect set of standards. Rather, they foresaw that application of the rubric would improve courses, and that repeated reference to this evolving set of standards would make courses progressively better. The standards were not intended to be prescriptive; rather, they were developed as benchmarks for good practice.

Another founding principle, which continues to drive Quality Matters, is the need for the standards to reflect current academic research on effective learning. The initial standards and subsequent modifications have been based on the insights of teams of experienced online teachers and instructional designers and on the best practices standards promulgated by accrediting bodies and national and international organizations. In addition, the QM standards have been examined for consistency with the conclusions of the educational research literature regarding factors that improve student retention rates and activities that increase learning and engagement.

**The Quality Matters Rubric**

The Quality Matters Rubric consists of eight general standards that define quality expectations for the basic elements that go into the design of an online or blended course. These general standards cover

1. The Course Overview and Introduction
2. Learning Objectives (Competencies)
3. Assessment and Measurement
4. Instructional Materials
5. Course Activities and Learner Interaction
6. Course Technology
7. Learner Support
8. Accessibility and Usability

Under each general standard are a number of specific standards that deal with discrete course elements. The specific standards are stated in succinct language, but they are annotated with more detailed explanations of their intent and examples of good practice. The annotations provide guidance to instructors, course development specialists, and course reviewers who are attempting to interpret and implement the standards. The inter-relationships among the standards are highlighted in the annotations through the identification of standards that should align with one another in a well-designed course.

A point system is associated with the specific standards, with some standards assigned more value than others. Those assigned the greatest number of points are considered essential standards that must all be satisfied for a course to meet overall Quality Matters standards.

Quality Matters collects feedback regarding the scope and language of the Rubric and its annotations from users and trainers on a continuous basis. Periodically, the Rubric is subjected to a thorough review and updated as needed. A new edition of the Rubric is released every two to three years.

**The Quality Matters Course Review Process**

The Quality Matters Rubric was designed to enable formal peer reviews of existing online courses. A course is evaluated by a team of three reviewers who have been trained in the application of the QM Rubric. The team members are experienced online instructors. For some Rubric versions, instructional designers may also serve as reviewers. At least one member of the team is external to the institution whose course is being reviewed. At least one team member is a subject matter expert. The chair is an experienced QM Certified Master Reviewer with advanced training.

The instructor or design team whose course is being reviewed provides baseline information and access to a version of the online course or online component of a blended course to the review team members. The review is launched with a conference call between the team members and the course instructor(s). The team chair stays in touch with the instructor(s) throughout the process, relaying questions from the team, going over the review, once it is complete, and monitoring any subsequent changes made to the course to satisfy the QM standards.

The reviewers are asked to evaluate the course on each of the specific standards, to identify its strengths, and to provide recommendations on how it might be improved, particularly to meet those standards they regard as not sufficiently met.
The reviewers work independently but confer with each other before submitting their individual reports. Reviewers do not have to reach consensus regarding their decisions, and the point value of the standard is awarded or not awarded based on the majority decision. The numerical score assigned to the course is the total of the points awarded for each standard; further, the advice and recommendations from all three reviewers are transmitted to the instructor(s) in the final report.

Courses that achieve a high enough numerical score (85% of the total possible points) and satisfy all the essential standards are regarded as having met QM standards and are immediately issued a version of the QM seal that may be displayed in association with the course. The QM seal is a quality certification mark registered in the U.S. and elsewhere. Instructors are free to incorporate the review team’s recommendations to improve their courses, and data show that most do make improvements based on the review team’s recommendations. Courses that achieve lower numerical scores must be modified if they are to eventually meet the QM standards. Almost all courses submitted for review eventually incorporate the recommended changes, although, in some cases, changes are not made immediately.

The Quality Matters Course Review Process

This process of formal review, shown in the figure above, is the only way for a course to gain QM certification and qualify to display the QM certification mark shown below. However, as explained below, staff and faculty at some institutions have developed alternative methods of applying the Rubric that meet their own internal needs.

Courses that successfully meet the QM Rubric Standards in an official review course review are eligible to carry the QM certification mark.

Quality Matters Professional Development

Quality Matters was designed by and for educators. Faculty are at the core of the process and are the focus for a suite of professional development offerings. Quality Matters provides two tracks for professional development: one track to
provide faculty with knowledge and skills to design and improve courses and to teach online, and another track to prepare and certify faculty (and staff in some cases) to perform specific roles in the implementation of Quality Matters at their own institutions and beyond. The certifications include QM Online and Face-to-Face Facilitator (of the Applying the QM Rubric workshop), QM Course Review Manager, QM Peer Reviewer, and QM Master Reviewer. All QM professional development is delivered by certified facilitators who are not QM staff members but rather are active professionals in their fields. Quality Matters maintains a database of more than 5,000 Certified Peer Reviewers, from institutions across the U.S. and abroad, who serve on official Quality Matters course reviews.

**Expanding Uses of the Quality Matters Rubric and Process**

While the Quality Matters Rubric and process were developed to meet a specific need, users have been quick to adapt it to meet a wider range of needs in the rapid growth of online and blended courses. Formal course reviews are both costly and time-consuming, and, while these reviews provide the most detailed and balanced assessment of existing online courses, many institutions have chosen to implement informal review processes internally, using the QM Rubric and some elements of the formal process.

The Quality Matters online tools and resources encourage institutions to provide instructors with access to the Rubric to assess and improve their own courses, either independently or in collaboration with instructional design staff. Academic and distance education administrators at some institutions have adapted the standards to provide guidance to instructors and course developers during the initial course design stage. Others have incorporated the QM standards into the development and training programs that prepare their faculty to teach online or require their faculty to complete QM professional development prior to teaching. Administrators at some colleges have gone so far as to incorporate some of the QM standards into institutional policies. Finally, institutions have successfully cited implementation of the Quality Matters standards and processes as evidence of quality assurance in their accreditation reviews and other forms of external accountability.

The Quality Matters approach is also having a broader impact on the culture of online education at many institutions. The Quality Matters process is providing a basis for campus dialog on best practices in online instruction among faculty and instructional development staff, and commitment to Quality Matters principles is helping to build a campus culture dedicated to the continuous improvement of online learning. Many faculty are applying the QM standards and best practices taken from QM’s professional development workshops to their on-campus, face-to-face courses as well. Institutions are specifically including these lessons in their faculty development offerings for all faculty as a way to advance the notion of course design and teaching excellence beyond the online medium.
Advancing Distance Education

Quality Matters engages a voluntary group of doctoral-level Research Colleagues who continuously review the research literature on distance education for new learning and innovations to be integrated into the QM Rubric and to share with the distance education community. Quality Matters sponsors research projects solicited from the online learning community on the efficacy and impact of the QM standards, faculty development, course reviews, and other aspects relating to online learning. The results of these projects, along with a broad array of community-delivered presentations on QM implementation and innovations in online learning, are presented at the annual Quality Matters Conference on Quality Assurance in Online Learning. As a means to further engage and connect the community and disseminate best practices, Quality Matters also holds regional conferences and meetings and supports community discussions through blogs, forums, and social media. These activities are part of QM's growing engagement with the broader field of quality assurance in distance education.

Current and Future Plans
With a rapidly growing number of QM-reviewed courses, research projects that are attempting to measure the impact of QM reviews and other methods of implementing QM are proliferating. As the results accumulate, Quality Matters bases the ongoing refinement of the QM Rubric and processes on directly relevant research, in addition to inferences drawn from broader-based research on student learning and distance education.

The trend toward widespread statewide and international adoption of the QM standards is creating momentum toward the de facto recognition of the QM Rubric as the prevailing standard for online and blended course design. To maintain and further this momentum, Quality Matters will need to remain relevant by continuing to evolve the standards in keeping with the latest research findings, changing technology, and the needs of its users, and by facilitating the ever-wider range of uses of its tools and processes. Quality Matters has, to date, developed five Rubrics (see above) for different needs in online education and it is anticipated that new rubrics and tools to apply quality standards will be needed as new use cases develop. In addition to course-level standards, Quality Matters has developed and is currently piloting a set of standards and four distinct certifications for online programs and a process for conducting such reviews. QM Program Certifications, awarded separately, include Program Design Certification, Teaching Support Certification, Learner Support Certification, and Learner Success Certification, all of which may culminate in the QM Exemplary Program Certification. Quality Matters will continue to be responsive to the needs of the online learning community in developing new tools and resources.
References

Publications and information about Quality Matters:


Quality Matters website (www.qualitymatters.org). Quality Matters research and related documents may be found at https://www.qualitymatters.org/research.


Publications featuring uses of Quality Matters:


Greenberg, G. (2011). *From the ground up: Conceptions of quality in course design for Web-support education* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH.


rubric, and peer collaboration. [2010 QM Research Grant].
Presentation at the 3rd Annual Quality Matters Conference, Baltimore, MD.


Publications on the Quality Matters grant initiative:


Key Terms as Applied in the Quality Matters Rubric and Process

Alignment: Critical course elements working together to ensure that students achieve the desired learning outcomes.

Course Delivery: The actual teaching of a course, i.e., the implementation of the course design.

Course Design: The forethought and planning that an instructor or course development team puts into a course, i.e., the elements of a course that are built online and the planning for how a course should unfold over time.

Blended Course: A course with both online and face-to-face components. Generally speaking, at least 25% of the course must be online for a course to be treated as a blended in the Quality Matters course review process.

Learning Objectives: Statements that describe what students are to gain from instruction in a course. An expectation in the Quality Matters Rubric is that learning objectives are measurable.
Learning Outcomes: The accomplishments of students in a course, as measured through various forms of assessment.

Quality Assurance: A systematic program for determining whether a product or process is performing according to established standards.

Rubric: A set of criteria to benchmark or evaluate a product, activity, or process.

Scalability: The potential of a process or function to handle a larger volume of activity without degrading.

Student Retention Rate: In the context of a course, the student retention rate is the percentage of initially enrolled students who complete the course.

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