

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.

Writing and Implementing Rubrics

Writing

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

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

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 can 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).

A Caution about Rubrics

Don’t forget the importance of combining a rubric with 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.