Rubric Guidelines and Samples

What is a rubric?

Rubrics are useful assessment tools that list the criteria and point distribution you use to evaluate student work. As a scoring guide, they help define the expected elements in an assignment, while providing specific characteristics that students should adhere to in order to perform at the highest levels.

While you probably have a mental set of guidelines and criteria that guide your assessment of student work, creating and posting a rubric makes these internal criteria more explicit and thus the grading process more transparent, benefiting both you and your students. The student knows what to expect and uses the rubric as a guide in completing assignments, while you will be able to grade more efficiently and consistently and will also find fewer questions from and challenges by students.

When and why should I use a rubric?

While many think of rubrics only in relation to formal writing assignments, it is possible to create a rubric for almost any sort of course activity. That said, you don’t need a formal rubric for every assignment--adequately detailed, clearly stated criteria can be sufficient.

But a rubric is often helpful in communicating more detailed assignment instructions, as well as expectations about what a quality submission may include. Think of rubrics as a primary way to help students apprehend what and how an assignment requires. Rubrics help

- Save time for instructors in grading
- Assure consistent assessment and greater fairness in grading across the whole class
- Clarify expectations for performance and guide student completion of assignments
- Provide initial feedback to students on their work
- Reduce the number of potential challenges and questions students have about their grades

Creating an effective rubric

An effective rubric should be detailed enough to cover the complexity of an assignment, and all its requirements, but simple enough that an instructor can easily distinguish between work that meets the higher and lower parts of the scoring range. (Rubrics should make your grading work easier, not more difficult!) We recommend keeping
rubrics to no more than five different scoring levels—fewer if possible. This will help ensure that you have an efficient process that avoids unnecessary hair-splitting and time-consuming deliberations. You may overlay a late policy onto your rubric (for example, deduct one or a partial point from the total score when postings are made within specific number of days after the due date) or build your late policy into the rubric itself.

In creating rubrics for assignments, you might also address some general expectations about what constitutes quality work for your students, including coherent and largely error-free writing, adequate documentation, and the policy on plagiarism. Whether or not you include these depends on the course level, assumed preparation of students, and sometimes institutional factors, like whether a course is designated as a gateway, introductory or capstone course.

Although writing a good rubric requires some initial investment of time, you may find that the process of constructing one, by requiring thoroughness and attention to each aspect of the assignment, helps produce a more carefully considered and effective assessment of student work.

**Different types of rubrics**
There are two main categories of rubrics—holistic and analytic.

A basic definition to distinguish these is that the holistic rubric provides a score that combines all criteria while the analytic rubric scores each criterion. For example, a holistic rubric would award a top score if all required elements had been provided at the highest performance levels while an analytic rubric would provide a top total score to those who achieved the highest score in each of the categories. In an analytic rubric, each element is scored based on the level of achievement—the total score is then the sum of all the individual scores. Holistic rubrics are a sort of *gestalt* view of the student performance, when you are more concerned with the overall combination of all criteria and less concerned about each individual criterion. Analytic rubrics are good when there are many different criteria to evaluate and when you want to give specific feedback on each criterion.

To compare holistic and analytic rubrics, see Mertler, *Designing Scoring Rubrics for your Classroom* and Moskal, *Scoring Rubrics: What, When and How?* for some more definitions and templates of these two types.

**Tips on creating a rubric**

1. Break out the various criteria and elements you require in the assignment. These should match up with your assignment instructions. For example, if you tell
students that the assignment must follow APA documentation guidelines, you could then add adherence to APA documentation as a rubric criterion.

2. Determine if there are any criteria that are a matter of either simply being present or not present, or whether the quality of the criterion is to be assessed. For example, “the essay should provide three examples” versus “the essay provides three examples recounting your experiences in the workplace in regard to challenges faced” or “the essay provides three examples, each from a different decade.”

3. Decide on how to classify the levels of performance—for example, high, medium, low; above average, average, below average; accomplished, developing, beginning—and the observable characteristics of each level. It’s generally easiest to start with the description of the highest and lowest levels.

4. It is best to confine the levels of performance to three or four in number. In an analytic rubric table the criteria form your leftmost column with the performance score levels on the horizontal row. For each level of performance you then add descriptions of what qualities and skills should be observable. For example, for APA documentation, the highest level might be “fully and properly cites each reference,” the next highest would be “properly cites most references with an occasional omission or error,” while the lowest might be “omits most citations or has frequent errors in documentation form.”

5. Each performance level is assigned a scoring number—generally speaking, it’s best to work within a three to five-point range. Splitting the levels too narrowly makes it more difficult to grade.

6. For holistic rubrics, you will group your descriptors together for each level and consider them collectively.

7. Check to make sure that all elements in your rubric are observable, and that each level is consistent in regard to the criteria. For example, don’t include an element on one level that is not mentioned on all other levels—you would not introduce the attribute of “extremely well organized” only for the highest level but instead would want to provide descriptors for the lower levels like “poorly organized,” “unorganized,” etc.

8. Before finalizing, test out your rubric on some existing student samples. Revise as needed.

This illustration from Craig Mertler’s article provides a good summary of this process with some additional suggestions like starting from your learning objectives, testing your rubric against samples of actual student work, and then revising as needed.
An online tutorial that will take you step by step through the creation of either an analytic or holistic rubric is at http://www.ucdenver.edu/faculty_staff/faculty/center-for-faculty-development/Documents/Tutorials/Rubrics/3_creating/1_purpose.htm

Here is a rudimentary example of a holistic rubric and an analytic rubric on the same research paper assignment, using a scale of four points.

Holistic:

4 points—Exemplary—a combination of the following is evident:
- The topic and thesis are well defined and focused
- APA documentation is complete and error free
There is a comprehensive review of the literature and there are at least 3 sources from peer reviewed journals

There is a fully developed and compelling presentation of ideas, with evidence to support

3 points—Good—a combination of the following is evident:
- The topic and thesis are well defined and focused
- APA documentation is thorough and largely error free
- There is an extensive review of the literature and there are at least 3 sources from peer reviewed journals
- There is a well-developed presentation of ideas, with evidence to support

2 points—Adequate—A combination of the following is evident:
- The topic and thesis are generally well defined
- APA documentation is generally present but may be lacking in a few cases or there are some errors
- There is a literature review but it is limited in scope or there are only one or two sources from peer reviewed journals
- Development of ideas is generally sound but sometimes lacking in evidence

1 point—Deficient—A combination of the following is evident:
- The topic and thesis are vague and not well defined
- APA documentation is either lacking or error-ridden
- The literature review is very limited or there are no peer reviewed sources
- Ideas are poorly developed

Analytic version:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Exemplary, 4 pts.</th>
<th>Good, 3 pts.</th>
<th>Adequate, 2 pts.</th>
<th>Deficient, 1 pt</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focused topic &amp; thesis</td>
<td>Well defined and focused</td>
<td>Well defined and focused</td>
<td>Generally well defined</td>
<td>Vague, not well defined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APA documentation complete</td>
<td>Complete and error free</td>
<td>Thorough and largely error free</td>
<td>Incomplete and/or some errors</td>
<td>Little or no documentation or with significant errors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Review of the literature &amp; at</td>
<td>Comprehensive with three or</td>
<td>Extensive with three</td>
<td>Somewhat limited in scope</td>
<td>Very limited and/or no peer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>least three peer reviewed sources</td>
<td>more peer reviewed sources</td>
<td>or more peer reviewed sources</td>
<td>and only one or two peer reviewed sources</td>
<td>reviewed sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>---------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideas well developed with supporting evidence</td>
<td>Fully developed and compelling presentation of ideas, with supporting evidence</td>
<td>Well developed with supporting evidence</td>
<td>Generally sound but sometimes lacking in evidence</td>
<td>Poorly developed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Don’t reinvent the wheel (or a rubric)**

There are many sample rubrics available for different subjects and assignments which can be adapted for your own use. Some of these can be found at:

- Penn State Schreyer Institute Tools and Resources
- Association for the Assessment of Learning in Higher Education
- Rubistar (you can find existing rubrics or build one from their templates)

**Additional References**
