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# Rubrics—A General Overview

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Suzanne, a first-year teacher, is committed to designing lessons that promote authentic learning for her students. In developing these activities, Suzanne is experiencing difficulty finding a way to assess student understanding of the concepts she presents in class. She is also struggling with assigning letter or numerical grades that reflect performance.

## RUBRICS TO ASSESS AUTHENTIC LEARNING

Not only beginning educators face Suzanne's problems. As all educators explore new ways of instructing students, they must also identify methods for evaluating students' grasp of concepts and ideas. The growing interest in authentic learning challenges teachers and administrators to examine current evaluation strategies. Carlson (2002) explained that *authentic learning* means "learning that uses real world problems and projects and that allows students to explore and discuss the problems in ways that are relevant to them." The authentic-learning classroom is a learner-centered environment in which students are encouraged to become active learners. The tasks in an authentic-learning classroom are relevant to students' real-life experiences. Many grading practices now in use are unsuitable for recording student performance on authentic-learning tasks. Authentic learning uses collaborative effort, problem-solving opportunities, and dialogue with informed sources to create a real-life learning situation. For example, in an authentic-learning unit on weather, students would use some of the same tools used by a meteorologist, such as a rain gauge and barometer. A simple letter or numerical grade used in traditional assessment practices does not provide enough information for such tasks. Using rubrics, the teacher can establish a set of performance guidelines ranging from inadequate to mastered, providing students with a clear understanding of expectations from the onset of an instructional activity (Arter & McTighe, 2000).

In addition to offering clear standards to students participating in authentic-learning activities, rubrics, with their multitask evaluation, are well suited to a process approach to learning because teachers can use them to evaluate

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performance for many phases within a single experience (O'Neil, 1996). For example, Chapter 5 describes the five-step writing process. Teachers can use a single rubric to assess student performance during each step of the five-step process.

### WHAT IS A RUBRIC?

A rubric is a flexible assessment tool. A rubric allows teachers to make more precise and useful measurements because, unlike conventional grading methods in the areas of language arts and reading, the rubric lists criteria necessary to attain graduated levels of mastery. In addition, using a rubric gives teachers the ability to set up criteria for each phase of an activity. For example, when evaluating an oral presentation, the teacher assigns a grade based on a number of factors, including vocal projection, content, nonverbal language, and the ability to capture and maintain audience attention. The teacher can construct the rubric to list each of these criteria with varying levels of performance, ranging from, for example, “fails to make eye contact” to “uses facial gestures to emphasize remarks” under the nonverbal language area.

Rubrics can be tailored to meet the individual needs of a teacher or a school district, but all rubrics contain certain elements. Each rubric contains an objective, or stated skill, behavior, or attitude, such as comprehension of a passage of expository writing or delivery of an oral report. Objectives may contain a number of components. Taking again the example of an oral report, the teacher must look at a number of factors, including vocal projection and clarity, quality of content, nonverbal language, and audience appeal. On a rubric, these areas would appear in a list in a random or specific (alphabetical or order of importance) sequence.

The most common arrangement for a rubric is a grid. The vertical axis lists the skills, behaviors, and attitudes required for successful completion of the task. For example, on the rubric evaluating oral presentations, the list might include the general areas of quality of content, vocal projection and clarity, nonverbal language, and audience appeal.

The rubric also includes more detailed features that would enhance or detract from a student's grade. For example, each rubric could list specific elements that fall within these areas of evaluation. For example, in the area of vocal projection and clarity, the ideal includes qualities such as “uses suitable volume,” “enunciates clearly,” and “exhibits no halting and repetition of words.” Students who achieve these criteria receive a grade that reflects mastery in this area.

Even though all the items appear within one heading in both sample rubrics, the rubrics allow teachers to evaluate each item. Each rubric contains a range, such as 1 to 4 points. The range of achievement on a rubric enables evaluators to gauge student performance against learning standards, rather than simply calling a performance “right” or “wrong.” The point values appear at the top of each column, which allows teachers to add them easily to arrive at a final grade. Assigning 0 points is a feasible option: If the student's work demonstrates no evidence of the criterion, the student receives no credit. Because a simpler rubric is more appropriate at the primary level, the primary-level rubrics in this book have a range of 0 to 2 points.

Focus on the category vocal projection and clarity, which evaluates three elements. If none of these elements could be considered present in a student's oral presentation, the rubric score would be no credit, or 0. If the student makes an attempt to achieve at least two elements under vocal projection and clarity but falls short in his or her efforts, the score would be 1 point to indicate an incomplete attempt. If the student achieves one of the three stated criteria completely, the score would be 2 points; if the student achieves two of the criteria completely, the score would be 3 points, and so on. Thinking of the rubric range as it relates to standards may be helpful. A score of 1 point is low: The student has not met the standards. Scores of 2 or 3 points indicate that the student has met some portion of the overall standard, and a score of 4 points indicates the student has met the standards. These rubric scores make up the eventual letter grade (an explanation of this conversion appears later in this chapter in the section titled "Converting Rubric Scores"). This feature of the rubric allows educators to pinpoint specific areas of strength or weakness, providing the student with more useful feedback for future presentations than a simple letter grade (A, B, C, etc.) or assigned percentage (96%, 85%, etc.). Teachers can show students how they convert the presence of these criteria to a letter or number grade.

On many rubrics, certain elements carry more weight than others (spelling is not as critical in a written report as content), and the numerical ranges help teachers and students make that distinction. Some educators refer to rubrics with this feature as weighted rubrics. All the rubrics in this book are weighted; in other words, all assign a larger point value to the most important elements of the lesson.

Weighted rubrics are one way to establish degrees of proficiency on the rubric. For example, rubrics assessing research writing have one criterion that covers the article's bibliography. Students receive no points, of course, if no bibliography is present, but if their bibliography contains only books, they might receive only 1 point; a multimedia bibliography that includes journal articles, Web sites, and videos related to the unit topic might receive 4 points. The scope of the bibliography (all book references, all Internet references, a mix of print, Internet, and video references) influences the grade. In short, a solely literature-based bibliography no longer represents the highest degree of competency or "correctness." Because the teacher distributes the rubrics at the start of the research unit, students are aware of this expectation before they begin their research. Once students have seen a completed rubric, teachers can actively involve them in the construction of rubrics. This helps students develop a clearer understanding of the types of criteria teachers take into consideration when assessing assignments. Educators in a wide variety of settings have found that the basic features of objective, range, and degree make the rubric a practical, adaptable assessment tool.

## WHY USE RUBRICS?

Because using rubrics may require additional planning in an educator's already time-challenged schedule, one might question why this assessment method is worth the extra effort. The most obvious reason is the rubric's unique capacity to quantify student performance in a relatively objective manner.

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Rubrics enable teachers to establish a set of criteria for completion of specified tasks, and rubrics give students the opportunity to see which skills and behaviors are expected for mastery of each task (Arter & McTighe, 2000). For these reasons, teachers must have the rubric ready before they make the assignment, and students need to see the rubric before they undertake the assignment. Seeing the rubric at the beginning of an activity allows students to be fully aware of what the teacher expects of them in the assignment and helps students become actively involved in their learning.

When educators in a particular grade level, school, or district reach a consensus about performance standards for specific tasks, the rubric's benefits become even more apparent. Having a consistent measurement of the standards set by a school district—say, 90% on a particular skill to be considered proficient—benefits teachers and students. For example, when students move from school to school, a universal form of measurement makes it easier to ease the new students into the classroom.

Rubrics provide students and their parents and guardians with a clear idea of expectations, eliminating confusion and frustration throughout all phases of the learning experience. Knowing what teachers expect reduces students' anxieties as they approach an assigned task. Whether or not they are able to attain mastery of all task-related components, students have an opportunity to examine the expected level of competency and to set goals. With rubrics, students can easily identify their weakest areas and place greater concentration and effort on improving them.

As educators such as the first-year teacher in the scenario at the beginning of this chapter attempt to involve students in more authentic learning, they must identify methods for assessing understanding. They must determine student achievement in a different way because the assignments often fall outside the category of traditional direct instruction (games, simulations, workshops). The flexibility and increased detail of the rubric make it an obvious choice for assessment purposes.

At the completion of an activity, teachers can use the information the completed rubric provides in a number of ways. The organization of the rubric offers easy identification of patterns that may suggest the need for additional instruction. For example, if all or most students scored low on the vocal projection and clarity component of an oral presentation rubric, educators may find it helpful to work with students in small or large groups in an alternate venue, such as the gym or cafeteria, to strengthen vocal projection. If an individual student consistently scored low on a specific area of the rubric, the teacher may use this information to prepare additional instruction for that student. Finally, if all students received a low score on an element, it may indicate inadequate preparation or lack of instruction in that area.

Mining the information on an assessment rubric provides teachers with opportunities to encourage students to develop their specific strengths (audience appeal) while offering suggestions on how to target areas of weakness (vocal projection and clarity) with tangible strategies. For example, teachers might suggest that, when students practice their presentation, they stand at the back of a room and speak loud enough to be heard by a classmate at the opposite side of the room.

## RUBRICS VERSUS CHECKLISTS

Checklists may be regarded as the forerunner of the rubric, even though both assessment instruments remain in use. Like the rubric, the checklist contains criteria necessary for mastery of a specific task. Absence of one or more of the stated criteria can detract from a student's overall grade on a particular activity. The checklist and the rubric provide students with a clear idea of educator expectations.

Although both assessment tools offer students more information than a letter or numerical grade, the rubric takes the criteria list one step farther by associating stated performance standards with graduated levels of mastery. For example, a checklist might remind students that they must edit written reports for punctuation errors; however, a rubric states the same objective with graduated levels of mastery: 0–1 errors = 4 points, 2–4 errors = 3 points, and so on. This additional information allows educators to distinguish between minor lapses in punctuation (2 or 3 punctuation errors) and a significant lack of understanding of correct punctuation (8 to 10 errors). This feature of the rubric makes it a more objective evaluation instrument than the checklist, where educator discrimination determines whether students receive full credit for correcting punctuation errors. In a weighted rubric, of course, teachers would assign a lower value ( $n \times 1$ ) to punctuation and give more points ( $n \times 4$ ) to the content and organization of a composition so that the number of punctuation errors does not decrease the grades of good but careless writers.

Although the comprehensive nature of the rubric offers students and educators more information regarding performance on specific tasks, the checklist remains a useful assessment instrument, particularly when teachers can evaluate the stated objective with a yes-or-no response to questions such as “Does the written report contain a title?”

## WHEN TO USE RUBRICS

A rubric is appropriate in all learning situations. Teachers can use it to evaluate oral and written assignments and individual and group presentations. Although sometimes regarded largely as an assessment instrument, teachers should make rubrics available to students during the early phases of the lesson or unit.

It is essential that educators construct and distribute the assessment rubric for a specific task before designing and executing related activities for three important reasons: to guide lesson planning, to make students aware of lesson objectives and teacher expectations, and to help students assume responsibility for their learning. Having the rubric at the onset of a unit, lesson, or activity assists in lesson planning because it gives teachers the opportunity to reflect on their expectations and make certain that students have ample instruction and opportunities for growth in those areas. For example, if a rubric on debating concentrates on students' ability to stay focused on the topic regardless of the nature of opponents' comments, the teacher must plan instructional time to emphasize this skill. The additional time invested in this area alerts students to its importance in their preparation as debaters.

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Second, showing and discussing rubrics with students at the start of a lesson or assignment alerts students to the areas the teacher considers most important for mastery of the unit or task and gives students insight into specific goals the teacher has set for activities. Students can begin to think about these expectations and look for ways to meet the criteria in the most effective manner. Rather than attempting to absorb every piece of information the teacher presents, students are able to rank the information's importance, investing more time and energy in those areas deemed essential to mastery of a specific task. They have time to ask questions and focus their efforts on those areas where they are weakest. For example, if a rubric for oral presentation lists "makes eye contact with audience" or "uses a strong opening statement" as the most essential factors, students can focus their primary attention on those areas of their presentation. Because its purpose is to convey a set of standards for a particular task, presenting the rubric at or near the completion of the task diminishes its function as an organizational tool and guiding force in students' preparation and execution of various tasks.

Finally, when students have an opportunity to view an assessment rubric at the onset of a lesson or assignment, they gain a sense of control over their learning; therefore, distributing rubrics before an assignment helps students become more actively involved in their learning. With the expectations in hand before they begin an assignment, students must assume responsibility for meeting the expectations. There can be no claims of "I didn't know that's what you wanted" or "You never said we had to do that." Teachers who use rubrics can effectively transfer responsibility for learning to students. This active involvement in their own learning also promotes an increased interest on the part of students.

To help students understand this form of assessment, students should have the opportunity to assign rubric scores. They might practice assigning scores in workshop settings when reading their peers' essays, they might complete them for their peers giving oral presentations, and so on. They might also create their own rubrics.

### **Student-Created Rubrics**

One of the most effective ways teachers can introduce rubrics in the classroom is to engage students in actively constructing rubrics. Stiggins (2004) explained that involving students in developing classroom assessments helps students gain a clear understanding of how their work will be judged. Participating in the development of rubrics helps students begin to assume responsibility for their own learning by building understanding of the criteria teachers consider in compiling an overall grade. In addition, partnering with the teacher in deciding what constitutes an ideal presentation, debate, or report increases student understanding of the evaluation process.

## **CONVERTING RUBRIC SCORES**

At present, most school districts continue to use some form of letter or numerical grading system. For the rubric to be an effective assessment tool, a widely

accepted method of converting its information to this grading system must exist. Assigning a particular weight (in numbers) to specific components of a task provides educators with the basis for converting rubric points into more traditional letter or numerical grades.

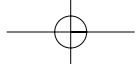
The most direct method of converting rubric scores is with a key at the bottom of the rubric that links student performance to a letter grade. To arrive at values for a letter grade of A, B, C, and so on, one simply divides the number of points earned by the total number of points available. For example, earning 19 points out of a possible 20 points yields a score of 95%, which the majority of grading standards would consider a grade of A. A score of 18 out of 20 yields 90%. Depending on the grade scale a school system uses, this grade might be considered an A (in a 90–100 classification) or a B (in a 93–100 classification). When creating a rubric, teachers should calculate the percentages for each possibility and list the results in a key somewhere on the rubric.

Teachers assign a specified number of points for each criterion listed under each objective on a rubric. They then combine these individual numbers to report a total score on the task. Because quality of content should be considered more critical than speaking volume on an oral report, criteria under the *quality-of-content* objective would be worth more points than the criteria under the *vocal-projection-and-clarity* objective. Students who present an oral report of little or no substance would receive a much lower grade than a student whose report contains high-quality content but who needs to improve in the area of vocal projection. This type of weighted evaluation provides students with clear expectations concerning which aspects of their report preparation and presentation are most important.

## AN EFFECTIVE ASSESSMENT TOOL AND MORE

The rubric is much more than an effective tool for measuring performance tasks. It is also an instructional tool that enables teachers to clarify specific components of a task at the onset of a lesson or assignment, to indicate which parts of the task are most important, and to explain what will be judged an acceptable performance on the various components of the task.

The following chapters provide sample rubrics for a wide variety of learning experiences, beginning with the assessment of reading comprehension. Because a clear understanding of the reading process and the selection and use of quality literature are essential components in any curriculum, it is important to invest some time and effort in reviewing these areas in detail. For this reason, Chapters 3 and 4 include an in-depth look at the reading process and the elements of story structure, including additional suggestions for class discussion topics and activities. These two chapters lay the foundation for rubric assessment in reading and the language arts, and the remaining chapters on writing, listening, speaking, research, and technology build on this foundation. Chapters 5 through 8 contain numerous self-explanatory rubrics and activities and require only minimal introduction and explanation. It is important to note that all of the rubrics provided in this book are intended to offer educators practical guidelines and can be modified to maximize their effectiveness in individual classrooms.



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Begin by reviewing the rubrics and the accompanying information for the grade level you teach, but do not overlook the information and rubrics for the other levels. Because students have varying learning needs, the rubrics for other grade levels might be useful when planning for differentiated assignments and assessment options.

