

Grading the Rubric Way

Trying to work our way through a mountain of student papers is just one of the challenges we face as college professors. When I was in college learning how to be an English teacher, we were taught to mark (or even correct) student errors so that the students would know the proper way to use a word or phrase a sentence. After more than twenty years in the classroom, I've come to the conclusion that students don't really learn how to write correctly if I correct their errors for them, and that correcting their papers takes way too much time—especially if I'm teaching four or more classes. After I've spent an hour or so on ONE paper, I'm not much in the mood for reading those other thirty-nine or so. Does that sound familiar? Besides, I'm a firm believer that education is a two-way street: the responsibility for learning rests as strongly with the student's efforts as it does with my teaching.

Giving the situation a lot of thought, I remembered a holistic scoring rubric I had used when evaluating essays for the Educational Testing Service. Why couldn't something like that work for my students? After much research and liberal borrowing of materials (with authors' permission, of course), I developed a rubric for my freshman English classes (Example 2). When using this rubric, I simply circle the appropriate remarks and post the grade at the bottom of the sheet. The students then have the responsibility of finding specific errors and correcting them. Being a normally verbose teacher, I do indeed make many comments on the paper itself, but having the rubric frees me to respond to the actual content of the paper, not just to the mechanics and grammar. I don't even feel obligated to mark every error. Instead, students can take their paper with my remarks and the rubric to the Writing Center, a friend, or even to me and discuss how to best improve their writing.

That system works well in an English class, but would it work in other classes, too? The answer is definitely yes! While my freshman English rubric may contain specific elements I'm looking for, the general rubric contains basic concepts that are important to any piece of writing: focus, content, organization, coherence or flow, and correctness. When you use a rubric for evaluating student writing, I suggest strongly that students know up front exactly what you will be basing your grade upon. Give them a copy of the rubric for a reference. Then, as you read through the piece of writing, you can simply mark boxes on the rubric (Example 1). Often, you may not have to mark

anything at all on the paper itself. (I usually write broad comments, such as “You have a major problem with subject-verb agreement. Check your sentences for this error.” If a student is not familiar with this error and does not have access to a writing or tutoring service for assistance, there is certainly a plethora of resources on the Internet that can teach grammar or mechanics concepts such as this.)

Of course using a rubric is just one way of approaching the evaluation of writing, but it can be an effective tool. Give it a try and see if it works for you.

Guide to Scoring Student Writing

Grading students' writing can often be an overwhelming task; however, with the use of a scoring rubric, that task can be made much easier. Follow the steps below using the Grading Rubric, and your response to student writing can be effective for the student and simple for you. A rubric with your marks and grade assignment can be completed for each student.

1. Know what you're looking for; have in mind the criteria for judging the papers. (It also helps if the students know those criteria before they write.)
2. Read holistically. In other words, read through the paper without stopping. After you've read the paper, then make any comments you need to make regarding the content of the paper.
3. Comment on content and global issues such as organization and development first. Then address any grammar/mechanics errors you think necessary.
4. Read supportively; try to reward what is done well, rather than search for small errors.
5. Realize that you don't have to mark or identify every error; even more importantly, you do not have to *correct* anything that a student has written. The writing is the responsibility of the student. You may make a check mark on the rubric itself to help students identify the areas that need improvement, or you may want to include a note about a common grammar problem, but your job is not to edit the student's paper for him/her.
6. Use the rubric as a short-cut to comments. Place a check mark next to any statement that exemplifies what you want to say to the student. When you have marked the pertinent remarks, you may use those remarks to substantiate any grade you assign to the student's writing. Likewise, the student can see what his/her strengths and weaknesses are by reviewing the rubric you have used to evaluate his/her writing.

Example 1: Sample Grading Rubric

Merits a Grade of A—Excellent in all areas

- Superior ideas and insights; clear and complex; witty or especially original
- Purpose clear throughout (unity)
- Expectations established and fulfilled very satisfactorily; satisfying closure (organization)
- Ideas connected clearly and smoothly (coherence); smooth transition between paragraphs
- Superior development (concreteness and/or examples, details, support)
- Writer is aware of audience
- Writer seems to mean what is said; genuine involvement in subject responding to the assignment
- Mature style; effective use of language
- Relatively free of any errors distracting to literate readers

Merits a Grade of B/C—Adequate in all areas

- Clear, maybe less insightful or complex than a 4
- Purpose clear throughout (unity)
- Expectations established and fulfilled (organization)
- Ideas connected clearly (coherence)
- Good development with examples and support
- Some audience awareness
- Writer engaged with subject; adherence to assignment
- Some sentence variety; appropriate word use
- Relatively free of major errors

Merits a Grade of C/D—Weaknesses in some areas

- Ideas somewhat clear, though not especially complex or insightful
- May include some information that detracts from central purpose
- Some expectations established but not fulfilled (organization)
- Ideas connected, but perhaps awkwardly (coherence)
- Adequate development with only a little support
- Some audience awareness--may shift audiences
- Adherence to assignment; occasional sense of engagement of writer with subject
- Adequate style
- Some errors, but not so many that writer seems illiterate

Merits a Grade of F—Major Weaknesses

- Ideas generally unclear
- Purpose unclear; writer seems to be searching for a topic
- Few expectations established or fulfilled;
- Disconnected ideas
- Paper short and undeveloped
- Audience not apparent
- Occasional adherence to assignment
- Simplistic writing style (i.e., short, choppy sentences)
- So many errors that the writer seems to lack control of standard written English

Score _____

Example 2: Freshman English Rubric

	A (attains excellence in all four areas)	B (attains a high level of mastery in all four areas)	C (must be at least competent in all four areas)	D (marginally below minimum college standards in any <i>one</i> of the four areas)	F (clearly well below minimum college standards in <i>at least one</i> of the four areas)
Content	Interesting topic handled with intelligence, originality, and depth; wealth of supporting material, smoothly integrated into the text; tone is evident and maintained throughout.	Content is above average; worthwhile topic; satisfactory depth of development; supporting details for the thesis and topic sentences are specific, concrete, and plentiful.	Worthwhile topic; supporting material for thesis and topic sentences is general and abstract rather than specific and concrete.	Trivial subject; very few supporting details for the thesis and topic sentences.	Consists of unsupported generalities and/or the repetition of commonplace ideas; lacks originality and insight.
Organization	Material is unified and well focused; organization is clear, logical and purposeful throughout the essay.	Material is unified and well focused; pattern of organization is clear, logical, and well executed.	Organization is clear, logical, and coherent.	Not logically organized; no clear organizational pattern.	Does not follow the instructions given for the assignment; rambling, disorganized and incoherent.
Style	Thought is evident in the paper; text is clear and credible; purpose is obvious; richly varied sentence structure; text is fluid, polished, balanced, graceful, and energetic.	Fluent, clear, and forceful language use; varied sentence structure; smooth and logical transitions; "voice" is apparent.	Ideas are clear, but sentence patterns may be simplistic, overly repetitive, and/or lacking transition. Language is overly casual or colloquial.	Sentences lack clarity and grace; overly casual, colloquial, or grammatically substandard language; little variety in sentence patterns.	Composed primarily of simple sentences; no sentence pattern variety; little or no transition between sentences or paragraphs.
Mechanics	Displays a mastery of punctuation and conventional written English; contains no major errors; contains no structural or grammar problems such as dangling/misplaced modifiers, shifts in viewpoint, pronoun-antecedent agreement, etc; words are spelled correctly; mechanically perfect (or nearly so).	Displays control of punctuation and conventional written English; no major errors; may contain slight errors in punctuation and spelling.	Contains no run-on sentences, subject-verb agreement, or fragment errors. Spelling, punctuation, and grammar are generally correct.	Lacks control of punctuation and conventional English; may contain run-on sentences, subject-verb agreement or fragment problems.	Greater degree of error than a D paper. More than five major errors will result in a grade of F.