Scenario Decision Design Rubric

A diagnostic tool for evaluating scenario decision points

Apply this rubric to a single decision point in an existing scenario or use it as a design check before you build. Rate each dimension separately — a scenario can score well on one and poorly on another. This is a practitioner construct, not an empirically validated framework.

DIMENSION 1
Decision demand
Does the option text carry the answer, or does the user have to read the situation to decide?

DIMENSION 2
Situational fidelity
Does the user need to read the specific dynamics of this situation or just a general idea?

DIMENSION 3
Consequence authenticity
Does the situation respond or does a narrator explain what went right or wrong?

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1. Knowledge check dressed as a scenario

The option text carries the answer. A user can identify the correct option by matching it to a principle — without reading the situation, the relationships, or the stakes. The consequence confirms the rule.

DECISION DEMAND

Option contains the principle name or a value judgment. Correct answer is self-announcing.

SITUATIONAL FIDELITY

Surface realism only. Specific dynamics are irrelevant to the decision.

CONSEQUENCE AUTHENTICITY

A narrator delivers the verdict, or feedback explains why the option was right or wrong.

Diagnostic questions:

- Does the option text contain the name of the principle or a value judgment about the response?
- Could a user identify the correct option before reading the situation at all?

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2. Realistic surface, recognition task underneath

The scenario looks authentic: plausible dialogue, named characters, emotional tone. The options have no visible labels. But a user who knows the content can still rank them by type without inhabiting the situation.

DECISION DEMAND

Options describe strategy types. The correct one announces itself through contrast, not through situational reading.

SITUATIONAL FIDELITY

Some emotional stakes present, but the specific context is irrelevant to the decision.

CONSEQUENCE AUTHENTICITY

Mix of instructional feedback and mild situational response. The narrator may still confirm or deny the choice.

Diagnostic questions:

- Can a user rank the options by how "professional" they sound, without knowing anything specific about the characters?
- Would the same options work in a different scenario with a different character on the same topic?

3. Judgment required, but decision context is thin

Options are concrete actions rather than abstract principles. Consequences are intrinsic — the situation responds rather than a narrator explaining. A user with situational awareness can still rank the options by type without fully inhabiting the situation.

DECISION DEMAND	SITUATIONAL FIDELITY	CONSEQUENCE AUTHENTICITY
Options describe actions rather than strategies but remain abstracted from the specific moment.	Emotional stakes are present. Relationship and power context is thin or not stated at the decision point.	The situation responds — a character reacts — but some instructional overlay remains.

Diagnostic questions:

- Are the options concrete enough that the user can imagine what happens next before choosing?
- Would knowing more about the relationships and power dynamics in the room change which option feels right?

4. Situated judgment

Options are ambiguous without reading the specific people and dynamics. Consequences emerge from the situation — the user has to interpret what happened. The decision genuinely requires conditional knowledge: knowing when and how to act in this specific context.

DECISION DEMAND	SITUATIONAL FIDELITY	CONSEQUENCE AUTHENTICITY
Options signal a specific type of move but remain somewhat abstracted. Specificity lives in the consequence.	The setup is specific and emotionally grounded. Relationships are established, though may not be active at the decision point.	The situation delivers the verdict. No narrator explains the principle. The user reads the outcome the way they would read a real room.

Diagnostic questions:

- Does the right option depend on reading the specific dynamics, not just the general principle?
- Does the consequence require interpretation rather than just receiving confirmation?

5. Full conditional knowledge practice

Options are genuinely hard to rank without situational judgment. Relationship context, power dynamics, and competing pressures are all present. No option announces itself as correct.

DECISION DEMAND	SITUATIONAL FIDELITY	CONSEQUENCE AUTHENTICITY
Options are specific enough that the user judges whether this exact approach fits this exact room.	Relationship context, power dynamics, and competing pressures are all present and active at the moment of choice.	The situation delivers the verdict entirely. No instructional overlay. The user reads the outcome as in a real situation.

Diagnostic questions:

- Would a user who knows the principles still find it genuinely difficult to choose without reading the specific dynamics?
- Does the consequence emerge entirely from the situation, with no instructional overlay?

A NOTE ON THE DIMENSIONS

A scenario can score well on one dimension and poorly on another. Strong consequence design can partially compensate for abstracted options — but it cannot fully replace the cognitive work of a well-designed decision point. Aim to strengthen all three dimensions.

A NOTE ON THE LEVELS

Lower levels are not failures. A Level 1 knowledge check has a legitimate place in learning design. The problem is mistaking it for judgment practice or making it the only cognitive work in a scenario that claims to build a behavioral skill.

THEORETICAL GROUNDING

The recognition/judgment distinction draws on transfer-appropriate processing (Morris, Bransford & Franks, 1977) and conditional knowledge (Paris, Lipson & Wixon, 1983). Decision demand builds on Christy Tucker's distinction between categorization and action questions. Consequence authenticity builds on the intrinsic/instructional feedback distinction from Ruth Clark's Scenario-based e-Learning (2012). Situational fidelity is informed by the simulation literature's argument that surface realism does not require realistic cognitive operations. The three-dimension framing applied to individual decision points is the author's own construct.

SOURCES

Clark, R. C. (2012). Scenario-based e-Learning: Evidence-Based Guidelines for Online Workforce Learning. Pfeiffer.

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