Auditing Without Criteria

GUIDING QUESTION *Send somebody to audit your busiest process tomorrow morning. What document would they hold in their hand, and does it say what the work is supposed to produce, or only how it is supposed to be done?*

Property: _____ Completed by: _____ Date: _____

How to use this sheet: work through the four parts with the people who own the process. The left-hand text comes from the book; the empty columns are for what is true in your property.

1. Verification Pact: what the market says, what actually holds, and your property

What the market says	What actually holds	In our property
The property's procedures are the audit criteria.	Not by themselves. Procedures may be criteria where they express the organisation's requirements, but applicable ISO requirements and other accepted requirements may also be criteria.	
The standard itself is a sufficient set of criteria.	Not always. ISO 9001 is one source; the organisation's own QMS requirements are another, and an audit may need additional applicable criteria.	
Audit criteria are defined once, in the audit programme.	No. ISO 9001:2026 requires objectives, criteria and scope to be defined for each audit.	
A customer contract is a commercial document, not an audit criterion.	It can be an audit criterion where the contract creates a requirement the organisation has accepted for the audited process or service.	
An auditor may establish criteria where none exist.	Not as an auditor-created substitute for a missing organisational requirement. If a needed criterion has not been determined, that absence should be examined against the applicable QMS requirement.	
An audit that finds nothing is evidence of conformity.	No. It only means no supported nonconformity was found in the evidence sampled against the declared criteria; it does not prove universal conformity.	
Audit objectives and audit scope are the same thing.	No. Objectives state why the audit is performed; scope defines its boundaries and extent.	

2. Objective evidence: what an auditor would examine

Line	What to examine	Found? (Yes / Partly / No)	Notes and location
Document	The audit plan for a recent internal audit, examined for stated objectives, criteria and scope. Most hotel audit plans contain a date, a department and a checklist.		
Record	The findings produced by the last four internal audits, read against the criteria that were declared. A finding that cites no criterion is either an opinion or a criterion the auditor supplied.		
Read	A signed group contract or corporate rate agreement alongside the property's internal documentation for the same service. Where the contract promises more than any internal document mentions, the criteria live outside the system.		
Told	Ask the internal auditor what they would do if they found that nothing existed to audit against. Hesitation is not a competence problem; it means nobody has told them that reporting it is the answer.		

Line	What to examine	Found? (Yes / Partly / No)	Notes and location
Seen	The process under load, at the hour it is hardest. A process audited in a quiet week has been audited under conditions that were never the difficulty.		
Absence	There will be no finding anywhere in the programme addressed to top management rather than to a department. In most hotel audit programmes every finding travels sideways, which is itself the most informative fact in the file.		

3. Common mistakes: self-check

Mistake	Why it matters	Present here? (Yes / Partly / No)
Treating procedures as criteria.	A procedure describes how the work is done; a criterion describes what must be true for it to have been done. Many hotel failures that reach a guest occur with the procedure fully complied with.	
Supplying the missing requirement.	An auditor who writes the criterion has become its author, and the finding is contestable on the one ground that usually succeeds.	
Auditing against the property's own documents only.	It measures consistency with yourself, which is not conformity, and it will find very little.	
Concluding conformity because nothing was found.	An audit with no criteria cannot conclude anything, and recording it as satisfactory puts the absence on the record as a positive result.	
Overlooking contracts and public claims.	They are requirements the property has accepted, they are written down, and they are available without anybody's permission.	
Sending the finding sideways.	The absence of criteria is not a departmental failure; it belongs to whoever determines the processes and their criteria.	
Writing criteria for everything.	Eleven sentences that are used beat two hundred that are filed, and the second outcome discredits the first attempt for years.	
Auditing in the quiet week.	A process examined when it is easy has been examined under conditions that were never the problem.	

4. Action plan

Position from the book / gap found	Action in our property	Owner	Deadline
The criteria are established before the audit, not discovered during it.			
Contracts are criteria.			
Public claims are criteria.			
The absence of criteria is a finding, and it goes upward.			
The objective is stated before the scope.			

In brief

An audit is a comparison between what is required and what is happening, and the standard requires the objectives, the criteria and the scope to be defined for each audit rather than once for the programme. The

criteria come from the standard, from what the property has itself determined, and from what it has undertaken to others, and that last source, the contracts and the public claims, is the one available to an internal auditor immediately and the one nobody thinks to use.

Source: The Helm and the Lens, Volume 2b: The Lens, subchapter 3.1. This sheet does not reproduce the text of any standard; work with your own copy of ISO 9001:2026 from an authorised source.