



# Rubrics

## What is a Rubric?

A *rubric* is a scoring guide, a list or chart that describes the criteria that you and perhaps your colleagues will use to evaluate or grade completed student assignments. At a minimum, a rubric lists the things you're looking for when you evaluate assignments. The list is often accompanied by guidelines for evaluating each of those things.

One of the great things about rubrics is that they have no rules. There is no single correct way to write or format rubrics. Any format that you're comfortable with is fine, so long as you fulfill the rubric's purposes. This review discusses just four of the many ways to format rubrics: checklists, rating scales, descriptive rubrics, and holistic scoring guides. Some faculty and staff are put off by the jargon nature of the word *rubric*. If this is the case, simply substitute in your discussions a term such as *scoring guide* or *grading criteria*.

## Why Use a Rubric?

Using a rubric to grade student assignments makes your life easier and improves student learning. Below are some advantages of rubrics.

- *Rubrics help clarify vague, fuzzy goals.* A goal such as “Demonstrate effective writing skills” is admittedly vague—what are effective writing skills?—but difficult to clarify succinctly. A rubric can provide this clarification.
- *Rubrics help students understand your expectations.* If you distribute a rubric with an assignment, students will understand better what you want them to do and where they should focus their energies. You'll have fewer questions from students, and they may find the assignment a richer, more rewarding experience.
- *Rubrics can help students self-improve.* If you encourage students to use the rubric to self-evaluate their work before turning it in, in order to make sure the assignment is complete and up to acceptable standards, you are helping them develop the important lifelong skill of metacognition: understanding how they learn by reflecting on how they learn.
- *Rubrics can inspire better student performance.* Rubrics show students exactly what you value and what you'll be looking for when you evaluate their assignments. Knowing what you expect will motivate some (not all!) to aim for the targets you've identified.
- *Rubrics make scoring easier and faster.* While it may seem that using a scoring guide adds an extra burden to the grading process, rubrics actually make the grading process faster because they remind you of what you're looking for. You also won't need to write as many comments on papers.
- *Rubrics make scoring more accurate, unbiased, and consistent.* Rubrics ensure that every paper is evaluated using the same criteria.
- *Rubrics improve feedback to students.* Marked rubrics give students a clearer picture of their strengths and weaknesses than a few comments scrawled on their papers.
- *Rubrics reduce arguments with students.* By making evaluation criteria explicit, rubrics stop student arguments (“Why did he get a B- when I got a C+?”) cold. You can force your conversations with students on how they can improve their performance rather than defending your grading practices.
- *Rubrics improve feedback to faculty and staff.* If a number of students aren't demonstrating understanding



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of a particular concept or skill, rubrics bring this to your attention. The consistency of rubrics can help track changes in student performance as you refine your teaching. Rubrics can help determine, for example, whether introducing collaborative learning activities into classes has improved students' analysis skills.

## Checklist Rubrics

A checklist rubric is a simple list indicating the presence of the things you're looking for in a completed assignment. For the most part, the checklist rubric is used primarily to determine if each element of the assignment is present. Most often, there is little evaluation with a checklist rubric.

## Rating Scale Rubrics

A rating scale rubric is a checklist with a rating scale added to show the degree to which the things you're looking for are present in completed assignments.

The major shortcomings of rating scale rubrics is that performance levels are not clearly described. The difference between "outstanding" and "very good" articulation of information and ideas isn't clear. The vague nature of rating scale rubrics can lead to several problems:

- *Faculty and staff may be inconsistent in how they rate performance.* One faculty member might rate a paper "outstanding" in its articulation of information and ideas, while another faculty member might rate the same paper "very good" in this respect.
- *Student don't receive thorough feedback.* Yes, students can learn from a completed rating scale rubric that their paper's organization was relatively weak and their grammar was relatively strong, but from the scored rubric alone, they won't learn exactly how their organization was weak or how it might be improved.
- *Rating scale rubrics can lack credibility with some audiences.* Some might look skeptically on the faculty rating 85 percent of student essays "excellent" and the rest "very good."

Rating rubrics are quick and easy to create and use, however, so they do have an important place in many assessment programs, especially for relatively minor assignments.

PBL Implementation Checklist

Criteria	Yes	No	Sometimes
<b>AUTHENTICITY</b>			
Did the project emanate from a problem or question that has meaning to the student?			
Did it provide opportunities to create or produce something that has personal or social value?			
<b>ACADEMIC RIGOR</b>			
Did the project lead students to acquire and apply knowledge related to one or more discipline or content areas?			
Did the students develop higher-order thinking skills and habits of mind?			
<b>APPLIED LEARNING</b>			
Did students solving a semi-structured problem, grounded in the life and work in the world beyond the school?			
Did the work require students to develop organizational and self-management skills?			

Oral Presentation Evaluation

Use the following table as a practice guide to help prepare you and your group members for your final oral presentation.

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Weak
Prepared for report				
Presented material in an interesting way				
Used visual aids effectively				
Organized presentation logically				
Made eye contact with audience				
Did not read presentation				
Spoke loudly enough				
Spoke slowly and clearly				
Listened to whoever else was speaking				



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## Descriptive Rubrics

Descriptive rubrics replace the checkboxes of rating scale rubrics with brief descriptions of the performances that merit each possible rating. Descriptive rubrics are increasingly popular because they explicitly document faculty and staff standards for student performance. Students, faculty, accreditors, and other audiences all clearly understand exactly what an “outstanding” or “inadequate” rating means.

But coming up with succinct, explicit descriptions of every performance level for everything you’re looking for in completed assignments is not easy! This process can require negotiation, tryouts, and revisions and can therefore be time-consuming. Thus while descriptive rubrics might be considered the gold standard of rubrics, don’t feel that you need to develop them for every assignment. Descriptive rubrics are a good choice under the following circumstances:

- You are undertaking important assessments whose results may contribute to major decisions such as accreditation, funding, or program continuance.
- Several faculty and staff are collectively assessing student work, because descriptive rubrics’ clear descriptions make scoring more consistent across faculty and staff.
- It is important to give students clear, detailed feedback on their strengths and weaknesses.
- Skeptical audiences will be examining the rubric scores with a critical eye.

## Holistic Scoring Guides

Sometimes assessment projects are so massive that faculty and staff don’t have time to complete a rating scale rubric or descriptive rubric for every assignment. Perhaps they must read and score 1,500 entering students’ essays to decide who should enroll in a developmental writing course. Perhaps they must review 150 senior portfolios to get an overall sense of the writing skills of graduates. The major purpose of such summative assessments is not to give feedback to individual students but to make decisions within a tight time frame.

In these situations, holistic scoring guides may be a good choice. They do not have a list of things you’re looking for in completed assignments.

## Rubric for Descriptive Essay

Student Name: \_\_\_\_\_

CATEGORY	A - Above Standards	B - Meets Standards	C - Approaching Standards	D - Below Standards	F-Not Completed
Attention Grabber	The introductory paragraph has a strong hook or attention grabber that is appropriate for the audience.	The introductory paragraph has a hook or attention grabber, but it is weak, rambling or inappropriate for the audience.	The author has an interesting introductory paragraph but the connection to the topic is not clear.	The introductory paragraph is not interesting AND is not relevant to the topic.	N/A
Focus or Thesis Statement	The thesis statement names the topic of the essay and outlines the main points to be discussed.	The thesis statement names the topic of the essay.			There is no thesis statement.
Details	There are many relevant details to support the thesis.	There are some relevant details to support the thesis.	There are details to support the thesis, but some are irrelevant.	The essay lacks detail.	N/A
Descriptive Language / Imagery	The writer uses much descriptive language and imagery that enables the reader to picture the events of the essay.	The writer uses some descriptive language and imagery that enables the reader to picture the events of the essay.	The writer attempts to use descriptive language and imagery, but there are weaknesses.	The essay does not contain any or very little descriptive language or imagery.	N/A

## Samples of Holistic Scoring Rubrics

<b>Excellent writer 6</b>	The essay clearly states a position, provides support for the position, raises a counter argument or objection, and refutes it. The evidence, both in support of the position and in refutation of counterpositions, is persuasive and original (that is, drawn from the student's own observations, not borrowed). The essay tackles a significant objection or counterargument, not a trivial one. The relationships between position, evidence, counterargument, and refutation are clear, and the essay does not contain extraneous or irrelevant information.
<b>Good writer 5</b>	The essay states a position, supports it, raises an objection or counterargument, and refutes it. The essay may, however, contain one or more of the following ragged edges: evidence is not uniformly persuasive or original; the counter-argument is not a very serious threat to the position; one has to read between the lines to see relationships between ideas and some ideas seem out of place or irrelevant.
<b>Average Writer 4</b>	The essay states a position and raises a counterargument, but their is well developed. The objection or counterargument considered may lean toward the trivial. The essay may also seem disorganized. Nonetheless, the essay should receive a 4 in acknowledgement of the cognitive complexity of the task. It is more difficult to address arguments and counterarguments than it is simply to support one line of argument.
<b>Fair writer 3</b>	The essay states a position, provides strong and original evidence supporting the position, and is well organized. However, the essay does not address possible objections or counterarguments. Thus, even though the support seems stronger and the essay may be more well organized than the 4 essay, it should not receive more than a 3.
<b>Weak writer 2</b>	The essay states a position and provides some support, but it doesn't do it very well. Evidence is scanty, general, trivial or not original. The essay achieves its length largely through repetition of ideas and inclusion of irrelevant information. The overall impression is that the essay has been dashed off at the last minute.
<b>Very weak writer 1</b>	The essay does not state the student's position on the issue. Instead, it restates the position presented in the assignment and summarizes the evidence discussed in the text or in class. The essay may include an occasional I agree with, but it provides nothing beyond what was said in class or in the readings. The essay receives a 1 rather than a 0 because there may be some merit to being able to summarise what the author of the text said.



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Instead, they have short narrative descriptions of the characteristics of outstanding work, acceptable work, and unacceptable work.

Holistic scoring guides have two major shortcomings. First, it can be difficult for faculty and staff to assign scores consistently, because few student works will meet any one description precisely. Second, holistic scoring guides do not yield feedback on students' strengths and weaknesses.

### Creating Effective Rubrics

First, list your learning goals: the most important things you want students to learn by completing the assignment. Then draft the assignment itself. Next, use the drafted assignment to refine your learning goals into more complete evaluation criteria. Once you've spelled out the evaluation criteria, revise the assignment so it will elicit the work described in the criteria.

Rubrics are not difficult to create, although descriptive rubrics can be time-consuming. The suggestions that follow may be helpful.

- **Look for Models.** Rubrics are increasingly widespread assessment tools, so it makes sense to begin creating a rubric by looking for models that you can adapt to your circumstances. Start with a simple online search, as many colleges, programs, and faculty post rubrics there. Use such terms like *rubric generator*, *rubric builder*, or *create rubrics* to find them.
- **List the Things You're Looking For.** Start creating a rubric by listing the traits or criteria you want students to demonstrate in the completed assignment. Discussing these questions collaboratively with other faculty and staff can be immensely helpful. Even if you are developing a rubric for a course that you alone teach, it can be helpful to discuss these questions with other faculty in your discipline or in related disciplines. If the initial list you generate is long, it probably needs to be pruned. A long rubric makes assignments more time-consuming to score and makes it harder for your students to understand the chief skills that they are to focus on as they complete the assignment. Effective rubrics can have as few as three criteria and generally have no more than eight or so. Review your list and reduce it to the most significant tasks, skills, or abilities that you'd like students to demonstrate. Discard anything that isn't a high-priority goal or observable in this particular assignment. Now edit the list so that each criterion is expressed in explicit, concrete terms, preferably action verbs or clear adjectives.
- **Leave Room for the Ineffable and the Unexpected.** Some faculty and staff have found that students who are given rubrics along with an assignment do exactly what the rubric tells them to do but no more. The result is solid but somewhat flat and uninspired products. To encourage originality, creativity, effort, and the unexpected but delightful something extra, build these qualities into the rubric. You might tell students, for example, that 10 percent of the assignment score will be based on effort, originality, or insight.
- **Creating the Rating Scale.**
  - **Create at least three levels.** At a minimum, you will need to include performance levels for adequate and inadequate performances, plus an exemplary level to motivate students to do better than merely adequate work. Usually no more than five levels are needed.
  - **Label each level with names, not just numbers.** There is no hard and fast rule on how to label each performance level. Use descriptors that are clear and relevant to you, your colleagues, and



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your students. Labels that work well for one assignment or discipline may not work for another. Whatever labels you choose, make sure that they make clear which category represents minimally acceptable performance.

- **If you are developing a descriptive rubric, fill in the boxes.** In other words, create brief descriptors for each trait at each performance level. What exactly do you want to see in an exemplary assignment? And adequate assignment? What kind of work merits a failing grade? This task can be easier if you look at a few samples of student work. Choose a range of student work—good, bad, and mediocre.