

Workshop

Evaluating Critical Thinking and Writing: Clarifying Expectations

What do we mean when we tell students that our course focuses on “Critical Thinking” or that we will be evaluating the quality of their “Writing” throughout the semester? What criteria do we use to evaluate students' critical thinking and writing on our assignments? And, how can our evaluation criteria be used to guide instruction?

In this workshop, participants learned about a rubric that can be used across the disciplines to assess critical thinking and writing skills in UMass Amherst students' work. Participants also had access to a course-and-assignment-specific rubric adapted from the University-wide rubric by a UMass Amherst faculty member.

Participants also had to opportunity to:

- Explore ways to use a flexible tool (a rubric) to articulate critical thinking and writing expectations and to evaluate student performance;
- Learn how other instructors have incorporated a rubric into their courses;
- See the link between evaluation criteria and instruction; and
- Clarify their own expectations for critical thinking and writing and develop a plan for adapting a rubric for one of their assignments.

This workshop was jointly sponsored by the Institute for Teaching Excellence & Faculty Development (TEFD), the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment (OAPA), and the University Writing Program (UWP).



TEFD



UMass Amherst
Writing Program

Critical Thinking and Written Communication Rubric*

This rubric focuses on traits central to written communication and critical thinking in a range of non-fiction texts written for university courses. Written communication aims to accomplish a given rhetorical purpose with an audience, either implied or explicitly addressed, and uses language skillfully to develop meaning for readers. That purpose often entails critical thinking, defined by the AAC&U Critical Thinking VALUE Rubric, as “a habit of mind characterized by the comprehensive exploration of issues, ideas, artifacts, and events before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion.” Because each concept entails an array of traits, some of which would vary from discipline to discipline, this rubric focuses on selected traits essential to each concept and applicable more generally across many genres and disciplines.

Specific terms used in the rubric:

Rhetorical Purpose is a more global trait than the others, representing how an entire text coheres to achieve a communicative purpose for a given audience. That purpose might be, for instance, to synthesize material, to explain a complex concept, to interpret an object, to persuade, to develop an argument, to reflect on one’s learning—all to develop a specific position or thesis. The audience could be, for instance, a specialized disciplinary audience, a more general academic audience, a generalized non-academic audience, a specific person, and/or oneself. As these purposes and audiences suggest, a rhetorical purpose is often linked to a specific context or genre. While all aspects of a text work to achieve this purpose, this specific criterion focuses particularly on such aspects as the overall frame of the text, register, and tone.

Explanation of Issue focuses on how well the paper sets up the issue or question that is to be critically examined.

Student’s Position/Thesis focuses on the overall position or thesis around which the work is organized, particularly the aspects of recognizing complexity and framing the position/thesis in a nuanced way. While developed throughout the paper, it is also often stated in the opening and/or closing of the paper.

Sufficiency of Relevant Evidence/Data/Detail refers to the amount of relevant, credible evidence that is drawn on to develop ideas and back assertions. It could be from primary sources, including personal observations and experience, or secondary sources.

Interpretation/Evaluation of Evidence/Data/Detail refers to the logic and coherence of the interpretation throughout the work that aims to develop the student’s position or thesis.

Organization refers to structural features of the text: that is, ideas and information are reasonably grouped within and across paragraphs, and the text has a cohesive line of development, setting up the paper and moving the reader through it in an orderly way.

Syntax and Grammar refers to clarity in use of language. It focuses on aspects of language use that can impede or facilitate understanding, specifically the structure of words and phrases within sentences, accuracy of word usage, and grammar.

* This rubric was developed through UMass Amherst’s participation in the Association of American Colleges and Universities’s (AAC&U) multi-state, multi-institutional VALUE Institute to assess student learning outcomes. It has evolved over the three years of the UMass participation, specifically in adapting the VALUE Critical Thinking and Written Communication rubrics for our own local assessments. It represents the work of those leading the UMass assessment with feedback from instructors involved in the local assessment. For further information on its development, see Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) Institute, 2015–Present at the Office of Academic Planning and Assessment (OAPA) website: <https://www.umass.edu/oapa/student-experience/outcomes-or-graduation/learning-outcomes> (2019)

Critical Thinking and Written Communication Rubric

| | Capstone 4 | Milestone 3 | Milestone 2 | Benchmark 1 |
|---|--|---|---|--|
| Rhetorical Purpose | Coheres around a communicative purpose that focuses all elements of the work (e.g., overall frame, register, tone) for implied or explicitly addressed readers. | Coheres around a communicative purpose that focuses most, if not all, elements of the work for implied or explicitly addressed readers. | Loose sense of a communicative purpose and/or the work may deviate from the purpose in some ways. | Minimal sense of a communicative purpose that organizes the work for implied or explicitly addressed readers. That is, little sense of it having an intentional purpose for readers. |
| Explanation of Issue/Problem/Question | Issue/problem/question to be considered critically is stated clearly, presenting sufficient, relevant information for full understanding of it in relation to the purpose of the paper. | Issue/problem/question to be considered critically is stated, described, and clarified so that understanding is not seriously impeded by omissions. | Issue/problem/question to be considered critically is stated but description leaves some terms undefined, ambiguities unexplored, boundaries undetermined, and/or backgrounds unknown. | Issue/problem/question to be considered critically is stated without clarification or not stated at all. |
| Student's Position/Thesis | Overall position/thesis takes into account the complexities of an issue/topic. Parameters and/or limits of position are acknowledged; and/or others' points of view are synthesized within position. | Overall position/thesis takes into account the complexities of an issue/topic reasonably well. Parameters and/or limits of position and/or others' points of view are acknowledged within position. | Position/thesis is stated and goes beyond being a simplistic assertion but is overly generalized and/or doesn't acknowledge limits of position or others' points of view or does so only minimally. | Position/thesis is stated, but is simplistic and obvious, or jumbled/difficult to pin down. |
| Sufficiency of Relevant Evidence/Data/Detail | Sufficient relevant, credible information is taken from primary and/or secondary sources to back assertions—sufficient enough to be persuasive. | Reasonably sufficient relevant, credible information is taken from primary and/or secondary sources to back assertions. | Some but insufficient relevant or credible information is taken from primary and/or secondary sources to back assertions. | Very little relevant or credible information is provided to back assertions. |
| Interpretation/Evaluation of Evidence/Data/Detail | Interpretation/evaluation is logical and convincing (sufficient and credible) to develop a coherent analysis, synthesis, or argument. | Interpretation/evaluation is reasonably logical and convincing to develop a coherent analysis, synthesis, or argument | Some interpretation/evaluation is provided but may be insufficient, illogical, or too generalized in some places so as not to develop a coherent analysis, synthesis, or argument. | Little if any interpretation/evaluation is provided or it is lacking in logic or too generalized or obvious throughout. |
| Organization | Orderly and cohesive line of development, overall and within paragraphs, that effectively sets up the paper and moves the reader through it | Reasonably orderly and cohesive structure that moves the reader through the paper. May be a couple sections that seem out of order or jumbled. | Some general sense of order but it breaks down enough within or across some paragraphs to make it difficult for a reader to follow. | Little or no apparent order. Jumbled. |
| Control of Syntax and Grammar | Uses language skillfully, communicating meaning to readers with clarity. Virtually free of grammatical errors. | Uses language that generally conveys meaning to readers. May contain a few grammatical errors. | Syntax and wording may be awkward in some places. May have grammatical errors that obscure meaning in a few places. | Syntax, wording, and grammar often impede meaning |

| CATEGORY Score | 5 - exemplary | 4 – well done | 3 - accomplished | 2 - developing | 0 - lacking or incomplete |
|--|---|---|--|---|--|
| Executive Summary <i>5%</i> | Summary accurately and succinctly summarizes contents of report. Presents essential facts and conclusions. | Summary accurately summarizes contents of report. Presents essential facts and conclusions. | Summary provides an incomplete picture of the report. Key points are not clearly stated. | Summary is incomplete and does not clearly describe the report. Lacks key points and conclusions. | No executive summary |
| Explanation of issues <i>10%</i> | Issue to be considered critically is stated clearly, presenting sufficient, relevant information for full understanding of the problem. | Issue to be considered critically is stated, described, and clarified so that understanding is not seriously impeded by omissions. | Issue/problem/question to be considered critically is stated but description leaves some terms undefined, ambiguities unexplored, boundaries undetermined, and/or backgrounds unknown. | Issue to be considered critically is stated without clarification. | The issue is not clearly stated or described. |
| Opposing viewpoints <i>10%</i> | The paper considers both obvious and unobvious counter-examples and/or opposing positions. | The paper considers obvious counter-examples and/or opposing positions. | The paper may consider some obvious counter-examples, and/or opposing positions, but some obvious ones are missing. | The paper considers very few obvious counter-examples, and/or opposing positions. The argument is very one sided. | No counter-examples, , or opposing positions are considered. |
| Sufficient evidence <i>10%</i> | Sufficient relevant, credible information is taken from primary and / or secondary sources to back assertions – sufficient enough to be persuasive. Minimum of 10 sources, 5 of which are scientific. | Reasonably sufficient relevant, credible information is taken from primary and/or secondary sources to back assertions. Minimum of 10 sources, 5 of which are scientific. | Some, but insufficient relevant or credible information is taken from primary and/or secondary sources to back assertions. Minimum of 10 sources, 5 of which are scientific. | Very little relevant or credible information is provided to back assertions. <i>Or</i> 7-9 sources. <i>Or</i> 3-4 scientific sources. | No relevant or credible information is provided to back assertions. <i>Or</i> fewer than 6 sources. <i>Or</i> fewer than 2 scientific sources. |
| Interpretation of evidence <i>10%</i> | Interpretation / evaluation is logical and convincing (sufficient and credible) to develop a coherent analysis, synthesis, or argument. | Interpretation / evaluation is reasonably logical and convincing to develop a coherent analysis, synthesis, or argument. | Some interpretation / evaluation is provided, but may be insufficient, illogical, or too generalized in some places so as not to develop a coherent analysis, synthesis, or argument. | Little interpretation / evaluation is provided, or is it lacking in logic or too generalized or obvious throughout. | No interpretation / evaluation of evidence. |
| Synthesis vs. summary of ideas <i>10%</i> | An excellent synthesis. Paper presents multiple new ideas based on evidence collected from scholarly sources. | A good synthesis. Paper presents new ideas based on evidence collected from scholarly sources. | Good syntheses in some parts of the paper, but other sections mainly summarize. | One or two attempts at synthesis, but most of the paper summarizes ideas presented by other authors. | The paper only summarizes ideas presented by other authors. |

| | | | | | |
|--|---|---|--|--|---|
| Conclusions and related outcomes <i>10%</i> | Conclusions and related outcomes (consequences & implications) are logical and reflect an informed evaluation and ability to use evidence, including opposing viewpoints. | Conclusion is logically tied to a range of information, including opposing viewpoints, related outcomes (consequences and implications) are identified clearly. | Conclusion is logically tied to information because information is chosen to fit the desired conclusion. Some related outcomes (consequences and implications) are identified clearly. | Conclusion is inconsistently tied to some of the information presented; related outcomes (consequences and implications) are oversimplified. | Conclusion is unclear and related outcomes are not discussed. |
| Reference formatting <i>5%</i> | All sources are accurately cited and references follow APA format. | All sources are accurately documented, but 1 or 2 are not in the correct format. | All sources are accurately documented, but 3 or more are not in the correct format. | Sources are listed in the reference section but not cited in the text. | References are not directly cited in text. |
| Organization <i>10%</i> | Paper is well organized and all individual paragraphs are well organized. Ideas and details are logically presented. Sophisticated transitional sentences develop one idea from the previous one or identify logical relationships between ideas. | Paper is well organized with ideas and details placed in a logical order, But some paragraphs are disorganized in their presentation of ideas (not all sentences within the paragraph relate to the main topic of the paragraph). | Paper is not logically organized. . Ideas and details are not logically presented. Multiple paragraphs are disorganized in their presentation of ideas (not all sentences within the paragraph relate to the main topic of the paragraph). | Little to no organizational structure within the paper. Paragraphs lack internal coherence. Paper uses few or inappropriate transitions. Paragraphs lack topic sentences or main ideas, or may be too general or too specific to be effective. Some paragraphs do not relate to the paper topic. | Paper completely lacks organization. |
| Mechanics <i>10%</i> | Virtually free of grammatical errors. | May contain a few grammatical errors. | Occasional grammatical errors. | Occasional grammatical errors that obscure meaning in a few places. | Frequent grammatical errors that impede understanding |
| Style <i>10%</i> | Chooses words for their precise meaning and uses an appropriate level of specificity. Sentences are varied, yet clearly structured and carefully focused, not long and rambling. | Generally uses words accurately and effectively, but may sometimes be too general. Sentences generally clear, well structured, and focused, though some may be awkward or ineffective. | Uses relatively vague and general words, may use some inappropriate language. Sentence structure is generally correct, but sentences may be wordy, unfocused, repetitive, or confusing. | Too vague and abstract. Multiple awkward sentences; sentence structure is simple or monotonous. | Many awkward sentences, misuses words, uses inappropriate language. |

Strategies for modifying rubrics

1. Review the student learning outcomes for your course; select the outcomes you want to focus on. They should guide creation of both the rubric and assignment.
2. Create the rubric before you design the assignment. That is, identify the skills you want students to draw on in doing an assignment. It may seem odd to create the rubric first, but using the philosophy of backwards design, it makes a lot of sense. The rubric allows you to see what criteria you are hoping students will meet and to what levels of excellence. Once you know those, you can design an assessment that will allow you to see to what extent students have accomplished what you were working toward.
3. Carefully read the rubric you want to modify. Some rubrics include a page of definitions – be sure to read these closely. Then consider the specific criteria. Depending on the outcomes you want to focus on, you may want to modify a specific criterion, delete it altogether, and/or add a criterion. Next read across each criterion (usually listed in the first column of the rubric). Ask yourself – what core behavior changes as you moved across the rubric? (Ideally only one behavior changes for each criteria.) How do the descriptors of that core behavior change as you move across the rubric?
4. Refine the criteria you want to use in your rubric by considering the rows in the rubric. Will your course thoroughly address the expectations in every row, or just some of them? You may need to delete or modify the key criterion in some of the rows if your course does not thoroughly address them.
5. Consider the columns in the rubric you are working from and consider your class. Is your course an upper-level or lower-level course? The VALUE rubrics and UMass’s rubric were designed to measure student learning across the entire college curriculum (from freshmen to senior year). So an “A” paper in a freshman English class might only be at a Milestone 2 / Milestone 3 level – which is completely appropriate and expected. In a capstone / senior course, one might actually use the rubric as written, but in most other cases modification would be necessary. What level do you expect most students to be at the end of your course? If you expect students to be at Milestone 2 on the original rubric, use level 2 as your “meets expectations” column. You might use the original verbiage as written or modify it some. After you write your description of the “meets” level, circle the words in that section that can vary. These words will be the ones that you will change as you describe the other levels.

| Criteria | Exceeds expectations | Meets expectations | Approaching expectations | Does not meet expectations |
|----------|----------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| | | | | |

6. Now fill in the other columns. You'll need an "exceeds expectations" column to go above "meets expectations". Next you'll need an "approaching expectations" column and a "does not meet expectations" column.

Concept words that convey various degrees of performance might include:

- a. Depth...Breadth...Quality...Scope...Extent...Complexity...Degrees...Accuracy
- b. Presence to absence
- c. Complete to incomplete
- d. Many to some to none
- e. Major to minor
- f. Consistent to inconsistent
- g. Frequency: always to generally to sometimes to rarely

Additional Resources:

AAC&U VALUE Rubrics

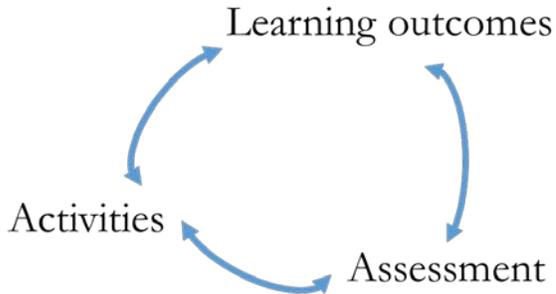
<https://www.aacu.org/value-rubrics>

Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE)

Institute, 2015–Present. UMass Amherst Office of Academic Planning and Assessment (OAPA)

<https://www.umass.edu/oapa/student-experience/outcomes-or-graduation/learning-outcomes>

7. Then you would go on to design an assignment (or assignments) that students could complete that the rubric could be used on (there is a lot of work and creativity hidden in this one step – and really it’s a whole other workshop).



Student learning outcomes
What do you want your students to be able to *know*, *do* or *be* by the end of your course?



Assessment
What would a student need to do to demonstrate that they had achieved the course learning outcomes?

Your rubric measures this.



Activities
What will the students do in class (and outside of class) to develop skills and abilities aligned with the learning outcomes? What instructional strategies and learning activities will help students achieve success?

8. And then you want to create class activities that allow students to practice and become proficient at demonstrating the knowledge, skills, and abilities that the rubric measures. These could include:

- Students apply the rubric to student work (names and critical info removed) from previous semesters, score the work, and then you lead a class discussion about each criterion as you provide your score.
- Low stakes writing assignments where students practice (and you provide feedback on) one criterion. For example, if you were interested in having students synthesize (vs. summarize information) then you could provide students with the following table:

| Summary | Synthesis |
|---|--|
| A basic reading technique. | An advanced reading technique. |
| Pulls together information in order to highlight the important points. | Pulls together information not only to highlight the important points, but also to draw your own conclusions. |
| Re-iterates the information. | Combines and contrasts information from different sources. |
| Shows what the original authors wrote. | Not only reflects your knowledge about what the original authors wrote, but also creates something new out of two or more pieces of writing. |
| Addresses one set of information (e.g. article, chapter, document) at a time. Each source remains distinct. | Combines parts and elements from a variety of sources into one unified entity. |
| Presents a cursory overview. | Focuses on both main ideas and details. |
| Demonstrates an understanding of the overall meaning. | Achieves new insight. |

First you provide them with examples of each and have them identify synthesis vs. summary in small groups.

Then you provide the class with 3-4 sources and ask them to synthesize the information in a well organized paragraph. You then provide feedback based on their ability to synthesize and create a well-organized paragraph.

9. Don't panic! This is an iterative process. You may find that you need to modify a rubric or assignment or class activity based on feedback from students and your own experience grading and evaluating student work. A good way to "test" and refine a rubric is to check it in relation to student work you have just graded: what are characteristics of work that "exceeds" expectations and how well do the descriptors in the rubric describe those characteristics? Similarly for work that "meets," "approaches," and "does not meet expectations"? This process can also help guide instruction as it further pinpoints where students are having difficulty.

UPCOMING EVENTS

**PROVIDE STUDENT WORK TO SUPPORT UMASS AMHERST'S PARTICIPATION IN A NATIONAL STUDENT LEARNING ASSESSMENT PROJECT:
THE VALUE INSTITUTE**



Those of you teaching upper-division courses already received an invitation from OAPA asking you to consider participating in this project. Unlike other national assessment efforts that have relied on standardized tests to study student performance, this assessment project uses anonymized samples of actual student work to assess students' performance in a number of areas, including Critical Thinking and Written Communication. This student work, collected in upper-division courses, is scored by a group of faculty members from colleges and universities across the country. These faculty members use the AAC&U's VALUE Rubrics for Critical Thinking and Written Communication to score this work.

Note: The UMass Amherst-developed Critical Thinking and Written Communication rubric you are using in today's workshop came out of our University's participation in this project.

Please consider submitting student work for this effort (let OAPA know by **Monday, March 18th** if you are interested). More information on the project is available at: <http://www.umass.edu/oapa/student-experience/outcomes-or-graduation/learning-outcomes>. Please contact Martha Stassen (mstassen@umass.edu) to express your interest, learn about next steps, and/or ask any questions.

**CONTEMPLATIVE PEDAGOGY WORKING GROUP MEETING
FRI., MARCH 22, 2019 | 10AM-11:30AM |
TEFD CONFERENCE ROOM, 301 GOODELL**



Come join colleagues interested in using contemplative exercises to deepen learning. For more information about contemplative pedagogy, please visit our CP page (www.umass.edu/tefd/contemplative-pedagogy).

**USING THE CONCEPT OF GENRE TO DESIGN DISCIPLINE-SPECIFIC WRITING ASSIGNMENTS*
MON., MARCH 25, 2019 | 11:45AM-1:15 PM |
TEACHING COMMONS, DU BOIS LIBRARY 26TH FL.**

In this workshop for faculty and graduate student instructors of junior-year writing and other writing-intensive courses across disciplines, Anne Herrington (Professor of English Emerita) will provide guidance on using the rhetorical concept of genre as an aid for developing writing assignments designed to engage students in using ways of reasoning and writing valued in your discipline. To begin, she will provide a framing rationale with examples from disciplinary assignments, both ones for majors and GenEd. The workshop will also include time for developing or redesigning one of your own assignments. Please RSVP to Haivan Hoang (hhoang@umass.edu) with the names and department affiliations of attendees. Lunch will be provided.

Professor Herrington's publications have included *Persons in Process: Four Stories of Writing & Personal Development in College* (co-authored with Marcia Curtis; NCTE, 2000); *Writing, Teaching, & Learning in the Disciplines* (co-edited with Charles Moran; MLA, 1992); *Genre across the Curriculum* (co-edited with Charles Moran; Utah State UP, 2005), and *Teaching the New Writing: Technology, Change, and Assessment in the 21st-Century Classroom* (co-edited with Kevin Hodgson and Charles Moran; Teachers College Press, 2009). She is also past Director of the Writing Program and the Western Massachusetts Writing Project.

**Supported by a Mutual Mentoring Team Grant from the UMass Amherst Institute for Teaching Excellence & Faculty Development*

**LOOKING FOR MORE EVENTS RELATED TO TEACHING?
PLEASE VISIT THE TEFD WEBSITE (umass.edu/tefd).**

