

## How to write competency descriptors *that work*

A skills matrix is only as reliable as the words behind its numbers. Vague level definitions like "good at data" mean two managers score the same person differently. Sharp, observable descriptors fix that. This is how to write competency descriptors that make every score consistent, fair and defensible.



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**Reading time** 12 min · **Method** Upleashed 0 to 5 capability framework · **Updated** May 2026

### THE SHORT ANSWER

To write a competency descriptor, describe the observable behaviour someone shows at a given level, in specific, measurable terms, led by an action verb. Replace vague traits like "good communicator" with what the person actually does, write one descriptor per level so the progression is clear, and make each one something you could evidence. In short:  
**describe observable behaviour, not vague traits, one clear level at a time, in words you could prove.**

#### KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **A descriptor describes observable behaviour.** It says what a person actually does at a level, not what they "are like".
- **Specific beats vague.** "Good at communication" is useless; "adapts the message and tone for different audiences" can be scored.
- **Lead with an action verb.** Write, demonstrate, analyse, lead. Verbs force observable, evidenceable behaviour.
- **One descriptor per level.** Each level should read as a clear step up from the last, so the progression is unmistakable.
- **If you cannot evidence it, rewrite it.** A descriptor you cannot point to in real work is a description you cannot score.

— [START HERE](#)

## What a competency descriptor *really is*

A competency descriptor, sometimes called a behavioural indicator, is a short, clear statement of what a person does at a particular level of a skill or competency. It is the words that sit behind a number, turning an abstract level into something you can actually recognise in someone's work.

### It describes behaviour, not personality

The single most important idea is this: a descriptor captures **observable behaviour**, not a trait or a feeling. "Is a strong communicator" describes a personality; "clearly explains complex ideas and adapts the message for different audiences" describes a behaviour you can watch, evidence and score. The first is an opinion; the second is a standard. Good descriptors live entirely in the world of what people do, because that is the only thing you can fairly and consistently assess.

### It is what makes a level mean something

Every rating scale has levels, but a level is just a number until a descriptor gives it meaning. "Level 3" means nothing on its own; "Level 3: has completed training and consistently produces work to standard, unsupervised" tells everyone exactly what a 3 looks like. Descriptors are what turn a scale from a set of numbers people interpret differently into a **shared language** where a 3 means the same thing across the whole team. Without them, your matrix is built on sand.

## It must be something you can evidence

A good descriptor passes a simple test: could you point to real work that proves it? If a descriptor describes something you could observe, a document produced, a task done unsupervised, a person trained, then it can anchor a fair score and stand up to challenge. If it describes something woolly you could never actually demonstrate, it cannot. **Evidenceable behaviour** is the line between a descriptor that works and one that just sounds good.

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— WHY IT MATTERS NOW

## Vague words make *unreliable scores*

When descriptors are fuzzy, scoring becomes guesswork: two managers rate the same person differently, ratings get disputed, and the whole matrix loses the trust it needs to be useful. Sharp descriptors are the cure, and the payoff is measurable.

21%

HBR, VIA SPRAD  
2025

fewer rating  
disputes reported  
by teams using  
detailed  
behavioural  
descriptors instead  
of vague traits.

3-5

BEST PRACTICE

distinct proficiency  
levels per  
competency, each  
with its own  
behaviour-based  
descriptor, is the  
recommended  
range.

8%

GARTNER, 2024

of organisations  
have reliable skills  
data; vague,  
inconsistent  
descriptors are a  
major reason the  
rest do not.

The logic is direct. A skills matrix exists to replace opinion with evidence, but it can only do that if the words defining each level are precise enough that different assessors reach the same score. Get the descriptors right and you get consistency, fairness and defensibility, ratings people trust, reviews that do not descend into argument, and a record that stands up at audit. Get them wrong, and every number in the grid inherits the vagueness of the words behind it. **The descriptors are where a matrix's reliability is won or lost.**

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— SEE THE DIFFERENCE

# Weak descriptor, strong descriptor

The fastest way to learn the craft is to see the same idea written badly and then well. The weak version describes a vague trait; the strong version describes observable, evidenceable behaviour.

## × WEAK

*"Has good data analysis skills and is confident with numbers."*

**Why it fails:** "Good" and "confident" are opinions, not behaviours. Two managers will read them differently, and you could never point to a piece of work that proves "confident with numbers". It cannot be scored consistently or evidenced.

## ✓ STRONG

*"Independently analyses a dataset, draws correct conclusions, and presents them clearly to non-specialists, without checking."*

**Why it works:** Every part is an observable action, analyses, draws, presents, without checking. You can point to the actual analysis as evidence, and any two assessors would judge it the same way. It is specific, behavioural and provable.

The transformation follows a simple pattern: strip out the adjectives that describe a person ("good", "strong", "confident") and replace them with verbs that describe what the person *does* ("analyses", "presents", "trains others"). Add the conditions that make the level distinct, "without checking", "to standard", "for different audiences", and you have moved from an opinion nobody can score to a standard everyone can. Every good descriptor is built this way.

## — THE FOUR INGREDIENTS

# What every good descriptor contains

Strong descriptors are not a matter of writing talent; they follow a formula. Include these four ingredients and a descriptor will be specific, observable and scoreable every time.

### INGREDIENT 01

#### An action verb

Start with what the person does: analyses, writes, leads, trains, resolves. Verbs force the descriptor into observable behaviour and out of vague description.

### INGREDIENT 02

#### An observable object

Say what the action is applied to: a dataset, a complaint, a new starter, a process. Concrete objects make the behaviour something you can actually watch.

### INGREDIENT 03

### INGREDIENT 04

### A standard or condition

State the quality or independence that marks the level: "to standard", "unsupervised", "for different audiences". This is what separates one level from the next.

### Evidence you could point to

Make sure the behaviour leaves a trace: a document, a sign-off, a trained colleague. If you could not show it to an auditor, rewrite it until you could.

Put them together and a descriptor almost writes itself: *verb + object + standard*, checked against the evidence test. "Resolves escalated complaints to the required quality standard, unsupervised" has all four: the verb (resolves), the object (escalated complaints), the standard (required quality, unsupervised), and clear evidence (the resolved cases). Build every descriptor on this skeleton and consistency stops being a matter of luck and becomes a matter of structure.

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## — THE SCALE BEHIND THE SCORES

# The 0 to 5 capability framework

Descriptors need a scale to hang on, a fixed set of levels each one defines. This framework, developed by Dr Alex J. Martin-Smith, gives you six levels with clear generic definitions; your job when writing descriptors is to make each level concrete for a specific skill.

0

### No skill required or desired EXCLUDED

No expectation that the person or role needs this skill within the next year. Take a longer-term view here, and do not use this level for short-term assessments. A 0 drops the skill out of that person's score entirely.

1

### In training / Trainee WEIGHTING 25%

Expected to be proficient within a year. Has completed up to 75% of training and does not yet fully understand the quality requirements.

2

### Developing capabilities WEIGHTING 50%

Has completed more than 75% of training. Can probably perform the task alone, but consistent quality and productivity are not yet evidenced, so complex output still needs checking or verification.

3

### Capable WEIGHTING 75% · USUAL TARGET

Has completed 100% of training and shown consistent quality and productivity. Can work unsupervised. This is the level most roles aim for, the point at which a person genuinely counts on a skill.

4

### Subject Matter Expert / Trainer WEIGHTING 100%

Prolonged experience at a consistent quality and productivity level. Works autonomously and can train others to a high standard. If the skill has not been used in three months, drop back to Level 3 to reconfirm competence.

5

### Strategic ownership / Leadership WEIGHTING 100%

Can define and develop new processes and skill requirements, show cross-function expertise, and demonstrate leadership. Carries the same numeric weight as Level 4; the purple flag highlights strategic capability and helps you spot succession candidates.

#### From generic level to specific descriptor

The framework gives each level a generic meaning, Level 3 is "capable, works unsupervised", for example. Writing descriptors means translating that generic meaning into the concrete behaviour for one particular skill, so an assessor can see it in real work. The level definitions also carry the proficiency weightings, Level 1 = 25%, 2 = 50%, 3 = 75%, 4 and 5 = 100%, with 0 excluded, that turn scores into a capability percentage once the descriptors make scoring reliable.

**A worked example.** Translate the generic Level 3 into a specific descriptor for one skill:

```
Generic Level 3 "capable, works unsupervised, consistent
quality"
Skill Compliance (KYC)
Specific descriptor → "Completes KYC checks to regulatory
standard, unsupervised, with consistent accuracy."
```

— SEE IT ON A REAL SKILL

## A full set of descriptors, *level by level*

Here is the craft applied end to end: one skill, Data analysis, with a specific, observable descriptor written for each level of the 0 to 5 scale. Notice how each step up adds a clear, evidenceable increase in independence and scope.

Level	Meaning	Descriptor for "Data analysis"
0	<b>Not required</b>	The role does not require data analysis within the next year; the skill is excluded from this person's score.
1	<b>Trainee</b>	<b>Follows</b> a provided template to run a basic analysis under supervision; does not yet judge whether the result looks right.
2	<b>Developing</b>	<b>Produces</b> a standard analysis alone, but complex or unusual datasets still need checking before the output is used.
3	<b>Capable</b>	<b>Independently analyses</b> a dataset, draws correct conclusions, and presents them clearly to non-specialists, without checking.
4	<b>Expert / Trainer</b>	<b>Handles</b> complex, ambiguous datasets, chooses the right method unaided, and <b>trains</b> others to analyse to standard.
5	<b>Strategic</b>	<b>Defines</b> the team's analysis standards and methods, and sets how data analysis is done across functions.

1 descriptor per level, each a clear, observable step up from the last

0-5 a complete, scoreable scale for one skill, ready to assess against

*Illustrative descriptors on the Upleashed 0 to 5 framework. Each is built from a verb, an object and a condition, and each could be evidenced in real work.*

#### WHAT MAKES THIS SET WORK

- **Every level leads with a verb.** Follows, produces, analyses, handles, defines. Each descriptor describes an action you can observe, not a trait you have to guess at.
- **The independence climbs clearly.** "Under supervision" to "still needs checking" to "without checking" to "trains others" to "sets the standard", the progression is unmistakable.
- **Level 3 is the unsupervised line.** The jump from Level 2 ("still need checking") to Level 3 ("without checking") is the most important boundary, and the words make it crisp.
- **Each one is evidenceable.** Every descriptor points to something real, a supervised analysis, a trained colleague, a defined standard, so a score can always be backed up.

#### — THE WRITING PROCESS

## Five steps to write a descriptor set

Writing a clear set of descriptors for a skill is a repeatable process, not an act of inspiration. Follow these five steps and you will produce sets that score consistently every time.

Step	What you do	Watch out for
<b>1 · Define the skill</b>	Name the skill precisely and what "doing it" actually means in your context	Skills so broad that one descriptor cannot capture them; split if needed
<b>2 · Anchor Level 3</b>	Write the "capable, unsupervised" descriptor first; it is the pivot the others hang off	Starting at Level 1; the unsupervised line is the clearest anchor point
<b>3 · Work outwards</b>	Step down to 2 and 1, and up to 4 and 5, adjusting independence and scope each time	Levels that do not clearly differ; each must be a visible step up
<b>4 · Apply the verb test</b>	Check every descriptor leads with an action verb and contains no vague traits	"Good", "strong", "confident" sneaking back in; replace with behaviours
<b>5 · Apply the evidence test</b>	Ask of each: could I point to real work that proves this? If not, rewrite	Descriptors that sound impressive but could never be demonstrated

The two tests in steps four and five are what separate descriptors that work from descriptors that merely look thorough. The verb test keeps you in the world of observable behaviour; the evidence test keeps you honest about whether a level could ever actually be assessed. Run every descriptor through both, and calibrate with a colleague by scoring a few real people together, and you will end up with a set that any two assessors apply the same way. That consistency is the whole point.

— AVOID THESE

## Six mistakes that ruin a descriptor

**MISTAKE 01**

**Describing traits, not behaviour**

"Confident", "strong", "good" describe a person, not an action. They cannot be observed, evidenced or scored consistently.

**MISTAKE 02**

**Levels that do not clearly differ**

If two adjacent levels could describe the same work, the scale is useless. Each must be a visible step up in scope or independence.

**MISTAKE 03**

**Writing what you cannot  
evidence**

A descriptor you could never point to in real work cannot anchor a fair score. Apply the evidence test to every one.

**MISTAKE 04**

**Cramming in too much**

A descriptor stuffed with five behaviours is impossible to score cleanly. One clear, central behaviour per level beats a paragraph.

**MISTAKE 05**

**Copying generic dictionary text**

Off-the-shelf descriptors rarely fit your actual work. Adapt them to what the skill really looks like in your context.

**MISTAKE 06**

**Never calibrating**

Descriptors that read well can still be applied differently. Score a few real people with a colleague to test they land the same way.

## Writing descriptors is a craft. A ready-made matrix gives you a *proven starting set*.

You can write descriptors from scratch in a spreadsheet, and this guide shows you how. A purpose-built template gives you a head start: the six levels of the 0 to 5 scale come with clear, generic definitions already written and refined through years of practice, so you are adapting proven descriptors to your skills rather than facing a blank page, and every score rolls straight into capability analytics.



*The Advanced Excel Skills Matrix comes with the 0 to 5 levels clearly defined, a proven starting point for your own descriptors, with every score feeding capability and coverage analytics automatically.*

TRY IT FREE	MOST POPULAR	WHEN YOU ARE READY
<b>£0</b> The online 5x5 builder maps a small team in your browser, with no sign-up. See defined levels in action.	<b>£199</b> The full Excel template: defined 0 to 5 levels, heat map, analytics, up to 30 people and 30 skills. One-off, yours forever.	<b>£1</b> Upgrade to PulseAI in your first year for a living, web and mobile version with AI skill suggestions and reminders.

## — COMMON QUESTIONS

### Quick *answers*

#### **Q What is a competency descriptor?**

It is a short, clear statement of what a person does at a particular level of a skill, written as observable behaviour rather than a trait. Also called a behavioural indicator, it is the wording that gives a rating level its meaning, so a "3" means the same thing to everyone scoring against it.

#### **Q What makes a descriptor good?**

It describes observable, evidenceable behaviour, leads with an action verb, names a concrete object, and states the standard or independence that marks the level. Above all it passes two tests: could two assessors score it the same way, and could you point to real work that proves it?

#### **Q How many levels should I write descriptors for?**

Best practice is three to five distinct proficiency levels per competency. The 0 to 5 framework gives you six points, with Level 0 simply marking "not required", so in practice you are writing observable descriptors for Levels 1 to 5, each a clear step up from the last.

#### **Q How do I avoid vague descriptors?**

Apply the verb test and the evidence test. Strip out trait words like "good", "strong" and "confident", and replace them with what the person actually does. Then ask whether you could point to real work proving each descriptor; if not, rewrite it until you could.

## Q Should I write descriptors for behaviours or technical skills?

Both, and the method is the same: describe observable behaviour at each level. Technical skills are usually easier ("completes the task unsupervised, to standard"), while behavioural competencies need extra care to stay concrete, "synthesises conflicting views into a clear recommendation" rather than "is collaborative".

## Q Do I have to write them all myself?

No. A good starting point is a proven, defined scale you adapt to your skills, rather than a blank page. The 0 to 5 framework provides clear generic level definitions; your job is to make each one concrete for your specific skills, then calibrate with a colleague.

### — ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Alex is the creator of the Upleashed capability framework that powers Skills Matrix Template, the award-winning Excel skills matrix. A Chartered Manager with an MBA, an LLM and a doctorate in business administration, he has spent more than two decades helping operations, HR and quality teams turn capability from a gut feel into something they can measure, manage and prove.

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alex J. Martin-Smith".

Dr Alex J. Martin-Smith

### — SOURCES

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# Words that *score the same*.

You now have the craft. The quickest way to start is to pick one important skill this week, write the Level 3 "unsupervised" descriptor first, then build outwards, running each one through the verb test and the evidence test. Consistent scores follow consistent words.

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