Module: Assessment

Lesson 3: How to Design a Rubric

Two students get a B on a paper; one essay is well written, but low on original ideas, while the other is full of insight, but also full of typos. Does a B really tell either student what went wrong in the paper? Moreover, given the professor’s goals for the paper, should poor ideas and poor editing be valued the same (such that both students earn the same score)? Luckily, there is a tool that helps students understand the expectations for the assignment, allows the professor to objectively score their work, and gives clear feedback to the student on their successes and failures in a complex task. This useful assessment tool, the rubric, is the focus of today’s lesson.

Benefits of a Rubric

Rubrics are helpful for students: It serves as a guide for students to improve their performance by clearly showing them how their work will be evaluated and what is expected. It allows students to self-assess their work before handing it in – this could be informal or you can even require students to complete and hand in a rubric of their own with the work. Once you have read and scored the work, the rubric gives students a clear (and visual) way of identifying their strengths and areas in need of improvement. Lastly, the assessment feels more objective and consistent.

Rubrics are also helpful for you. The process of creating a rubric forces you to clarify your criteria in precise language. Once the rubric is set, the grading process is rather quick, in relative terms, because, although many people like to write a few comments to students in addition to the rubric, much of the feedback is already there! Using a rubric can help you feel more confident that your assessment is objective and consistent. When the grading is finished,
you can quickly survey student progress as a class and appropriately adjust your instruction. Moreover, you can use your rubric to plan in-class activities and out-of-class assignments that will prepare students to succeed at each part of the whole project.

**Design a Rubric**

The rubric is made of two main parts: the various parts of the assignment that are being evaluated (we’ll call them the traits) and a description of how they will be scored.

**Traits**

The various traits reflect the smaller things that make up the assignment. It is easiest when these are nouns, rather than more complex expressions. In writing assignments, these might include: thesis, grammar, use of sources, elegance of argument, or conclusion. In lab reports, these might include: measurement of variables, random sample, or hypothesis construction. Oral presentations might include: visuals and stage presence, while group projects might include attitude, communication, and collaboration. You can choose as few as one or two traits, or as many as five or six - ideally, this limited amount places emphasis on the most important traits and avoids being too trivial in evaluation. When making the rubric itself, it’s like a big table, with the trait normally listed in the left-most column.

**Performance**

The second step of rubric design is creating the scale to rate the level of performance of each trait. Most people use a scale of two to six levels. Some people favor a scale with an odd-number of levels so that the middle can represent a kind of neutral score, while others prefer an even number, so that an evaluation must be made to the positive or negative side of the scale. However, perhaps more important than the exact number of levels is your description of each
level and how they differ - this is where you will define for students how an excellent paper differs from a really good paper.

One way to think about this is that the levels are on a continuum, and thus have an additive or subtractive relationship. Level 5 does something better than level 4, which is better than 3, and so on. For example, a conclusion of a lab report might score a 5 if it meets five specific criteria, such as “restates the hypothesis” and “explains how data supports or refutes the hypothesis.” A score of four is then described as the conclusion meeting only four of those statements. This is a great way of combining a number of pass-fail criteria. Another example deals more with crafting an argument: one level requires that a student’s paper present a main idea from one reading; while the next level up requires the main point to synthesize multiple readings; and the highest level requires the same, but also that the paper give more meaning to the readings as a whole than a simple summary.

Another tip for writing descriptions is to keep the descriptions as supportive as possible. To be sure, the bottom level might be pretty straightforward: “this paper has no main idea,” but the other levels can be made to reflect a language that suggests “needs improvement, please revise” rather than “not good enough.” Notice that these phrases do not read “the student should” or “the paper must,” because they are not commands, but rather a description of the product itself: like “the paper has a clear thesis.” This is yet another way that the tone remains neutral.

Lastly, you might consider how to use the rubric as a tool for assigning a grade. Some people give each level a certain number of points or a letter grade equivalent. Others choose to only use certain traits to make-up the grading portion (allowing some traits to be feedback-only), while still others require that certain traits be satisfactorily met before the assignment is ready to be graded.
Using the Rubric

It is best practice to hand out and discuss rubrics before the assignment begins, as they help teach students what the expectations are. You can even involve students in the process of creating a rubric, either by having them list traits or describe the evaluation scale. I’ve found this to be a great reflection activity, for example, by considering what “good writing” is during a junior year writing course. It can also be really telling to see what traits the students list: they are often worried about different parts of the assignment than you are - and discussing these traits can provide you with a valuable learning opportunity. You can use the rubric to create a supportive infrastructure for the students - a combination of in-class activities, out-of-class assignments, and supplementary resources, like the writing center, to help them prepare the assignment.

While students are working on their assignment, it is really helpful to have them practice assessing sample or peer work, so that they become more familiar with the standards described in the rubric. You could also have students do a self-assessment before turning in the assignment by filling out the rubric for their own work. The rubric’s use throughout the working process, before, during and after the assignment, fulfills a key purpose of assessment by establishing a line of communication between those giving the feedback and those receiving it.

Evaluate Your Plan

Creating the perfect rubric is not easy, but there are many resources and examples. Considering past assignments, talking to colleagues, or surveying sample rubrics are all great ways to find the terms and phrases that help make your expectations clear.

When evaluating the rubric, you can reflect on these questions:

- Does the breakdown of criteria reflect what is important about the assignment?
• Do the levels of performance clearly describe your expectations?

• Is the description positive or at least generally supportive?

You might consider sharing your rubric with colleagues and revising based on some of their suggestions. Some colleagues might even ask to borrow or tweak the rubric for their own classes – another way to test the efficacy of the rubric. You might also make adjustments year to year, as you reuse and revise the rubric, adjusting to changing student skills or revising the instruction to help with weaker points.