

Recognizing Flaws in Rubric Design

Using the ten Tips to Evaluate Rubric Design, the following resource is meant to give teachers examples of common mistakes made when creating rubrics. Some of the criteria are self-explanatory and are not accompanied by examples. The others have pieces of rubrics where the trouble spots occur, followed by an explanation of where the faulty rubric went wrong. This tool was developed based on a conversation with Dennie Palmer Wolf—Director of the Rethinking Accountability Initiative at the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University.

One: *DO NOT confuse a higher quality rubric with a higher number of criteria; 3-7 is an optimal amount.*

First-Draft Essay Rubric

Criteria:	4	3	2	1
Grammar				
Punctuation				
Neatness				
Source Documentation				
Ideas				
Organization				
Voice				
Word Choice				
Sentence Fluency				
Presentation				
Timeliness				
Length				

What went wrong?

This rubric uses twelve criteria to evaluate a first draft of an essay. The suggested number of criteria for a rubric is between 3 and 7. The rubric designer might choose to focus on two or three closely related criteria (ex. voice, word choice, sentence fluency) for the first draft, and then choose another set of criteria for the second draft. The student will understand the set of skills more thoroughly and will not be overwhelmed with the quantity of expectations for the first draft.

Two: *DO NOT* include as a central part of a rubric something that translates into a quantifiable term.

Research Paper Rubric

Criteria:	4	3	2	1
<i>Source Documentation</i>	Correctly cites 10 or more sources	Correctly cites at least 7 sources	Cites at least 5 sources	Cites less than 5 sources

What went wrong?

Rubrics are meant to assess criteria that are complex and subjective. If a rubric uses quantities or quantifiable terms (such as rarely, occasionally, frequently, and always) the rubric becomes just as unhelpful as a traditional grading scale at assessing dynamic work. When designing a rubric, it is important to decide what skills are to be assessed and what would be better assessed using a checklist or grading scale.

The example above could be altered to assess the *quality* and *use* of resources in the research paper. For example, a student may have three credible resources that she cites to support her thesis, while another student may have twelve questionable resources that do not support his thesis. A rubric addressing the nuances of individual student work will be far more beneficial to improving skills than categorizing with arbitrary numbers.

Three: *DO NOT* use the first two levels of the rubric to describe what is wrong and the second two levels to describe what is right.

Group Work Rubric

Criteria:	4	3	2	1
Contribution & Completion of Tasks	Participates actively	Participates in group	<i>Participates inconsistently in group</i>	<i>Does not participate</i>
	Models concern for goals	Shows concern for goals	<i>Shows some concern for goals</i>	<i>Shows no concern for group goals</i>
	Helps lead the group in goal-setting	Participates in goal-setting	<i>Participates sporadically in goal-setting</i>	<i>Impedes goal-setting</i>
	Helps lead the group in meeting goals	Participates in meeting goals	<i>Participates sometimes in meeting goals</i>	<i>Impedes group meeting goals</i>
	Thoroughly completes assigned task	Completes assigned tasks	<i>Completes assigned tasks</i>	<i>Does not complete assigned task</i>

What went wrong?

This rubric draws a not-so-subtle distinction with the language used to score a student’s performance as a 1-2 and a 3-4. The rubric draws a line between acceptable and unacceptable work, rather than develop performance levels using 1 as a base of acceptability. Telling a student what she *can’t* do is not motivational. Using phrases such as “can improve upon,” “beginning,” or “building the foundation” gives students a goal to work toward and does not stigmatize students that may score a 1.

Four: DO use first level as a standard base, not as an incomplete or failing level.

Math Skills Rubric

Criteria:	4	3	2	1
Skill Fluency				Unable to carry out basic algebraic and geometric procedures
Modeling and Data Analysis				Unable to accurately formulate the problem or task
				Unable to develop reasonable model
				Does not explain how the model relates to the problem
Problem-Solving				Unable to plan and solve non-routine problem
				Unwilling to complete problem

What went wrong?

Every rubric should have a body of student work to draw on so that students recognize quality work and common sticking points. Therefore, the first level of a rubric should be a teaching tool, a base, a springboard representing where many students may be at the beginning of a new school year, a semester, or when learning an unfamiliar skill. It is quite possible that an entire class may strive to move from the first level to the second level over the course of a lesson or unit. If student work falls below the standard base set for the first level, providing a checklist with specific improvements would be more appropriate than a list of failures outlined in a rubric.

Five: *DO create levels of performance that advance in equal increments, representing realistic increases in students' skill level.*

Essay Rubric

Criteria:	4	3	2	1
<i>Sentence Fluency</i>	Excellent transitions; maturity in sentence structure beyond "the norm"; exceptional "flow."	Highly skilled style, numerous variations in sentence structure; developing "wow factor."	Feels "sticky" at certain points; doesn't peak the reader's interest.	Doesn't use transitions properly (or not at all); juvenile style; no variety in structure.

What went wrong?

Unless the class has spent time developing a shared understanding of what constitutes "flow," "the norm," the "wow factor," "sticky," "juvenile," and "maturity," a student would be at a disadvantage for knowing how to improve their skill level, using this rubric as a guide. A student who received a score of 3 would struggle to know if they used transitions adequately or varied their sentence structure appropriately, as there is no mention of either in the performance level. Not only are the performance levels not written on an incremental gradient, but also they don't contain the same performance indicators.

Six: *DO align rubric language with everything else students are doing in their educational life, creating a common language and standard.*

Seven: *DO align rubric criteria with national/state/school standards.*

Eight: *DO involve kids in deciding particular performance tasks.*

Nine: *DO make rubric understandable to kids.*

Ten: *DO use terminology that is understandable to an outside evaluator.*

Research Paper Presentation

Criteria:	4	3	2	1
Content	Thoroughly documents type of methodology, data collection methods, and protocols			
Reflection		Adequately uses metacognition and can articulate use of Gardner's multiple intelligences in work		
Connections			Uses at least 3 of Maslow's hierarchy of needs to support thesis	

What went wrong?

Outside evaluators are a valuable resource because they offer validity to assessment, open the school up to the community, and give students a chance to defend their work for a high-stakes audience. We need to keep our audience in mind when writing rubrics. Without a thorough briefing on research methodology and education theory, a guest evaluator would have little chance of being able to score a student's presentation using this rubric. What may be commonplace to teachers and students could be unfamiliar jargon to the outside evaluator. Be cautious when using acronyms, as well.