



### TALE Teaching Tip:

#### Rubric Basics

#### Why bother with rubrics?

- Grading becomes time efficient with a well-developed rubric.
- May help faculty avoid editing student work because the rubric outlines best practice.
- Might make grading more consistent.
- Students welcome clearly articulate criteria.
- May encourage students to take responsibility for their work by setting learning standards and clarifying achievement expectations.
- Stevens and Levi contend that rubrics may level the playing field for students. How? If we use rubrics as a teaching moment to explain disciplinary standards, every student has access to this information. Whereas students, who have grown up in college-educated households, can adapt more easily to vaguely worded assignments in which expectations are not spelled out.<sup>1</sup>

**Definitions of a Rubric:** “a scoring tool that lays out the specific expectations for an assignment;” “a format in which the traits of the student’s work are separately named, and each trait is evaluated according to a scale from high to low;” “articulates in writing the various criteria and standards that a faculty member uses to evaluate student work. It transforms informal professional judgment into numerical ratings on a scale.”<sup>2</sup>

#### Checklist Rubrics

- List items that the assignment should have
- Could be used as a gateway standard before a student submits work.<sup>3</sup>
- Use to give feedback for rough drafts, etc.
- May not help students realize how to improve

#### Scoring Guide Rubrics

- Describes highest level of performance
- Can be more time consuming to grade than a performance-level rubric.
- Recommended for graduate-or senior-level students when you have time to write comments.

#### Holistic Rubrics

- Describes in short paragraph narratives or bullet points each level of performance.
- Students rarely fit neatly into one level of performance.
- Useful when general impressions are sufficient to communicate achievement.

#### Rating Scales

- Only lists items in a checklist format.
- 2-5 levels (e.g. exemplary-competent-beginning; proficient-intermediate-novice)
- Time-saving.
- Does not describe differences between levels of the scale
- Does not provide student with sufficient insight on levels of achievement.
- Criteria can be communicate separately which can create “teachable moments.”

<sup>1</sup> Dannelle D. Stevens and Antonia J. Levi, *Introduction to Rubrics: An Assessment Tool to Save Grading Time, Convey Effective Feedback, and Promote Student Learning* (Sterling, Virginia: Stylus, 2005), 27-28

<sup>2</sup> Stevens and Levi, 3; Barbara E. Walvoord and Virginia Johnson Anderson, *Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment in College*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 39; Barbara E. Walvoord, *Assessment Clear and Simple* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 19.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara E. Walvoord, *Assessment Clear and Simple* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), 56-58.



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### Descriptive or Performance-Level Scales

- Each level provides descriptions of criteria.
- 2-5 levels.
- Facilitates communication with student about strengths and weaknesses.
- Challenge to compose.
- Needs to communicate professional standards to students

Levels of Mastery or Scale		Capstone 4
Explanation of issues <b>Element</b>	<b>Criteria or Descriptors</b>	Issue/problem to be considered critically is stated clearly and described comprehensively, delivering all relevant information necessary for full understanding.
Evidence <i>Selecting and using information to investigate a point of view or conclusion</i>		Information is taken from source(s) with enough interpretation/evaluation to develop a comprehensive analysis or synthesis. Viewpoints of experts are questioned thoroughly.
<b>Source:</b> Critical Thinking		VALUE Rubric, AACU

### Steps to Create Criteria-Based Rubrics

1. Select an assignment and determine your student learning outcomes/objectives/goals (SLOs). This is not as easy as it sounds. As professionals, we recognize the difference between excellent-average-poor, but we struggle to articulate those differences in writing.
  - A. Work backwards from your assignment guidelines. Read your assignment critically, take notes on what you are asking your students to do and why. This may help you formulate language about expectations.
  - B. Consult your professional organization for ideas; in outlining disciplinary standards, they have articulated outcomes.
  - C. Create a practice assignment following your guidelines and make note of your disciplinary expectations. These could assist you in writing SLOs and ponder if your assignment makes sense!
2. Identify elements that you expect to grade drawing from assignment guidelines. Formulate these as nouns or noun phrases. For example, elements in a research project might include: bibliographic research; content; composition; documentation.
3. Write criteria descriptions for different elements. For example, if the element is Effective Writing:
  - The criteria for excellent achievement: *Standard English with isolated errors missed in editing stage.*
  - The criteria for below average: *Several deviations from Standard English creating a chore for the reader.*
  - Competent achievement: *Deviations from Standard English suggest a pattern but does not undermine reader's ability to comprehend.*
  - A. Consult student work for inspiration. What made one student's work A-level and another student's work C-level?
  - B. Consult sample rubrics for language. Countless rubrics are available on the internet and potentially through your professional organization. Also consult the AACU VALUE rubrics; the verbiage in these rubrics provides language that might help you differentiate between levels of performance.
  - C. Start with only a three-level scale, such as excellent-competent-below average. It is less daunting.
  - D. Work from the outside in to write criteria, i.e. write the criteria for what constitutes excellence, then what constitutes below average.
  - E. Increasingly, I create assignments with rhetorical audiences, and so my criteria references the audience. E.g. an insider will comprehend but an outsider will struggle. Criteria for a book review: *Ready for Publication; Publishable with Revision; Not Publishable.*
  - F. Barbara Walvoord recommends that faculty use a four-level scale to avoid middle drift that will more likely occur with a five-level scale, especially when multiple faculty are using the rubric.



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4. Compare your three levels. Does your criteria provide sufficient differentiation? Are the targets achievable, reasonable? Does your language clearly articulate the goals of the assignment? Will your academic language be understood by a novice in your discipline?
5. Determine if you will assign points to criteria and if and how these will be weighted. Walvoord and Anderson suggest that rubrics can be used “as a guide, not a calculator.”<sup>4</sup> In short, avoid creating awkward moments in which rubric points add up to passing, but the work is not passable. **Warning:** Some students will not go beyond the rubric, which may leave their work “flat and uninspired” so consider giving points or assigning a percentage to creativity, originality, insight.<sup>5</sup>
6. Test out the rubric on some assignments, thoughtful students, and colleagues. Do the criteria make sense? Do students find the criteria useful for successful completion of the assignment and meeting disciplinary standards?
  - A. Compose and test a semester before you plan to share with students.
  - B. Or present the rubric to students and emphasize you are “test-driving”. It is a draft and let them know to expect modifications during the semester.

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### External Sources:

- [AACU VALUE Rubrics](#)
- [MERLOT](#) (a clearing house of ideas)

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### Rubrics in Use: Best Practices

1. Distribute rubrics in advance to students. Use this as an opportunity to communicate assignment expectations. Students are given the opportunity to ask questions about the assignment, and you learn more about what their worries and working assumptions are.
2. Consider providing examples of each level of criteria through class discussion, in a separate handout, or within the rubric. For example:
  - Excellent:** Thesis is well-defined, complex and accurately reflects the content of the paragraph topic sentences.
  - Example of an excellent thesis:** The historians Christopher Browning, Richard Breitman, and Henry Friedlander agree that Hitler played a major role in the decision for the “final solution,” that his subordinates were equally critical to its implementation, but they disagree on when a decision was made.
  - Unsatisfactory:** Thesis is non-existent or confuses a focus statement with a thesis.
  - Example of Unsatisfactory:** This paper will examine what historians have said about the origins of the “final solution.”
3. Consider having students peer tutor with rubric during the drafting stage of an assignment.
4. Consider having students use the rubric to assess anonymous student samples from previous semesters or samples that you create which represent different levels of achievement.
5. Some faculty fear losing time for content by when they engage in discussions of assignments, rubrics, and what represents best work, let alone take time to peer review, but if you frame the discussion in terms of meeting disciplinary standards, then you level the playing field for all students and can maintain a more professional tone.
6. When using a rubric initially, make sure students know it’s a work in progress; make notes to yourself about what parts of the rubric need revision. It’s perfectly acceptable to revise a rubric based upon your observations and student feedback, and roll it out for the next assignment.

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**Rubrics for Outcomes Assessment:** Rubrics are not limited to grading individual assignments. They may also be used to communicate to what extent professional standards have been achieved by students in a course or program. For example, in order for a BU course to qualify for general education points, faculty must link course-level student learning objectives to at least one element of the AACU VALUE rubrics. They may need to adopt, revise, or create VALUE rubric criteria or descriptors to communicate accurately the levels of achievement. In this instance, rubrics are being used to report outcomes, not necessarily being used to grade individual assignments.

<sup>4</sup> Walvoord and Anderson, 45.

<sup>5</sup> Linda Suskie, *Assessing Student Learning: A Common Sense Guide*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2009), 150.