

PAIDEIA

TEACHING & LEARNING AT MOUNT ALLISON UNIVERSITY
THE NEWSLETTER OF THE PURDY CRAWFORD TEACHING CENTRE



RUBRICS

Doctor, Doctor, give me the news . . . I got a bad case of grading blues!

As many of you may already know, I am in my second term as Chair of the Association of Atlantic Universities' Coordinating Committee on Faculty Development. That Committee, comprised of representatives from every university in the region, is probably best known for administering the AAU Distinguished Teaching and Educational Leadership Awards and for organizing the annual Atlantic Teaching Showcase (of course, we do many other, less visible things, too!).

At a recent meeting, we launched a new initiative: a syndicated *Dear Doctor Mentor* column—a kind of pedagogical Agony Aunt. No questions here about the pangs of unrequited love or whether to wear white after Labour Day! Instead, faculty from the region are invited to send a teaching question to their Committee representative, who will then forward it to the rest of the syndicate for their learned responses.

I am delighted, therefore, to present the first *Dear Doctor Mentor* column which contains three responses on the value of using rubrics when grading students' work.

Dear Doctor Mentor:

I hear so much about rubrics these days; it seems that half the people in my department are using them to grade essays—but I remain resolutely unconvinced!!

It strikes me that there's so much work involved in creating a rubric (especially since I want to do it right) but I'll still have to write developmental comments on my students' work. Where's the time-saving in that? Am I missing something about the benefit of rubrics?

Prof. B. C. Rollers, Scottish Studies



The Purdy Crawford Teaching Centre
Mount Allison University
<http://www.mta.ca/pctc>

Dear Professor Rollers,

Rubrics have many benefits. Though you may not necessarily *save* time in marking, you will likely use your marking time more wisely and productively with rubrics, as Figure One suggests.

What is a Rubric?

- “An assessment tool with a descriptive scoring scale that lists the criteria or ‘what counts’ for a piece of work.” (Andrade, 1997)
- “Templates in which professors place the expectations they have at the back of their minds anyway.” (Stevens & Levi, 2005).

Figure One: What is a Rubric?

Creating a good rubric is hard work: you must be very clear about the learning outcomes (criteria) you want the student assignment to demonstrate, you must write descriptive comments for various levels or scales of achievement for each criterion, and you must decide on the appropriate weighting for each criterion. Though this takes upfront time, it does help you to clarify your expectations and communicate them clearly to the students. This in turn increases the likelihood that they will follow the instructions for the assignment, and they may even do better since you have demystified the process a little and told them what they must do to succeed. To increase this benefit, professors may use part of a class to describe the rubric and its composition.

Rubrics comprise three sections: scale, criteria, and definitions or descriptors. (See Figure Two.)

Scale—Describes how well the task has been

performed. There’s no set rule for number of levels, but many prefer to start with three and add later if necessary. You can begin your scale at the highest or lowest level of performance: e.g., *Unsatisfactory, Good, Excellent* or *Excellent, Satisfactory, Unacceptable*. Just make sure that there is enough differentiation between levels—this is especially important should you decide to use a 5-level scale. For more ideas on scales, see Figure Three.

Criteria—Refers to the essential components or learning outcomes of the assignment. Break the assignment down into its essential component skills: a task analysis

Definitions and Descriptors—Clarify and explain to the students their level of performance in each dimension.

You can create the descriptors for each of the performance levels by thinking about the frequent comments you write on essays.

Sample 3-level Rubric—Frame Only
Don't fret about the content

Criteria	Levels of Performance		
	Novice	Acceptable	Accomplished
Number of Sources	1-4	5-9	10-12
Historical Accuracy	Lots of historical inaccuracies	Few inaccuracies	No apparent inaccuracies
Organization	Can not tell from which source information came	Can tell with difficulty where information came from	Can easily tell which sources info was drawn from
Bibliography	Bibliography contains very little information	Bibliography contains most relevant information	All relevant information is included

Figure Two: 3-Level Rubric

Once they're on the rubric, you don't have to write the same comments time and time again on individual papers—instead, you can just circle the appropriate descriptors on the rubric (or bold them if you are marking online).

You may, of course, add an open-ended section to your rubric such as “Comments” in which



you provide individual feedback to each student.

If you want to test rubrics without investing too much time initially, consider one that describes only an *excellent* performance. You can circle the areas which the students matched and write comments for the areas that still need work. Use this “holistic rubric” as the starting point to develop a 3-level rubric once you see the types of comments you are repeating.

Sample Scales

based on Stevens & Levi (2005)

- Emerging, Developing, Achieving
- Novice, Proficient, Distinguished
- No evidence, Partial evidence, Complete evidence
- Exemplary, Acceptable, Unacceptable
- Sophisticated, Competent, Simplistic
- High, Middle, Beginning

Figure Three: Sample Scales

There is little more frustrating for professors than writing copious comments on students' papers (perhaps in blood at 3 am!) and then discovering that they were not heeded or, worse still, not read. Again, a rubric helps you to make the most of your marking time by allowing you to circle the more 'routine' comments while focusing on writing developmental comments tailored to each student's specific needs. This may make marking less fatiguing for you.

Rubrics increase consistency in grading—and the *perception* of consistency, especially in courses where there are multiple markers. They also encourage students to see that the marking has been done fairly and transparently (again a potential time-saver during office hours with fewer students challenging grades).

Finally, try asking your students to help construct the rubric for a given assignment or task; this is especially good for work that involves peer review, such as in-class presentations. As they construct the assessment rubric, students see what they must do to succeed. For more benefits, see Figure Four.

Benefits of Rubrics

- Communicate in concrete, measurable, and observable terms what we value
- Provide a means to clarify and articulate excellent performance
- Encourage and guide performance by providing clear expectations and benchmarks
- Increase the perception of objectivity, consistency, and fairness in assessment
- Students can participate in construction
- Guide students in peer review

Figure Four: Benefits of Rubrics

There are some excellent books on rubrics, Dr. Rollers. I strongly recommend *Introduction to Rubrics* by Stevens and Levi (Stylus/AAHE). It shows you how to build a rubric step-by-step and contains many examples.

So, rubrics as time-savers . . . in some respects perhaps. But, as I hope I have convinced you, saving time is not the main goal of rubrics.

Eileen Herteis, PCTC
Mount Allison University

Useful Resources

Andrade, H. G. (1997). *Understanding rubrics. Educational Leadership, 54(4).*
<http://learnweb.harvard.edu/alps/thinking/docs/rubricar.htm>

Herteis, E. & Simmons, N. (2010). *The Portfolio Process.* STLHE Green Guide No. 10.

Stevens, D. D. & Levi, A. J. (2005). *Introduction to Rubrics.* Sterling, VA: Stylus Press.



Dear Dr. Rollers,

With most worthwhile endeavours, time invested up-front usually offers the prospect of dividends for the longer haul. Developing a rubric to help grade essays will certainly take some time, and probably several iterations, to have the desired effect.

It is useful to have a checklist in the form of the rubric to assign the grade. It provides a more quantitative way of marking and, should the student question the grade, you can isolate their areas of strength and areas that need work by using the rubric.

However, rubrics are not solely for the instructor. Indeed most of the benefit of a rubric is for the students. Students can isolate the elements that constitute a good essay based on the rubric categories, and can self-assess whether they meet the various exemplars used in the rubric before they even submit their work. Frequent use can also help students gain confidence as they consider the assessed categories without having to repeatedly consult the rubric, and so they begin to internalize the standards you seek.

Rubrics are not solely for the instructor . . . most of the benefit of using a rubric is for the student.

To save time with common feedback, you could provide a generic response sheet that contains numbered comments, with annotations in the essay to refer to the specific comment number. This certainly helps you avoid writing the same comments on 50% of the papers! But rubrics will not replace comments on an essay. Whatever you do, individual comments on the papers will still provide the most beneficial feedback.

Rubrics are certainly no panacea but, using them with a number of other tools, the instructor can help develop good practices among the students in a systematic, reproducible and easily understood way.

James Whitehead
Director of Teaching and Learning
St. Thomas University



“We all win when students understand our expectations and strive to meet them.”

Dear Professor Rollers,

Yes, rubrics rule (a quick Google search for "marking rubric template" returns 4 million hits). But do rubrics rock?

Your skepticism is justified. Sure, even a bad rubric (*i.e.*, one that sheepishly follows models popular in the K-12 system) probably provides more information to a student than 3 hastily scribbled generic comments at the end of an essay. But even the best rubric in the world (and I do *not* mean ones from the web's numerous 'rubric generators') is no substitute for the developmental comments specific to each individual essay that you mention thinking you will still want to do.



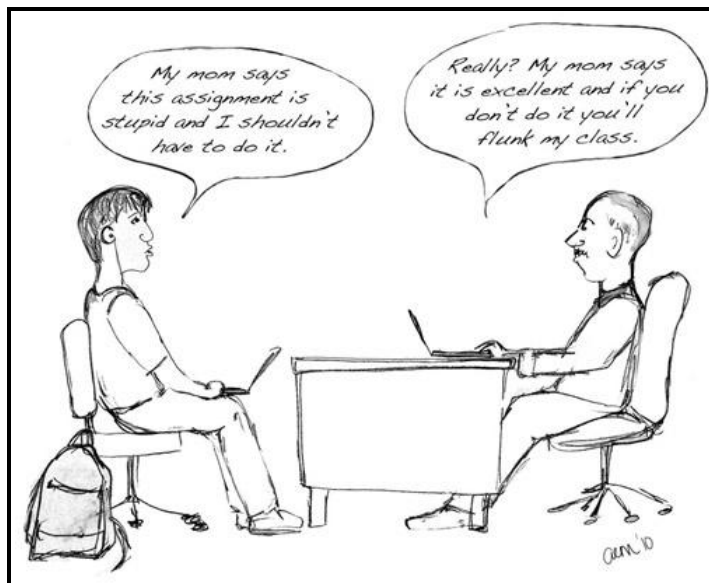
There is indeed a great deal of work involved in creating a useful rubric for the specific course purposes that you might have in mind, and that's even after you spend much time thinking about what *you* actually want *your* rubric to do: is it meant to be a formulaic grading tool for you, or a 'critical elements' reminder for your students, or something altogether different?

So if it will be much work to 'do it right' (as you suggest you would want to) and it won't save you marking time if you also continue to do the right thing and comment on your students' essays, why bother trying to create a rubric for your students at all?

You quite rightly do not want to be a sheep and merely follow what can seem like the latest educational fad (after all, universities are meant to be about critical thinking, and that should surely begin with us). However, the fact that you have asked this question at all suggests you already know the answer.

Why bother? Because you are obviously an instructor who cares about student progress, who wants to give students all the tools possible to succeed in your courses, and a thoughtful rubric (call it what you will, design it as you like, and use it however you prefer) is one more instrument that may lead to increased satisfaction for both you and your students. Where's the benefit? Well, we *all* win when students understand our expectations and strive to meet them.

**Diana Austin, AAU Distinguished Teaching Award, 2010
Department of English, UNB**



This cartoon was drawn by Beth Matheson, a Librarian at University of Saskatchewan. Published in the October 22, 2010 issue of the U of S publication, *On Campus News*, it is used here with the author's permission.



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