

## Designing & Using Rubrics

A rubric serves two purposes in responding to student writing: it explicitly communicates performance expectations and criteria for success to your students as well as providing everyone with a shared language for measuring success on a given assignment. Well-developed rubrics allow you to avoid writing out the same comments over and over on multiple students' work while allowing you to mark each students' success in relationship to the assignment criteria quickly and then tailoring additional written comments to individual needs.

There are two broad categories of rubric: analytic and holistic, as well as hybrid forms of the two. You can find examples of both kinds of rubrics designed for a variety of assignments, including common hybrid forms (grid rubric, numeric rubric, etc.), in our supplements:

- **Sample Analytic Rubric**
- **Sample Holistic Rubric**
- **Sample Grid Rubric**
- **Sample Numeric Rubric**
- **Sample Hybrid Rubric**
- **Sample Essay Grading Rubric**

In this supplement you will find tips for:

- Using rubrics to develop your assignment
- Designing rubrics
- Using rubrics to develop students' self-assessment skills
- Grading with rubrics

**Analytic Rubrics:** An analytic rubric (often a grid rubric or numeric rubric) divides student work into component parts—such as tasks that make up the whole, or individual criterion such as ideas, organization, voice, mechanics, etc.—with descriptions of what high-, mid-, and low-level quality work looks like for each component.

This type of rubric often takes the form of a table or grid, with the tasks/criterion being judged in the left column, and assessment numbers or language appearing in the top row (see **“Sample Analytic Rubric”** and **“Sample Grid Rubric”**). It can, however, take the form of a list of quality indicators (letter grades; numbers; descriptors such as high, developing, low, etc.) with textual descriptions for each indicator, or some other hybrid form suited to your needs (See **“Sample Hybrid Rubric”**).

**Holistic Rubrics Defined:** A holistic rubric provides guidelines for various levels of achievement in the work *overall*, rather than by categories, tasks, or component parts (see **“Sample Holistic Rubric”** and **“Sample Numeric Rubric”** supplements). A holistic rubric is often structured as a comment form, with sentence- or paragraph-length descriptions of different levels of competencies, rather than a table. Like an analytic rubric, a holistic rubric may or may not associate categories with points, and it may or may not weight categories.

## Using Rubrics to Develop Your Assignments

It can be useful to provide a rubric to your students when you give them the assignment prompt so that they understand your expectations as they begin their writing. Creating a rubric when you create your prompt can also help you design your assignments more effectively, because the language on the rubric can (and should!) correspond directly to the language of the assignment's goals and expectations.

### Designing Rubrics

In order to be effective, a rubric must be able to accurately reflect the expectations of the assignment and fit in with the larger context of the course, particularly the learning goals.

When you create a rubric, you should be able to answer the following questions:

- What will distinguish the best papers from the least effective?
- What does the writing task deem important enough for commentary? (That is, what skills is this task meant to teach?)
- What is the paper supposed to accomplish, and what is the process that the writer should go through to accomplish those goals?
- How will I know if they have learned what the task calls for them to learn?

If your rubrics use numbers in a scale (i.e., 1-6, which cannot be associated neatly with a four-point grading scale) and/or descriptive gradations, rather than letter grades, you can help students move away from their typical associations with and generalizations about letter grades and instead focus on how to write more effectively.

An analytic rubric may associate different levels of achievement with different points on a scale, which often are weighted so that the most important components are worth more than less important components.

- For instance, you may value something like “clarity of thought” over “mechanical precision” for an assignment, and thus the “clarity of thought” category would be worth more points on that rubric.
- Points, numbers on a scale, or category weighting can be indicated in a grid or numeric rubric. (See “**Sample Grid Rubric**” and “**Sample Numeric Rubric**” for examples.)

Many analytical rubrics, however, don't use a point system at all. In this case, instructors typically indicate what quality of work a student's writing meets for each component and then make a judgment call on what the student's overall success level is. (See “**Sample Analytic Rubric**”)

Some common descriptive alternatives to numbers or letter grades are listed below, though you might find it useful to adopt language that's meaningful in your subject area or discipline:

- Basic, Developing, Accomplished, Exemplary
- Poor, Below Average, Average, Above Average, Excellent
- Below Expectations, Basic, Proficient, Outstanding
- Unsatisfactory, Basic, Competent, Distinguished
- Developing, Acceptable, Target
- Does Not Meet Expectations, Meets Expectations, Exceeds Expectations

Also, it's a good idea to avoid using only negative language for the criteria/descriptions associated with less strong numbers or gradations, so that students understand them not simply as "lost points" but as things to work on.

For example, a description of a thesis that would qualify as "below average" (rather than "accomplished") might look like this:

"Thesis is implied or absent, or is stated but not connected to the rest of the essay; thesis may be agreeing or disagreeing with the text's argument rather than making a case for how the author constructs their argument."

rather than this:

"Essay lacks a thesis; thesis fails to make a case for how the author constructs their argument."

Like an analytical rubric, a holistic rubric may or may not associate categories with points, and it may or may not weight categories. (See "[Sample Holistic Rubric](#)" and "[Sample Hybrid Rubric](#)")

## **Using Rubrics to Develop Students' Self-Assessment Abilities**

It can also be quite powerful to involve the class in development of the rubric, so that you share the responsibility for creating clear expectations with your students, helping them become more invested in the process while making your commitments and processes transparent. If you want to establish, first, how you will make use of rubrics in the class, consider creating rubrics in advance for earlier assignments. Then you can move to creating them in collaboration with the class on later assignments, once students have a sense of how rubrics work.

It's also useful for students to respond to each other's work (and/or even grade early drafts!) by applying the rubric, which holds them responsible for providing substantive feedback and helps them understand their own work through considering others'.

## Grading with Rubrics

Both analytic and holistic rubrics can help you save time while improving the consistency and clarity of your feedback.

Whatever type of rubric you choose, it's most helpful to students if you use the rubric itself to indicate where their work falls on the scale, whether by printing out and marking it physically or by highlighting appropriate sections in an electronic version. It's also best to address students directly with an accompanying end note or head note that connects the assessment on the rubric to specific examples in their work and offers advice for future writing. These need not be lengthy comments, especially if your rubric is detailed, but they are crucial in helping students understand specifically what needs improvement. For an example of what this might look like, see the comments to the student in "**Sample Hybrid Rubric.**"

### Further Reading

Ambrose, Susan, et al. *How Learning Works: 7 Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2010.

Bean, John C. "Coaching the Writing Process and Handling the Paper Load." *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001.

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Nilson, Linda B. "Grading Summative Assessments." *Teaching at its Best: A Research-Based Resource for College Instructors*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010.

Parkes, Kelly A. and Sara Kajder. "Eliciting and Assessing Reflective Practice: A Case Study in Web 2.0 Technologies." *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* 22.2 (2010): 218-228.

White, Edward M. "Writing Assignments and Essay Topics." *Assigning, Responding, Evaluating: A Writing Teacher's Guide*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2007 (1-24).

There are many, many free tools available online to help you design your rubrics. informEd by Open Colleges has a particularly robust guide (<http://www.opencolleges.edu.au/informed/teacher-resources/guide-to-scoring-rubrics/>), and assessmentfocus.com (<http://www.assessmentfocus.com/rubrics-rubric-makers.php>) provides a helpful annotated list of a variety of tools.

