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Steps for Designing Assignment-Specific Analytical Rubrics

1. Review the intended outcomes of the assignment. What do you want students to gain from doing this assignment? What skills or mastery should they be able to demonstrate by completing this assignment?

Another way to think about this is: what do you expect in these papers? It's important to be specific and to prioritize your expectations. It's very difficult to grade a paper if you've left out a major component that you expect the papers to contain!

EXAMPLE: In designing a rubric for my FSP class, "Listening to Depression," I knew that I wanted students to develop the ability to apply the findings of a sociological study by David Karp to two depression memoirs we had read. This element was going to be worth a substantial part of the grade. I soon realized, however, that listing the levels of proficiency for the skill of applying Karp's ideas to the other texts did not fully address the closely related skills that make such an application possible. Therefore, I also included "building block" skills of reading comprehension and using concrete examples to support one's analytical conclusions.

2. Translate these outcomes into the criteria by which the paper will be evaluated. Keep the total number of criteria to between 5-10, fewer if applicable, but not more than 10.

Each criterion will be composed of a trait (e.g., reading comprehension, evidence, documentation), plus the levels of proficiency or scales for measuring the student's performance. In other words, don't include evaluative words in the trait itself (such as, "the introduction contains a strong opening or a memorable analogy"), as this then makes the scale for scoring the work confusing. Likewise, when listing the trait, don't say what should be included or what the student should do ("paper should anticipate and address opposing view points"). Rather than give directions, simply list the trait, and then in the scale, describe the possible levels of achievement. Then you simply match the student's work to the level within the scale for each trait. Here is an example:

Rebuttals / Naysayers

- Paper anticipates potential objections to the claim, to specific reasons, or to the evidence, and adequately addresses these concerns by deflating or critiquing them. (10)
 - Paper anticipates some potential objections but does not effectively address them. (5)
 - Paper does not address opposing view points or "plant" any naysayers. (0)
3. Decide how many levels of proficiency you want to include. For example, three (weak, satisfactory or strong), five (based on grades A-F) or some other set up based on points.
 4. Determine the relative weight of each criterion. "Introduction" may count for 10%, while "Evidence" may count for 30%.

5. Now write out the descriptions of each level for each trait. For example, what specific features will an A paper's thesis have? What will an A paper contain in terms of the evidence used to support the thesis? **Describe the characteristics of a student's paper as specifically as possible at each level for each trait.**

Sometimes it's best to describe the best possible paper in all its facets first, and then describe the worst possible paper. Then fill in intermediate levels. I prefer starting at the best level and then working my way down.

In your description, you can use an additive format, where an A paper is described as doing something better than a B paper, even including phrases such as "includes the previous box plus has xyz"; or you can use a subtractive format, where a C paper does something less well than a B paper.

Think carefully about using words such as *adequate*, *appropriate*, *good*, *poor*, etc. unless your students really know what these look like. If you and your students know what these descriptions translate into (if they are conventional terms in your discipline), then by all means use them. The determining factor here is the level of specificity needed to help your students understand what's expected.

Additional Resources:

<http://rubistar.4teachers.org/index.php>

If you're stuck, and want a basic format to get you started, Rubistar provides an online tool with standardized criteria and descriptions that you can revise to meet your needs.

<http://www.winona.edu/air/rubrics.htm>

A whole buncha rubrics in many disciplines.

Walvoord, Barbara E., and Virginia Johnson Anderson. *Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass, 1998.

ENG 101—GENERAL PAPER SCORING RUBRIC

Grades will be assigned on assessed quality of rubric features; plus/minus distinctions will be assigned on the directionality of quality as affected by strength/weakness of features and improvement/regression in process.

GRADE/ POINTS	FORM/ ORGANIZATION	IDEA DEVELOPMENT	FOCUS/ COHERENCE	ARTICULATION/ DICTION	MECHANICS/ USAGE	MODE/ PURPOSE
A/4.0	Seamless and easily discernable flow that drives intrinsically from beginning to middle to end.	Points established clearly with clear and coordinated explanation through use of extended example, illustration, analysis, etc.	All points tied carefully and explicitly centered on a central proposition with full transition stated (or implicit) and clear.	Consistent and careful word choice clearly suited to its purpose and audience.	Flawless with no spelling or mechanical errors that detract from easy reading. Sentence structures and length varied for effect.	Selected mode and methods appropriate to and consistent with audience expectations and expressed purpose.
C/2.0	Discernable structure with beginning-middle-end and points established.	Points established with examples or illustrations mentioned but not explained or clarified.	Evidence of a central proposition and subpropositions with transition, but subpropositions not fully or carefully tied to support central proposition, with transition often stated and forced.	Word choice mixed and inconsistent for its purpose and audience.	Evidence of spelling or mechanical erroring that detracts from easy reading in spots. Sentence structures and length repetitive and may demonstrate little evidence of syntactic manipulations such as subordination or verbal phrases used to contribute to effect.	Selected mode and methods inconsistent in part with audience expectations and expressed purpose.
F/0.0	Little discernable organization; disorganized or unorganized.	Points, ideas, statements made but with little use of example or detail.	Evidence of a central proposition with little attempt to expand upon it discernibly or to provide transition for clear readability.	Word choice seems random with little regard to intended purpose and audience.	Evidence of consistent spelling or mechanical erroring that causes difficulty in reading. Sentence structures and length limited to simple or compound forms.	Little evidence of mode and methods selected to appeal to audience expectations and expressed purpose.

Paper Rubric Sample

1. **Organization**

- Appropriate paragraphing (with transitions and topic sentences)
- Consistently reinforces thesis
- Stays on topic

More than Satisfactory _____ Satisfactory _____ Less than Satisfactory _____

2. **Content**

- Clear, interesting thesis that observes contradictions and tensions
- Demonstrates understanding in the analysis
- Avoids generalizations by providing adequate and appropriate evidence
- Cogent use of secondary sources that are integrated into the essay
- Title adequately reflects content of paper (and is witty, clever)

More than Satisfactory _____ Satisfactory _____ Less than Satisfactory _____

3. **Audience and Purpose**

- Socialized into genre (e.g., literary criticism)

More than Satisfactory _____ Satisfactory _____ Less than Satisfactory _____

4. **Style**

- Stylistically strong (parallel structure, vivid word choice, varied sentence structure)
- Demonstrates clarity and a control of language

More than Satisfactory _____ Satisfactory _____ Less than Satisfactory _____

5. **Punctuation and Grammar**

- Mechanics (comma usage, sentence fragments, pronoun usage)

More than Satisfactory _____ Satisfactory _____ Less than Satisfactory _____

6. **Criteria for Research Papers**

- Appropriately cites sources

More than Satisfactory _____ Satisfactory _____ Less than Satisfactory _____

7. **Overall, this paper is:**

More than Satisfactory _____ Satisfactory _____ Less than Satisfactory _____

Analysis / “Strong Reading”

- ___ commentary broad or superficial; reader yearns for more in-depth and meaningful interpretation that goes beyond a minimal or obvious reading
- ___ **So What?** Writer tends to describe text without arguing how or why it’s important, or does not follow through by developing logical implications of observations
- ___ interesting connections stated or implied but left unexplored
- ___ some lack of connection between the parts of the discussion: “laundry list”
- ___ summary of sources too brief or incomplete; writer simplifies sources or takes them out of context

Support

- ___ lack of details from the text that support generalizations
- ___ lack of commentary or elaboration that explains fully why a quotation is significant
- ___ assumes too much knowledge in unformed audience; more commentary needed
- ___ does not fulfill audience expectation by answering questions raised in commentary
- ___ **Dropped Quotes:** writer does not prepare reader by integrating quotes and providing attribution: “Who’s speaking here?”

Organization

- ___ lack of consistent conceptual thread that makes explicit connections among writer’s observations
- ___ reader needs to have clearer “road signs” to get from one idea to the next
- ___ ideas tend to repeat
- ___ organization confusing at points, leaves reader wondering “how did we get here?”
- ___ paragraph cohesion needs work so that sentences tie together smoothly

Language: Clarity, Style, Diction, & Grammar (anything in the writing itself that disrupts reader’s ability to focus on the content)

- ___ wordiness
- ___ awkward or unclear sentences; reader has to “fight” way through sentence or reread to understand
- ___ heavy reliance on to be verbs; active verb choices enliven your prose
- ___ imprecise word choice
- ___ inappropriate diction: slang, overly informal or colloquial language
- ___ grammatical errors: fragments, run-ons, pronoun usage, punctuation, spelling, etc.;
- Any error in Standard English usage.

Essay Grade:

13 Ways of Looking at Responding to Student Writing¹

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1. No professor is capable of making comments so profoundly wonderful that a student will become a perfect writer on the basis of remarks on a single paper.
2. Unskilled writers are largely unable to assign levels of importance to comments made on their papers. In other words, they are likely to treat equally a comment that the argument of an essay is confusing and a comment that the essay contains several misspellings. Moreover, since comments on surface errors are more easily addressable (though error types themselves are not necessarily easily and permanently resolved), students are likely to attend to them and not to more serious problems in logic, idea development, focus, or order.
3. Teachers have a finite amount of time to spend responding to writing. There is evidence that time spent meticulously annotating every aspect of a student's paper does little good. This is especially true if the comments are rubber stamp ones: "awkward," "be specific" and so on.
4. Students learn to write by writing, and while judicious advice is helpful, there is a gap between knowledge and performance. A steady diet of being closely edited doesn't mean that a student will necessarily internalize what he or she needs to do in future tasks.
5. Set ground rules for yourself, and clearly convey to students what they can and cannot expect in terms of your response. For example, tell them (or include a response sheet that tells them) that your written comments will address only one main strength and one main area for improvement, if that's what you choose to do. Cover other aspects of the paper with a response or grading rubric. 1. "The most effective aspect of this paper is ____ (or, "The best section of this paper is on page) 2. "The one thing that would most improve this paper or ones like it in the future is ____ "
6. "Edit" only a fraction of a paper: a selected paragraph or page. Make clear up front that you do not aspire to be exhaustive. See recommendation 3.
7. Make good student papers available to illustrate features of strong work.
8. Develop a response rubric, that is, a list of elements of the paper, with values you can check off. Typical broad criteria include: focus, thesis, argument; organization; clarity of development; quality and quantity of evidence or support; ambition (degree of difficulty); format; correctness; and style. However, each element may look different in different situations. Use general rubrics to develop ones tailored to specific assignments.
9. As you write assignments, consider how you might respond to the kinds of writing those assignments might yield. It doesn't "cheapen" the assignment to reveal criteria to students up front. You might provide more scaffolding to students at the beginning of the semester
10. Require students to tell you the specific aspect of the paper on which they'd most like to get feedback from you, then reserve most of your comments for that aspect. You might want to give them a menu of features to select from or, at least, explain to them why very general requests won't yield them much help (e.g. "Does it flow?")
11. Have students write a cover memo in which they describe their strategies in writing the paper and what they

perceive its strengths and problem areas to be.

12. Use brief marginal comments to call attention to “higher order” aspects in the paper, usually content or development. A “good” or a “yes” or a “?” or an “evidence?” go a long way. Use squiggly lines (or what you will) to call attention to sentence errors or hugely rough spots (but remember that your goal should be to teach). Don’t feel compelled to mark everything, and certainly don’t edit everything.

13. In courses with multiple assignments give students “vouchers” good for one detailed commentary per term. They should reserve that for the time they want you to read a paper as you would a manuscript submitted to a journal.

1 Sorry Mr. Stevens.