Primary Trait Analysis

- Primary Traits: Essential or central components of the discipline
- Components of an assignment are recognized as primary traits to be learned by the student.
- Professor constructs rubrics representing level of achievement for each primary trait.

Primary Trait Analysis (PTA) is a way to take what we already do—record grades—and translate that process into an assessment device.\(^2\)

Advantages of using PTA as an assessment tool:
1. Instructors can use information gained through personal experience
2. Bringing to consciousness the mostly subconscious processes that go into recording grades
3. Looking at performance strengths and weaknesses in individual pieces of an assignment, course, or curriculum.

When professors create an assignment, they typically envision the ideal performance and those students who most closely match the ideal tend to receive the A’s; those who fall short of the standard receive a lesser grade. No one is perfect, which means that achievement of goals is usually uneven; students may excel in one area and not in another. Nevertheless, professors record a single, holistic grade that tends to sum the student’s performance and provide an overall judgment of merit.

Primary Trait Analysis does not yield a single, holistic grade. Instead, it reveals parts.

General notes about Primary Trait Analysis
- Assessment does not determine relative contributions of curriculum structure, teaching styles, learning styles, effort, student study habits, etc.
- Assessment makes learning visible to dispel assumptions, guesses, and rumors.
- PTA makes teaching conscious. It uses information already [unconsciously] available.
- PTA, and assessment in general, requires a faculty conversation about student learning.
- If the sample is large, multiple readings of the same papers are unnecessary.
- Primary traits may be identical to goals or learning objectives.

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\(^1\) From Doug Eder’s handout, “Primary Trait Analysis,” that he shared in a workshop sponsored by the UI Center for Teaching in June 2006. Used with permission from Doug Eder.