

Designing Rubrics to Improve Students' Writing and Make Grading Easier

William S. Altman (SUNY Broome Community College)
Kathleen P. Greenberg (SUNY College at Old Westbury)

Rubrics Provide Clear Guidelines

What is a rubric? Essentially, it's a list of your objectives for an assignment or essay, with some way to measure the quality of students' responses to each objective. Your rubrics should reflect the things you think are most important. They can be as simple as a list of points you'd like to see in a student's essay or as complex as a complete outline of what you expect students to produce. But it's always your choice.

Starting Out

Start out slowly. Take assignments one by one.

First, decide what the assignment is meant to accomplish. What are the students supposed to learn by doing this paper, presentation, or project? Is it about learning how to do background research, how to design a research project, how to communicate about your subject to a professional audience or the public, or something else entirely? If you can't articulate the purpose of the assignment, perhaps you're not ready to assign anything.

Once you've decided on what the assignment is meant to teach, create a specific rubric for what you expect from your students. This might be fairly general for a simple assignment, or quite detailed for a final report on students' research. The more specific you can be, the easier it will be to explain the assignment to your students; and perhaps best of all better, the easier it will be for you to grade it!

Give Students the Rubric

By giving the rubric to your students before they begin their assignments, you make it possible for them to understand exactly what you want done, and how. Be sure to let them know that you'll use these criteria to grade them, and that they can use your rubric as a guide to writing a paper that will earn an A.

It's helpful to post rubrics on your website or in your course management system, linked to the assignments for which they're designed. Your students will be able to download the rubrics and refer to them as they work on each assignment, checking to be sure they've satisfied the specific requirements for each part of the paper or project. In addition, you may be able to get former students' permission to post their papers as examples. Current students can look at these successful efforts and model their own work on those.

When grading, use the rubrics as checklists, assigning points directly on them. This speeds up grading tremendously. As you read each section of a paper, you'll know specifically what to look for, and what constitutes appropriate quality. You may still want to make comments in the papers, but those will be more targeted to guiding the writer's thinking, and not for grading. Return each paper with a copy of the graded rubric, so students can see precisely where they did well and why any points were taken off. This saves a LOT of questions and unhappiness on everyone's parts.

Tools, Samples, and Helpful Readings

Information about rubrics:

- The ToPIX Grading Rubrics page: <http://topix.teachpsych.org/w/page/19980998/Grading%20Rubrics>
- Bill Altman's Rubric web page: http://www.williamaltman.info/Bill_Projects/Rubrics.html

Sites to help with designing rubrics:

- Rubistar: <http://rubistar.4teachers.org/index.php>
- TeAchnology: http://www.teach-nology.com/web_tools/rubrics/
- University of Southern Florida Rubric Page: <http://www.usf.edu/atle/teaching/rubrics.aspx>
- Dannelle Stevens and Antonia Levi's Rubrics Page: <http://www.introductiontorubrics.com/index.html>
- Berkeley Center for Teaching and Learning Rubrics Page: <http://teaching.berkeley.edu/rubrics-0>

Information about Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives:

- http://epltt.coe.uga.edu/index.php?title=Bloom%27s_Taxonomy
- http://ww2.odu.edu/educ/roverbau/Bloom/blooms_taxonomy.htm

Helpful readings:

García-Ros, R. (2011). Analysis and validation of a rubric to assess oral presentation skills in university context. *Electronic Journal of Research in Educational Psychology, 9*(3), 1043-1062.

Greenberg, K. P. (2012). A reliable and valid weighted scoring instrument for use in grading APA-style research reports. *Teaching of Psychology, 39*(1), 17-23.

Greenberg, K. P. (in press). Rubric use in formative assessment: A detailed rubric helps students improve their scientific writing skills. *Teaching of Psychology*.

Halonen, J. S., Bosack, T., Clay, S., & McCarthy, M. (2003). A rubric for learning, teaching, and assessing scientific inquiry in psychology. *Teaching of Psychology, 30*(3), 196-207.
doi:10.1207/S15328023TOP3003_01

Lipnevich, A. A., McCallen, L. N., Miles, K. P., & Smith, J. K. (2014). Mind the gap! Students' use of exemplars and detailed rubrics as formative assessment. *Instructional Science, 42*(4), 539-559.
doi:10.1007/s11251-013-9299-9

Miller, H. J., & Lance, C. L. (2006). Written and Oral Assignments. In S. F. Davis (Ed.), *Handbook of the teaching of psychology* (pp. 259-264). Malden: Blackwell Publishing.
doi:10.1002/9780470754924.ch44

Stellmack, M. A., Konheim-Kalkstein, Y. L., Manor, J. E., Massey, A. R., & Schmitz, J. P. (2009). An assessment of reliability and validity of a rubric for grading APA-style introductions. *Teaching of Psychology, 36*(2), 102-107. doi:10.1080/00986280902739776

Thaler, N., Kazemi, E., & Huscher, C. (2009). Developing a rubric to assess student learning outcomes using a class assignment. *Teaching of Psychology, 36*(2), 113-116. doi:10.1080/00986280902739305

Unal, Z., Bodur, Y., & Unal, A. (2012). Choosing or designing the perfect webquest for your learners using a reliable rubric. *Contemporary Issues in Technology & Teacher Education, 12*(2), 209-231.