
Devising a rubric for assessing writing

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Goals for writing assessment

- Assessing self or peers within a class for improving learning
- Assessing student learning in a class for assigning grades
- Assessing a program (e.g., writing-intensive courses with a department or across the university)

The objective is learning to write

“Stated explicitly . . . the learner has to
a) possess a concept of the *standard* (or goal,
or reference level) being aimed for, b) compare
the *actual* (or current) *level of performance* with
the standard, and c) engage in appropriate
action which leads to some closure of the gap.”

Sadler, 1989, qtd. in Tarras, Maddelena. “Do Unto Others or Not: Equity in
Feedback for Undergraduates ” *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher
Education* 31.3 (June 2006): 365-377, p. 367.

What is a rubric?

- A “rule” that
 - Establishes characteristics by which student work will be evaluated.
 - Defines/describes two or more levels of quality for each characteristic.

Sample rubric

The rubric that follows assigns points to specific traits; it is an abbreviated example of a rubric for evaluating a business memo. Many more traits could be included, but these are the traits the instructor deems most important for the specific assignment. Traits should reflect learning objectives.

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
Clearly defined audience & purpose	4	3	2	1
Appropriate tone	4	3	2	1
Important information in first paragraph	4	3	2	1
No errors in spelling or punctuation	4	3	2	1
Total points	A (13-16)	B (9-12)	C (8-11)	D (4-7)

Steps for creating a rubric

- Do a “primary trait analysis” by identifying the characteristics or traits that you will consider in evaluating student performance in writing.
- Decide which traits you will measure.
- Decide how many levels are appropriate or necessary for each trait.
- For each trait, describe what exemplary work would look like.
- For each trait, describe what the remaining levels of work would look like.
- Decide the weight you will give to each trait.

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor
Accuracy	10	8	6	4
Development	10	8	6	4
Audience/Genre	10	8	6	4
Organization	5	4	3	2
Spelling	5	4	3	2
Punctuation, & Grammar	5	4	3	2
Usage	5	4	3	2

Weight each trait

Describe each trait at each level.

Development

- Excellent: The points or claims are fully explained and supported. The writer goes the extra mile to be sure the reader gets the point by providing helpful examples or details. When necessary, the writer anticipates or refutes counterarguments.
Good: All important points or claims are adequately explained and supported with some extra detail.
- Fair: Most points or claims are adequately explained and supported but with minimal detail. Some minor points may be left unexplained or unsupported.
- Poor: Many of the points are unexplained or unsupported, or inadequately explained or supported.

Primary trait analysis

- You should select those traits you most value or that are most significant to success for the type of writing you've assigned.
- Consider which traits are most associated with success for the type of writing you are assessing.
- What traits are included in the assignment's learning objectives?
- What traits are you emphasizing in your teaching?

Examples of primary traits common in writing

- Appropriate to genre, audience, purpose (rhetoric)
- Content
- Development
- Organization
- Format
- Tone or Voice
- Spelling, Punctuation, Grammar
- Documentation

How many levels?

- For grading papers, 4 is good (A-D) and 5 is too many.
- For program assessment, 3 is usually adequate (exceeds, meets, or does not meet standards).
- The more levels, the harder it can be to grade.

Using models for creating a rubric

- Select a model that is close to what you want students to produce and that represents best practice; or, use real student papers representing the various levels of their work.
- Analyze the best quality writing for
 - Rhetorical situation
 - Content
 - Development
 - Organization
 - Format
 - Tone
 - Sentences and paragraphs (types and lengths)
 - Diction
 - Grammar and mechanics
 - Documentation (research)
 - Other

Exercise

1. Using the worksheet analyze “title”
2. Of the primary traits listed on the worksheet, which matter? Which do you want to assess?
3. Can you group any traits together (for example grammar and punctuation)?
4. Decide if some traits might be weighted more than others.
5. Write descriptors for each of three levels using your analysis as a guide. The less competent students papers will help you describe lower levels of performance.

Using a rubric for self- or peer-assessment

- ❑ To clarify the criteria by which good writing is judged
- ❑ To aid composition by giving students a clearer and more concrete sense of what they are aiming for
- ❑ To allow students practice in applying the criteria within their own composing

Using a rubric for evaluating student work

- ❑ To define for yourself what you mean by “A” work, “B” work, etc.;
- ❑ To increase consistency in grading;
- ❑ To give students a target;
- ❑ To allow you to provide justification for grades assigned;
- ❑ To save time in the grading process;
- ❑ To help you analyze student strengths and weaknesses.

Using a rubrics for program assessment or learning outcomes

- To identify common standards for good writing within a major, department, set of courses
- To provide consistency in judgment
- To clarify the way the criteria are met within a given assignment
- To measure achievement as consistently and as objectively as possible (i.e., to establish reliability)

Program assessment

- Start with common goals or learning outcomes
- Review the writing assignments used in teaching
- Do a primary trait analysis of assignments
- Create a rubric
- Test it to see if it works for all assignments being assessed

Learning Objectives for Business Writing

- Our students will be able to compose reports, executive summaries, correspondence (memos, letters, emails), documents which support oral presentations and other documents which conform to the generally agreed upon standards of edited American English and which meet the expectations and needs of readers.
- Our students will display a range of documents in a portfolio. They will include reflective analyses of their writing which demonstrate an awareness of the writing process and of how as writers they work to meet audience expectations and needs.

	Exceeds Expectations	Meets Expectations	Does not meet expectations
Ideas	14	12	10
Development	12	10	8
Audience/ Genre/Tone	4	3	2
Introduction/ Conclusion	4	3	2
Organization	4	3	2
Spelling	4	3	2
Punctuation, Grammar, & Usage	4	3	2
Format	4	3	2

Descriptor for ideas

- Exceeds: All facts included are correct and complete; facts complement the argument or reinforce the thesis and are appropriate to the reader's level of understanding. Ideas are interesting, feasible, and, when applicable, innovative.
- Meets: All facts are correct and complete and mostly complement the argument or reinforce the thesis and are appropriate to the reader's level of understanding. Ideas are feasible and interesting, though not particularly innovative.
- Does not meet: Most major facts are correct but may be missing crucial contextual information or be tangential or irrelevant to the argument or thesis. Generally appropriate for the audience. Ideas are feasible, but not innovative or interesting and may be inappropriate.

Descriptor for punctuation, grammar,

usage

- Exceeds: Punctuation, grammar, and usage are appropriate to the audience and genre and in fact enhance the style. They conform to the conventions for edited American English, or, if they do not, the reason is rhetorical and stylistic. There is no inappropriate use of slang or jargon. Words and expressions seem carefully selected for the genre and audience.
- Meets: Errors may occur but are few and do not markedly distract the reader. Punctuation, grammar, and usage are appropriate to the audience and genre. They conform to the conventions for edited American English. There may be a few clichés included, but they are used correctly. Diction (word choice) is correct and appropriate though perhaps not sophisticated. While errors occasionally distract the reader and cause less fluency, they do not detract from comprehension.
- Does not meet: Errors occur frequently and mar the writer's ethos and the reader's comprehension. Reading is frequently interrupted by error. The writer has not proofread. Improper diction and usage mar the writer's ethos and the reader's comprehension.



Improving programs and courses

- Rubrics can be used effectively for formative assessment, in other words to improve or refine a program or course, not just to evaluate it as an end result.
- Rubrics help us find common language and standards within a program, department, major, or multi-section course.
- (Megan Oakleaf will be talking about reliability on Friday afternoon.)