

How to **Create and Use** **RUBRICS** for FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT and GRADING

Preface	v
Acknowledgments	vii
Part I: All Kinds of Rubrics	
1 What Are Rubrics and Why Are They Important?	3
2 Common Misconceptions About Rubrics.....	15
3 Writing or Selecting Effective Rubrics	23
4 General Rubrics for Fundamental Skills.....	40
5 Task-Specific Rubrics and Scoring Schemes for Special Purposes	56
6 Proficiency-Based Rubrics for Standards-Based Grading	64
7 Checklists and Rating Scales: Not Rubrics, but in the Family	76
8 More Examples	82
Part II: How to Use Rubrics	
9 Rubrics and Formative Assessment: Sharing Learning Targets with Students.....	93
10 Rubrics and Formative Assessment: Feedback and Student Self-Assessment	102
11 How to Use Rubrics for Grading	112
Afterword	126
Appendix A: Six-Point 6+1 Trait Writing Rubrics, Grades 3–12	128
Appendix B: Illustrated Six-Point 6+1 Trait Writing Rubrics, Grades K–2	142
References	154
Index	156
About the Author	159

Preface

The purpose of this book, as the title suggests, is to help you use rubrics in the classroom. To do that, two criteria must be met. First, the rubrics themselves must be well designed. Second, the rubrics should be used for learning as well as for grading.

Many of you are already familiar with rubrics, and you will read this book through the lens of what you already know. For some, the book will be an affirmation of your current understanding of rubrics and provide (I hope) some additional suggestions and examples. But for others, the book may challenge your currently held views and practices regarding rubrics and call for some change.

So I wrote this book with some apprehension. It's always a challenge to "come in in the middle" of something. Teachers do that all the time, however. I ask all of you to keep an open mind and to constantly ask yourself, "What do I think about this?" To that end, I have included self-reflection questions along the way. I encourage you to think about them, perhaps keeping a journal of these reflections so you can review and consolidate your own learning at the end.

In some ways, this book is two books in one, and for that reason it is divided into Part I and Part II. Part I is about rubrics themselves: what they are, how to write them, and some examples of different kinds of rubrics. Part II is about how to use rubrics in your teaching.

The big ideas in Part I concern the two must-have aspects of rubrics. First, rubrics must have clear and appropriate criteria about the learning students will be demonstrating (not about the task). Second, rubrics must have clear descriptions of performance over a continuum of quality. If the rubrics are analytic, each criterion will have separate descriptions of performance. If the rubrics are holistic, the descriptions of performance for each level will consider all the criteria simultaneously.

The big idea in Part II is that rubrics should assist with learning as well as assess it. The strategies in Part II are grouped according to purpose: sharing learning targets with students, formative assessment in terms of feedback and student self-evaluation, and grading. Actually, sharing learning targets with students is the foundational formative assessment strategy. Without clear learning targets, from the students' point of view there is nothing to assess.

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1

What Are Rubrics and Why Are They Important?

The word *rubric* comes from the Latin word for *red*. The online Merriam-Webster dictionary lists the first meaning of *rubric* as “an authoritative rule” and the fourth meaning as “a guide listing specific criteria for grading or scoring academic papers, projects, or tests.” How did the name for a color come to mean a rule or guide? At least as far back as the Middle Ages, the rules for the conduct of liturgical services—as opposed to the actual spoken words of the liturgy—were often printed in red, so the rules were “the red things” on the page.

In this book, I will show that rubrics for classroom use are both *more* and *less* than the dictionary definition suggests. They are more because rubrics are good for much more than just grading or scoring. They are less because not just any set of rules or guides for student work are rubrics. This first chapter lays out some basic concepts about rubrics. Chapter 2 illustrates common misconceptions about rubrics, and Chapter 3 describes how to write or select effective rubrics.



SELF-REFLECTION

What is your current view of rubrics? Write down what you know about them and what experiences you have had using them. Save this reflection to compare with a similar reflection after you have read this book.

What is a rubric?

A rubric is a coherent set of criteria for students' work that includes descriptions of levels of performance quality on the criteria. Sounds simple enough, right? Unfortunately, this definition of *rubric* is rarely demonstrated in practice. The Internet, for example, offers many rubrics that do not, in fact, describe performance. I think I know why that might be and will explain that in Chapter 2, but for now let's start with the positive. It should be clear from the definition that rubrics have two major aspects: *coherent sets of criteria* and *descriptions of levels of performance* for these criteria.

The genius of rubrics is that they are descriptive and not evaluative. Of course, rubrics can be used to evaluate, but the operating principle is you match the performance to the description rather than “judge” it. Thus rubrics are as good or bad as the criteria selected and the descriptions of the levels of performance under each. Effective rubrics have appropriate criteria and well-written descriptions of performance.

What is the purpose of rubrics?

Like any other evaluation tool, rubrics are useful for certain purposes and not for others. *The main purpose of rubrics is to assess performances.* For some performances, you observe the student in the process of doing something, like using an electric drill or discussing an issue. For other performances, you observe the product that is the result of the student's work, like a finished bookshelf or a written report. Figure 1.1 lists some common kinds of school performances that can be assessed with rubrics. This list by no means covers every possible school performance. It is just meant to help you think of the types of performances you might assess with rubrics.

This list is not meant to suggest what your students *should* perform. State standards, curriculum goals, and instructional goals and objectives are the sources for what types of performances your students should be able to do. When the intended learning outcomes are best indicated by performances—things students would do, make, say, or write—then rubrics are the best way to assess them. Notice that the performances themselves are not learning outcomes. They are *indicators* of learning outcomes. Except in unusual cases, any one performance is just a sample of all the possible performances that would indicate an intended learning outcome. Chapters 2 and 3 cover this point in greater detail. For now, know that the purpose of the list in Figure 1.1 is to describe some of these performances, so you can recognize them as performances and as

suitable for using rubrics, when they are appropriate indicators of your goals for student learning.

About the only kinds of schoolwork that do not function well with rubrics are questions with right or wrong answers. Test items or oral questions in class that have one clear correct answer are best assessed as right or wrong. However, even test items that have degrees of quality of performance, where you want to observe how appropriately, how completely, or how well a question was answered, can be assessed with rubrics.

Rubrics give structure to observations. Matching your observations of a student's work to the descriptions in the rubric averts the rush to judgment that can occur in classroom evaluation situations. Instead of *judging* the performance, the rubric *describes* the performance. The resulting judgment of quality based on a rubric therefore also contains within it a description of performance that can be used for feedback and teaching. This is different from a judgment of quality from a score or a grade arrived at without a rubric. Judgments without descriptions stop the action in a classroom.

Figure 1.1 Types of Performances That Can Be Assessed with Rubrics

Type of Performance	Examples
<p>Processes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Physical skills • Use of equipment • Oral communication • Work habits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Playing a musical instrument • Doing a forward roll • Preparing a slide for the microscope • Making a speech to the class • Reading aloud • Conversing in a foreign language • Working independently
<p>Products</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Constructed objects • Written essays, themes, reports, term papers • Other academic products that demonstrate understanding of concepts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wooden bookshelf • Set of welds • Handmade apron • Watercolor painting • Laboratory report • Term paper on theatrical conventions in Shakespeare's day • Written analysis of the effects of the Marshall Plan • Model or diagram of a structure (atom, flower, planetary system, etc.) • Concept map

Performance levels. The teacher's original intent was to add up the points and take a percentage grade, a common approach used in her school. For this intention, weighting the title, order, and overall appearance criteria 4 points instead of 6 made sense. For reasons that are discussed more thoroughly in Chapter 10, using points and percentages for grading with rubrics is not recommended. Doing so removes some of the observation and judgment of work that is a strength of rubrics, and often the results do not match actual student performance and achievement. The revised rubrics use proficiency-level descriptions (Advanced, Proficient, Nearing Proficient, and Novice) instead of points. Then the descriptions can be written to those levels. Notice that one of the criteria, Order of Life-Cycle Stages, does not have an Advanced level. Knowing the order of an organism's life-cycle stages is a characteristic of proficiency. Any advanced understanding about the life cycle would be expressed in the descriptions and illustrations.

Descriptions of performance at each level. Several "wordsmithing" revisions have been made in the descriptions of performance at each level from Figure 3.4 to Figure 3.5. First, numerical counts ("one stage," "one detail") are replaced with substantive judgments. This revision actually makes the assessment more accurate, not less accurate, as you might think. Different animals have different life cycles, and some stages and details are more important than others. The revised descriptions require figuring out how clearly the students' descriptions show their understanding of the research they have done, rather than the number of facts they copied. This, in turn, will make for a more accurate assessment of students' understandings of animal life cycles. And it will discourage students from copying facts instead of interpreting what they learned by reading the facts.



SELF-REFLECTION

Do you sometimes use rubrics that are more about assignment directions than evidence of learning? If you do, try to revise your rubrics in a similar manner to the way we revised the Life-Cycle Project rubric. Even better, work with a colleague, so you can discuss the issues raised in this chapter as you revise.

Second, there is space for describing performance at an Advanced level—that is, beyond that necessary for simply doing what was required. Because students have the rubrics ahead of time, they know that they can include extra-detailed, more complex descriptions if they are able. The first draft of the rubric provided no reason for students to do anything above or beyond listing stages in their chosen animal's life cycle, copying two facts about each stage, and using some sort

level,” “Solves problems at a proficient level,” and so on, are just rating scales dolled up into sentences. These sentences do not contain any descriptive information about performance that will move learning forward.

Three, quality ratings often lure teachers into using task-based criteria because quality ratings are easy to apply to such criteria. For example, for a written report, task-based criteria might be Introduction, Text, Illustrations, and References. You just judge the quality—in effect, assign a grade—to each part of the task. In fact, quality rating scales used with schoolwork amount to the same thing as assigning grades without comments. Rubrics began to be popular in the 1980s as an antidote to this very thing. As educators began to see performance assessment as a solution to the problem of too much minimum-competency testing, rubrics became the solution to the problem of the “just a number” results of such tests. To co-opt rubrics into quality rating scales does violence, in my mind, to the whole point and purpose of using rubrics in the first place.



SELF-REFLECTION

Can you identify any checklists or rating scales you use that you want to revise to become rubrics? Can you identify any rubrics you use that might be more effective if revised into checklists (for example, to lay out the requirements for an assignment)? How would you proceed with these revisions?

Summing up

Why include a chapter on checklists and rating scales in a book about rubrics? I hope that after reading the chapter several reasons are clear. First, distinguishing checklists and rating scales from rubrics should make the characteristics of rubrics clearer. Rating scales often masquerade as rubrics, and I hope you can identify those and avoid them or revise them. Second, checklists and frequency rating scales have some important uses, on their own or in conjunction with rubrics. Checklists are great for helping students see whether they have followed directions, included all required elements of an assignment, adhered to format requirements, and the like. Frequency rating scales are good for assessing certain kinds of performance skills and for assessing behavior, work habits, and other learning skills. Finally, this chapter identified and defined quality rating scales, which are often mistaken for rubrics. Be on the lookout for those and stamp out their use whenever possible. They are Trojan horses that will allow old-fashioned grading judgments to slip in where rubrics were intended.

Figure 10.1 Example of Charting Progress with Rubrics**WRITING AN EXPLANATION**

<p>5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I write what I did and why I did it. • I explain each step of my work. • I use math words and strategy names. • I write the answer in a complete sentence at the end of my explanation. 						
<p>4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I write what I did and a little about why I did it. • I explain most of my work. 						
<p>3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I write a little about what I did or why I did it, but not both. • I explain some of my work. 						
<p>2</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I write something that doesn't make sense. • I write an unclear answer. 						
<p>1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I don't write anything to explain how I solved the problem. 						
	Oct. 7 Problem set #1	Oct. 14 Problem set #2	Oct. 21 Problem set #3	Oct. 28 Problem set #4	Nov. 4 Problem set #5	Nov. 11 Problem set #6

Note: This example uses the Math Problem-Solving Rubric shown in Figure 4.1.

Appendix A: Six-Point 6+1 Trait Writing Rubrics, Grades 3–12

6-POINT WRITER'S RUBRIC

CONVENTIONS

NOT PROFICIENT			
	1 Beginning	2 Emerging	3 Developing
	Errors in conventions are the norm and repeatedly distract reader, making text unreadable	Many errors of various types of conventions are scattered throughout text	Author continues to stumble in conventions even on simple tasks and almost always on anything trickier
A	Spelling errors are frequent, even on common words	Spelling is phonetic with many errors	Spelling on simple words is incorrect, although reader can understand
B	Punctuation is often missing or incorrect	Simple end (. ? !) punctuation is correct, internal (, ' ; — : . . .) punctuation is usually wrong or missing	Punctuation is inconsistent
C	Capitalization is random, inconsistent, and sometimes nonexistent	Only the easiest capitalization rules are correctly applied	Capitalization is applied inconsistently except for proper nouns and sentence beginnings
D	Errors in grammar/usage are frequent and noticeable, making writing incomprehensible	Serious grammar/usage problems of every kind make comprehension difficult	Inappropriate grammar/usage results from heavy reliance on conversational oral language; meaning is confusing
E	Extensive editing (on virtually every line) is required to polish text for publication; reader must read once to decode, then again for meaning	There is still a lot of editing required for publication; meaning is uncertain	Too much editing is still needed to publish, although piece begins to communicate meaning
<p>Key question: How much editing would have to be done to be ready to share with an outside source? (Note: For the trait of conventions, grade level matters. Expectations should be based on grade level and include only skills that have been taught. Expectations for secondary students are obviously much higher than those of the elementary grade levels.)</p>			