

DEVELOPING GOOD RUBRICS FOR WRITING

Faculty Resource Series

Grading writing is hard. When reading through a series of 20+ writing samples, it is not hard to find ourselves developing “pet peeves” about things students mess up, and docking grades accordingly. Rubrics are a great way to a) ensure we provide fair grades, b) focus our grading on key learning outcomes for our courses, and c) ensure students know what is expected of them and are set up to succeed. This guide provides strategies for creating rubrics that help students understand expectations, help you to grade in accordance with your course learning outcomes, and structure feedback in a way that helps students to learn.

How a rubric can help when grading writing

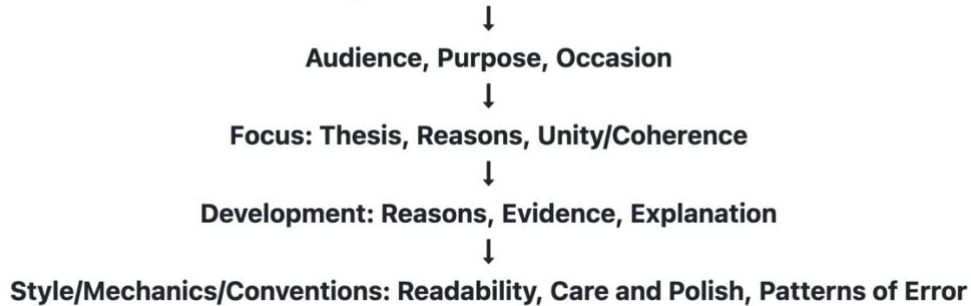
Writing grades can feel subjective to many students: some feel that writing assignments are simply an exercise in learning what the teacher wants. However, good writing assignments are designed as a “test” of sorts, evaluating students on how well they are able to meet the requirements and constraints of a given communication task that is integral to a discipline; for example, a student may be evaluated on how well they are able to describe a computing process to a user of a system, which involves careful description of computing processes and tasks that can be evaluated with some level of objectivity. A good rubric can shape grading to the important requirements of a task, and along the way, make these constraints clear to students so that they know how to meet them.

How to create a good writing rubric

Good writing makes it easy for a reader to comprehend what the writer wants to tell them. A rubric should evaluate how well that is done. Below are some guidelines and examples for creating rubrics that help you provide fair grades and feedback that help students to learn, constrain your grading appropriately, and make sure those constraints are clear to students as part of the assignment.

Decide what to grade on. There are many different criteria which you may grade on. Consider using this [hierarchy of writing concerns](#) for a list of criterion to grade on, privileging writing concerns which are near the top of the hierarchy as being worth more points than those lower down:

Hierarchy of Rhetorical Concerns



As you list criteria, be sure to specify how it will look in the particular assignment. That is, a paper “meeting the needs of an audience” will look different for a technical report than a historical narrative.

Clarify each criterion in regards to levels of success. For each criterion, distinguish at least 3 levels of success. For example, in regards to evaluating a student’s source usage to back up points, you may grade on a scale of 0-3, where 0 is “did not use sources at all as evidence” and 3 is “used quotes or paraphrases from peer-reviewed sources as evidence for controversial claims”.

Weight criteria. Assign weights to criteria in proportion to their importance to the purpose and task of the assignment. Typically, that means that criteria which are higher on the hierarchy of rhetorical concerns will be worth more. Try to avoid taking off substantial points for low-level errors like comma misuse because, though it may interfere with the readability of the text, it is unlikely to be critical to its success.

Example communication rubrics

Theoretically, there are several different types of rubrics. Two of the main varieties are analytic and holistic rubrics: analytic rubrics provide a grid of criteria that writing must meet, while holistic rubrics have a single scale that consider how all criteria interact together for a larger effect.

Either may be useful, depending upon the goals of your course and assignment: analytic rubrics are especially helpful for more complicated and higher-stakes assignments like project reports or research papers because they provide more detail, while holistic rubrics may be helpful for simpler or lower-stakes assignments like journal entries or reflections. If a student is receiving low marks on a holistic assessment, they may benefit from more explicit feedback like an analytic rubric prompts.

When filling in a rubric, be sure to mark which box a student checks, as well as provide some comments on the degree to which they meet (or do not meet) each criteria.

Analytic rubric

Category	Excellent (100%)	Adequate (50%)	Needs improvement (0%)	Points possible
Argument	Paper provides an introduction which provides important background and articulates the goal of the project.	Paper provides an introduction which briefly describes background and goals, but leaves some unanswered questions.	Paper does not provide an introduction or important background information.	20
	Paper includes a literature review that contextualizes the paper's gap and argument.	Paper roughly summarizes a variety of papers in a "list" format, but without using them to contextualize their own argument via a synthesis.	Paper barely (or does not) synthesize or list relevant literature to the topic.	15
	Paper includes a clear, focused research question and thesis.	Paper includes a vague, or broad research question or thesis.	Paper's thesis or research question is unclear or very vague.	20
	Paper is organized clearly to help the author develop their argument.	Paper has some organization, but it is unclear and does not cohesively support a larger point.	Paper has no obvious organization.	20
Design & Mechanics	Paper includes a title page with a focused title, date, and author's name.	Paper includes a broad title.	Paper has no title, name, or date.	5
	Paper is 5-7 pages, single-spaced, with 12 pt Times New Roman font and is designed professionally.	Paper is designed in a casual format, and uses non-standard fonts.	Paper implements completely inappropriate (i.e., non-academic or formal) fonts and design choices.	5
	Paper is formatted consistently per MLA, APA, or IEEE guidelines.	Paper has some inconsistencies or errors in stylistic and formatting guidelines.	Paper has no clear choice of formatting or citation guidelines.	5
Process	Paper has been revised using the feedback provided at all stages of the writing process.	Paper has only integrated minimal feedback.	Paper has not integrated any feedback from peers or instructors.	10
Total				100

Holistic rubric

Criterion	Score
This response contains a well-developed claim with evidence that supports an argument.	5
This response is a simple or incomplete essay with a basic or standard argument structure.	3
This response provides evidence of an attempt, but contains a weak argument with minimal evidence.	1