

Designing Rubrics and Grading Standards

Some teachers use rubrics; others carry them around in their heads. Many teachers would agree that it is a helpful exercise to, at least once, articulate and organize the standards by which you will grade a particular kind of paper. Many students perceive rubrics as more objective than written comments, and rubrics can help students decode the types of responses and evaluations they receive from instructors.

Designing and Implementing Rubrics

Designing a Rubric

Good rubric design is intimately connected with quality course and assignment design. Your rubric can (and probably should!) echo the language of your assignment and should be aligned with the demands and student learning goals of the individual assignment and class context.

Rubrics can be broken down into discrete elements (title page, correct citations, an introduction that includes a thesis statement) and/or into modes and levels of thinking (coherence, analysis, the sophistication of a counter-argument). They should remain flexible enough to allow for student creativity, not create a formulaic pattern that all students must follow.

Rubrics can rate the student's fulfillment of your various criteria either numerically (ex., a scale from 6 to 1) or quantitatively (ex., awarding points for each criterion) or qualitatively (ex., a range from "excellent" to "needs work").

Teaching with Rubrics

Consider handing out your rubric with the assignment—so the students have a clear idea of how their work will be evaluated from the beginning.

Spend class time instructing students about the learning goals and skills required for each assignment, and allow students to ask questions about the rubric.

Encourage students to use rubrics as guides for both peer and self-assessment. With guidance from the instructor, peer and self-assessments can improve student learning and save time for you. For example, a student can assign a grade to her own essay using the rubric; your comments can then briefly address why you agree or disagree with her self-assessment.

Grading with Rubrics

As you grade, keep your rubric in front of you to remind you of your expectations, help you use your grading time efficiently, and keep you consistent in your grading.

When evaluated using a rubric, most papers show a mixture of hits and misses: the student is not confronted with a single grade or evaluation, but an analysis of the paper's various successes and failures. This makes the rubric a helpful teaching tool for future papers, because students can clearly see where to focus their efforts for the next assignment.

Finally, a formal rubric can be combined with a more holistic explanation of your larger grading standards (see below).

Evaluating L2 writers' use of language using rubrics

Some L2 writers (writers who use English as their second language) may struggle to produce papers that conform precisely to expectations about language use and punctuation. Although it is not realistic to expect that such students will be able to produce a "perfect" paper, it is still possible to assign an equitable "grammar" or "language use" grade to such students. Here is a good strategy for doing so:

1. Refrain from commenting on language use until students have read your comments on content, revised for content, and been assigned a content grade.
2. Using a clean copy of the student's paper, call attention to those errors that the student is likely to be able to correct without assistance. The documents linked at <http://www.lsa.umich.edu/sweetland/instructors/teachingmultilinguallearners> will help you determine which errors students are likely to be able to correct on their own.
3. Give the student time to correct those errors that you have noted. Forty-eight hours should be sufficient, but you may consider allowing the student to work on the corrections over a weekend.
4. Base the student's "grammar" or "language use" grade on the number of errors corrected and/or the apparent effort that went into the correction process.

A Caution about Rubrics

Don't forget the importance of combining a rubric with head or end comments of your own (see our handout on formulating written comments). Whether the paper did or did not meet the bulk of your expectations, students appreciate evidence that you have also engaged with their work (and, by proxy, with them) on a level beyond the mere assignment of a grade