

Using Rubrics to Guide and Grade

Rubrics ensure grading consistency from student to student, section to section, and grader to grader.

Although you have a clear vision of what an “A” paper looks like, students may not share that insight. Specific, detailed instructions help, but rubrics add the clarity students need to guide their work.

Rubrics outline the criteria students must meet to receive a high score; rubrics also identify what constitutes a low score, showing students the precise areas where they lost points. If students have the criteria for where they fell short, they may feel less inclined to send you an email questioning their score.

Anatomy of a Rubric

CRITERIA OR TASKS	HIGHEST PERFORMANCE LEVEL	NEXT PERFORMANCE LEVEL	NEXT PERFORMANCE LEVEL	LOWEST PERFORMANCE LEVEL
Criterion #1 description	Specific description of attributes <i># points</i>			
Criterion #2 description	Specific description of attributes <i># points</i>			
Criterion #3 description	Specific description of attributes <i># points</i>			

Helpful Tips

1. Decide upon criteria. Rubric criteria specify the learning outcomes to be measured, which must align with the learning objectives. Review the assignment instructions, and align the rubric criteria (rows of the rubric table) to match. If there are several sections or parts to the assignment, you might have one criterion for each section. You may also want to include one or two “generic” criteria such as “Overall Organization” or “Composition (spelling/grammar).”

2. Decide upon performance levels to describe. Examples of performance levels are

- Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor
- Exemplary, Proficient, Acceptable, Needs Improvement
- Outstanding, Good, Needs Improvement, Unacceptable

- Target, Needs Improvement, Unsatisfactory
- Exceeds Expectations, Meets Expectations, Below Expectations
- Exceeds Expectations, Meets Expectations, Developing
- Professional, Competent, Acceptable, Inadequate
- Advanced, Proficient, Basic, Beginning

The advantage of using an *even number* of performance levels is that you are then forced to make the distinction more carefully between adjacent levels and are less likely to default to the “middle” one.

A *positive* practice is to list the *highest* level of performance in the *first* performance column to the right of the criteria column, and then list lower levels to the right. That way, the students view that maximum expectation *first*, setting the tone for quality work.

3. Describe performance in measurable terms. Be sure your descriptions will make it clear to students (and graders) exactly what attributes represent each performance level. Using adjectives such as *clearly*, *expertly*, and *appropriately* leave room for interpretation. Adjectives such as *specifically* and *generally* are a little more descriptive, but using more specific characteristics will provide better distinction between performance categories.

For example:

Poor distinction between performance levels:

CRITERIA	EXEMPLARY	PROFICIENT	ACCEPTABLE	NEEDS IMPROVEMENT
Identify workplace problem	Clearly articulates the workplace problem.	Articulates the workplace problem.	Somewhat describes the workplace problem.	Fails to identify the workplace problem.

Better distinction between performance levels:

CRITERIA	EXEMPLARY	PROFICIENT	ACCEPTABLE	NEEDS IMPROVEMENT
Identify workplace problem	Articulates the workplace problem using cause-and-effect language, and provides at least two examples.	Describes workplace problem, and provides at least one example.	Generally describes the workplace problem.	Fails to identify the workplace problem.

4. Set reasonable point values or ranges for each performance level for each criterion. Not all criterion are created equal! You may choose to award 10 points for the top performance for one criterion or task and 4 points for the top performance for a less-important criterion. You may also choose to specify *ranges* of points for each level of performance.

Regardless of the method you choose and the distribution of points among criteria that you choose, be sure that the points awarded match the description of the performance level. For instance, say you use a simple 3-2-1-0 scale for a four-level rubric. This would result in a performance “rating” of 100% for the top level, but only 67% of the maximum number of points for the second-lowest performance – possibly lower than you really intend! Perhaps more appropriate would be a scale of 4-3-2-(1/0), since the second-lowest rating would then be 75% of the maximum score. (The “(0/1)” designation provides the flexibility for awarding either a 0 or a 1 for the lowest performance level – helpful if that criterion was not addressed at all by the student’s work.)

Useful Strategies:

- **Use available resources to develop rubrics.** Check out the [irubric](#) website that provides thousands of rubrics categorized by subject, assignment type, and education level that you can use as-is or download and revise to meet your specific needs! (You are also encouraged to share your own rubrics at the site!)
- **Use the same or similar rubrics for similar assignments.** This not only aids in grading the assignments efficiently, it also builds competence in students by helping them develop the “habits of mind” outlined by the rubric for those tasks or criteria.

For instance, you can create a rubric for scoring discussion posts to use throughout the course. It might look something like this:

CRITERIA	TARGET	NEEDS IMPROVEMENT	BELOW EXPECTATIONS
Initial post	Answers prompt with specific course-related terminology, and provides at least one example.	Answers prompt using some course-related terminology, but no examples.	Does not specifically answer prompt, OR fails to use course-related terminology
Replies to peers’ posts	Replies to at least two peers’ posts with additional example or clarifying question.	Replies to one peer’s post with additional example or clarifying question.	Does not reply to peers, OR fails to provide additional example or clarifying question.

Consider collaborating with your colleagues to develop and implement similar (or same) rubrics for specific types of assignments *throughout the student’s program*. Think of the impact on the student experience if the same rubric is used for every student presentation, for example, across multiple courses!

- **Apply your rubric to a student submission you graded previously for this same assignment.** Does it produce the type of score you expected? If not, your rubric may need revising.
- **If your course will have multiple graders, use a sample set of student submissions to conduct an inter-rater reliability check.** Have each grader use the rubric to score one or two of the *same* papers, then compare those scores to what *you* would have given the papers. Discuss discrepancies and clarify expectations with the graders.

- **Provide opportunities for students to use the rubric to critique each other's work on major assignments before submission for grading.** Be certain to establish “ground rules” to keep the critiquing environment “friendly.” For example, require them to refer to the grading rubric to provide two specific *positive* comments and one specific *suggestion* on another student's work.

Most importantly,

Keep rubrics specific!

Ambiguity will not provide the guidance needed.