

Writing Rubrics: Avoiding Pitfalls

In my job, I see a lot of grading rubrics. These are often for final papers, class projects, portfolios, and a whole host of things in between. In my own class, I use rubrics for everything, because the entire course is based on written assessments. Here are some questions I've learned to ask myself after writing *a lot* of (sometimes really bad) rubrics:

1. Do you know what you're assessing?

This always seems like such a simple question, but after teaching both high school and college history, I've found this is the thing most people mess up for themselves first (including myself). What is the purpose of your assignment?

For example, my students in History 1302 watch a documentary on Reconstruction. This is their assignment:

After watching the Reconstruction documentary, answer the following questions:

- What is one thing from the documentary that confirmed an understanding that you had about the post-Civil War period in the United States?
- What is one thing you learned in the documentary that challenged an understanding you had about the post-Civil War period in the United States?
- Provide at least one specific connection between an event, trend, argument, or circumstance in the documentary and that is unresolved today. Be sure to explain how this connection is specifically similar (beyond just simple categories of oppression, race, gender etc.).

Answers must be **specific** and provide **evidence and/or examples**. These should come from your notes, the documentary (especially where asked), or scholarly sources that are **cited** (citation style does not matter).

Submissions must be in PDF or Word format.

The **only** thing I require of them (other than watching the documentary) is to answer the questions with a specific answer and specific historical evidence. Notice that I do not dictate anything about:

- Length
- Grammar
- Exclusions

Here is the rubric:

Criteria	Ratings		Pts
Question 1	10 to > 6pts Response answers the question and provides specific details/evidence to support confirmed understanding.	6 to >0pts Response answers the question, but may provide little or no specific details.	10
Question 2	10 to > 6pts Response answers the question and provides specific details/evidence to support confirmed understanding.	6 to >0pts Response answers the question, but may provide little or no specific details.	10
Question 3	20 to > 12pts Response answers the question and provides specific details/evidence to support confirmed understanding.	12 to >0pts Response answers the question, but may provide little or no specific details.	20

This rubric is incredibly simplistic, but tells students exactly what to expect when I am looking at their assignments. They do not have to ask me if “grammar counts” or “how long does it have to be.” They know those things aren’t being assessed. They know that it needs to be as long as necessary to respond to the question specifically and with enough historical evidence to completely address the question. On the rubric in our LMS (Canvas), I add additional feedback for students directly onto the rubric when I grade the assignments so they know how to improve from there.

Could I have added a third column to make this more complex? Absolutely! Keep in mind that not every rubric needs to be so complex that students feel trapped into specific criteria though. My rule of thumb is that if there is room for flexibility, always give it.

2. Do you want the points to be allocated that way?

One of the struggles I had to learn primarily through trial-and-error was how to allocate points. This is especially difficult on a multi-part rubric for things like projects or for an essay where the various components are broken down into individual parts for grading. How much should an introduction be worth versus a conclusion?

Here's an example from an UnEssay project I did a few semesters ago in class:

Administrative (25pts)

Reading Plan

5-4 pts	3-1 pts	Opts
Reading plan outlines a clear reading strategy, as well as a general idea of how the student intends to budget time, balance other courses and extracurriculars, etc. Plan incorporates ideas based on "How to Read for History."	Reading plan outlines a strategy for reading that may leave out certain aspects of the process, such as how to budget time or may be vague. Plan may also be incomplete or not answer all aspects of the posed questions. Plan may incorporate ideas based on "How to Read for History."	Plan does not answer the questions posed or is not turned in.

Proposal

10-6pts	5-1pts	Opts
Proposal outlines clear plan for the project/essay the student wants to complete. This includes at least one potential specific historical trend the project intends to focus on, as well as specific examples of that trend gleaned from the research thus far. The proposal includes either a rough outline or sketch of the final product.	Proposal outlines a plan for the project/essay that the student wants to complete that may be slightly vague in concept. The proposal may include a historical trend that the project intends to focus on, or the student may still have substantial questions about where their focus should be. The proposal does not include specifics, such as examples or an outline/sketch of the final product.	Proposal does not meet basic requirements, or is not submitted.

Guidance Checks (5pts each)

5-4pts	3-1pts	Opts
Student is prepared for conference with prepared notes, questions, comments, etc. for the instructor. Student is prepared to engage with questions about the material and/or their progress in their project. At first conference, student has set reachable goal for second conference.	Student has clearly done some research or work toward the project, but is not prepared to engage with the instructor about the material. Student may or may not have notes, questions, comments, etc. prepared to show/share. At first conference, student has either not set	Student has not started research or prepared for the conference.

In this case, 25pts (out of 125pts total) of the UnEssay were dedicated to "Administrative" tasks like proposing a project and turning in a plan to me about how the student planned to complete their outside reading for the project.

Since outside reading was critical to this project, I really should have made this Reading Plan more of the overall score. Many students didn't take the task seriously since it was 1) the very start of the semester, and 2) only 5pts. Additionally, I should have done a better job of explaining why the reading plan was important for me as their professor in helping them stay on track.

In the end, it's important to not only think of the point significance of a category to the overall success of an essay or project, but to communicate that to students at the onset.

3. Does your rubric build off itself?

Overwhelmingly, this is the biggest issue that I find on other educators' rubrics when they are dismayed at student failure rates on assignments. So what does it mean for a rubric to build off itself?

Let's use this [Core Objective Assessment Rubric for Personal Responsibility from the University of North Texas \(2014\)](#) as an example:

	Advanced (4)	Proficient (3)	Developing (2)	Beginning (1)
Describes the ethical issue	Skillfully describes the ethical issue	Adequately describes the ethical issue	Partially describes the ethical issue in broad terms	Minimally describes the ethical issue
Analyzes the ethical issue	Skillfully analyzes the ethical issue	Adequately analyzes the ethical issue	Partially analyzes the ethical issue	Minimally analyzes the ethical issue
Suggests steps to solve the ethical issue	Skillfully suggests steps to solve the ethical issue	Adequately suggests steps to solve the ethical issue	Partially suggests steps to solve the ethical issue	Minimally suggests steps to solve the ethical issue
Justifies the suggested solution to the ethical issue	Skillfully justifies the suggested solution to the ethical issue	Adequately justifies the suggested solution to the ethical issue	Partially justifies the suggested solution to the ethical issue	Minimally justifies the suggested solution to the ethical issue
Discusses possible consequences of solution	Skillfully discusses possible consequences of solution	Adequately discusses possible consequences of solution	Partially discusses possible consequences of solution	Minimally discusses possible consequences of solution

Now, this rubric is problematic for a number of reasons. First, it doesn't seek to define "ethics" within the context of "personal responsibility." Moreover, however, it provides no sense of what extremely subjective terms like "skillfully" or "adequately" mean. This ties us back to both Question 1 and the ideas we'll explore momentarily in Question 4.

To address the idea of building off itself though, in every sense, this rubric assumes at each level after "describes the ethical question" that the assignment has done that correctly. If the student *hasn't* correctly established or described an ethical issue, they cannot possibly analyze

that issue, suggest steps to solve it, justify solutions to it, or discuss solutions to it. By building all subsequent portions of the rubric from the first step, the creators of this assessment have either created a grading system they cannot possibly abide by or doomed a large portion of students to failure.

Here is an example from one of my essay exams of a rubric that does *not* build from itself:

	Explanation	Points
Thesis	<p>Essay begins with a thesis, which makes an argument that responds to the prompt, rather than just restating or rephrasing the prompt. Thesis statements should lay out at least one specific argument that addresses the entire prompt.</p> <p>Thesis statements receiving full credit should lay out three arguments that address complexity of argumentation.</p>	15pts
Argumentation	<p>Within the thesis statement and the body of the essay, there are complex and/or counter arguments. This can look like:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presenting both similarities AND differences • Presenting both continuities AND changes • Presenting both causes AND effects • Ranking causes or effects in order of importance and using evidence and analysis to sufficiently support that ranking (not just simply stating it) 	20pts
Evidence	<p>Each argument must be supported by specific (ex: proper noun) evidence. Essays should include at least five (5) pieces of specific evidence to support each argument.</p>	15pts

Each category of this rubric is evaluated separately. For example, even if a student does not present a strong thesis, but manages to present arguments within the body of the essay, they can still get points for argumentation. Or, even if they don't have strong arguments at all, but manage to tell me very specifically about the time period in general, they will get points for evidence.

Of course, some educators may decide that constructing a rubric that builds off itself is, in fact, what they are going for. There are a variety of reasons why someone might do this, and they are completely valid as well! For example, in a science or math class where the steps to a lab or problem are contingent upon getting the first step correct, a rubric that reflects this process is certainly appropriate. This ties back to Question 1. Or, for example, in an upper-level writing class where the instructor wants students to understand that the evidence used in an argument must be contextually correct for that argument and tie back to a central thesis, this would be a correct approach. In the end, how one approaches this particular issue is entirely up to the instructor and their understanding of the course and assignment objectives.

4. Does the rubric make sense?

Finally, does the rubric make sense? This probably seems like a ridiculous question once you've answered Questions 1-3, but it's still important to ask. The best way I've found to answer this is to actually do the assignment myself and try to grade it. This probably seems like a pain, but I've always lived by the logic that I'm not going to assign anything I wouldn't do myself. It also gives you a good "example" essay or project that you can upload to the LMS for students as a framework. I have one of these for each writing assignment.

In testing your own rubric, you can see whether the points make sense, or whether your wording is either too vague or too specific. After all, if you're an expert and *you* can't figure it out – your students sure can't. Writing the assignment for yourself as a trial run will also help you hit some of the roadblocks your students might stumble upon ahead of time and either fix them or have answers ready. I've found that sometimes my instructions weren't entirely clear and needed to be rewritten for clarity, rather than the rubric.

In any case, it's important to remember that rubrics are meant to guide students on expectations as much as they are a tool for you to grade with (which you certainly don't even have to).

Be flexible – ask for student input when it's appropriate! And if it doesn't work, don't feel defeated. Like writing, it's a journey.