Grading with Rubrics: Developing a Fair and Efficient Assessment Tool

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When I pose the question, "Why do we assign grades?" to a group of faculty and graduate instructors, at least one person jokingly replies "because we have to"; however, once the laughter dies down, most offer responses that fall into the following categories:

- To evaluate student work
- To communicate student achievement
- To help students learn and demonstrate their learning

Ideally, grading serves the interests of both you as an instructor and your students. A grade, and the feedback that goes along with it, can assess present performance as well as indicate how a student might improve for future assignments or courses. Some of us find it important to measure student work and learning against a set standard and recognize the value of communicating this information to students, to potential employers, or to graduate and professional schools through a transcript. Grades can also motivate students to improve, can affirm their interests, learning, and abilities, and can even encourage them to seek out different courses or majors.

Most of us would agree that grades can be and should be used in ways that facilitate teaching and learning. And yet, grading remains a particularly vexed, often time-consuming, activity for the majority. Rather than a task we anticipate with great joy (imagine), it is typically an obligation we dread. Frequently, this trepidation results from the different meanings grades can have for students and instructors in any learning environment. If our grading system or expectations aren't clear, misunderstandings occur and these meanings begin to adversely affect learning. Students complain they get too little or too much feedback to know how to respond in future assignments. They may also perceive the grade as subjective ("She gave me a C") or as a marker of the professor's idiosyncrasies ("I don't know what he wants"). Alternately, we begin to suspect students are not reading our comments carefully, if at all, and wonder whether the time we spend grading is ultimately worth it.

Clarifying your expectations for the assignment is an important first step toward creating an effective grading system, one which accurately reflects differences in student performance, lays out clear criteria so that students can gauge their own progress and, most importantly, is efficient, consistent and fair. Grading rubrics provide one means to create such a system. As a flexible assessment tool, rubrics can help reconcile instructor and student perceptions about grades and help students learn to evaluate their own work according to these standards. As a benefit to you, rubrics save on grading time while still offering specific feedback. They also help make the grading process more objective, particularly for multifaceted assignments or for assignments graded by a teaching team. Rubrics can also help instructors in sequenced courses communicate about student performance. For your students, other advantages include helping them learn what is expected of them for each assignment and what areas to focus on for future ones. By making instructor expectations specific and visible, rubrics also help level the playing field for first-generation college students or any students who may find confusing or vague the language commonly used to define academic skills (e.g., critical thinking or argumentative thesis).

A grading rubric typically takes the form of a grid

that identifies and describes various levels of student performance for each of a task-specific set of criteria. Most commonly, rubric columns list three to five levels of performance or achievement and the rows list criteria being assessed. Each cell of the table describes what performance of a particular criterion looks like at a particular level. (See Figure 1 for a partial sample rubric.)

Figure 1.

Sample Rubric for an Oral Presentation			
Levels of ➡ **Achievement** **Criteria** ⬇	Superior	Competent	Need Work
Organization	Thesis clearly stated and developed; specific examples are appropriate and develop claims.	Most information presented in logical sequence which audience can follow.	Audience cannot understand presentation because there is no sequence of information.
Student Knowledge	Student demonstrates full knowledge by answering all class questions with explanations and elaboration.	Student is at ease with expected answers to all questions, but fails to elaborate.	Student does not have grasp of information and cannot answer questions about subject.

More specifically, to develop a rubric that functions as both a grading and teaching tool, I recommend creating a handout that includes a detailed description of the assignment at the top of the page and the rubric beneath it. (NB: I find it easiest to create a table in Microsoft Word; there are also websites such as the Rubric Machine at http://www.thinkinggear.com/tools/ or Rubistar at http://rubistar.4teachers.org that will create the table for you.) This handout will not only help you while you are grading, but can be easily distributed and discussed with your class when you make the assignment.

Begin your rubric by identifying your criteria for scoring or evaluating each student's work and place this list in the rows of your table. (See "Questions to Ask" below for a quick list of steps.) These criteria may range from concrete skills to more abstract concepts and may include such items as content knowledge, argument, organization, creativity, or understanding of problem. Among other advantages, rubrics are useful when grading student performance that relies on higher order thinking or other complex processes. Whatever criteria you choose, they should be ones students must combine for their scholarly work to be successful. By defining the criteria carefully, you will provide each student with detailed feedback on how well or poorly he or she did on specific parts of the whole as well as with an overview of the student's strengths and weaknesses for the assignment.

Questions to Ask When Constructing a Rubric	
Questions	**Actions**
1. What criteria or traits must be present in the student's work to ensure that it is high in quality?	Include these nouns or noun phrases as rows in your rubric (e.g., Clarity, Organization, Eye Contact, Formulation of Problem, etc.).
2. How many levels of achievement do I wish to illustrate for students? (Walvoord & Anderson recommend using 3 to 5 levels.)	Include these as columns in your rubric and label them (e.g., Excellent, Average, Poor, or Not Yet Competent, Marginally Competent, Competent, Sophisticated, etc.).
3. For each criterion or trait, what is a clear description of performance at each achievement level?	Include descriptions in the appropriate cells of the rubric.
4. What are the consequences of performing at each level of quality?	Add descriptions of consequences to the commentaries in the rubric.
5. What numerical rating scheme will I use in the rubric?	Add this to the rubric in a way that fits in with your grading philosophy. Use only as many levels as you need.
6. When I use the rubric, what aspects work well and what aspects need	Try out the rubric and revise accordingly.

improvement?	

For the next step, label the columns with a scale for evaluating student performance based on these factors (e.g., superior, competent, needs work; or exemplary, proficient, marginal, unacceptable). As you determine the labels or numbers for this scale, be sure to consider how many levels it needs to be both useful and clear. Research suggests 3-5 levels are optimal (Walvoord & Anderson, 1998). Determine, too, how much weight you'll give to each criterion when grading. Is organization more important to you than grammar or mechanics? How much more-20 out of 100 points or only 10? Communicating your priorities for the assignment to your students provides guidance as they work, showing what components make up the assignment and which components are most important.

The final step will likely take the most time. Once you've determined the criteria and levels of performance, fill in each cell of the table with a description of student performance at each achievement level. You'll find as you complete this section that precision is important-what does it mean that a student demonstrates excellent knowledge or poor problem-solving skills? These descriptions will provide the specific feedback on each student's performance that you can later circle or highlight as you grade.

After creating a rubric, test it on a student's work; you may find that it needs to be calibrated. As with all grading systems, issues of validity, reliability and fairness still apply. Be sure your rubric aligns with reasonable standards and the curriculum; or, if you are part of a grading team, have everyone test the rubric first to standardize your grading expectations.

Although a rubric can be time-consuming to formulate, in the long run it saves time spent grading and explaining grades, while keeping us objective, fair, and unbiased. One caveat: Rubrics are not self-explanatory, and you may find that students don't instinctively know how to use them; however, discussing the rubric in class when you make the assignment is an excellent way to promote both student understanding and self-assessment. If used in this way, rubrics can help clarify what the grade means by explaining

standards, desirable qualities, and common pitfalls beforehand. As such, a rubric can provide a benchmark for students, helping them see their strengths and weaknesses on a given assignment in order to make future progress in those areas. In the end, rubrics help accomplish the three goals for grading I so often hear: Not only do they help instructors evaluate and communicate about student achievement, they can also help students learn and demonstrate their learning in more effective ways.

References available in the TRC library or on-line:

Authentic Assessment Toolbox: http://jonathan.mueller.faculty.noctrl.edu/toolbox/rubrics.htm. (An excellent, online article explaining the hows and whys of analytic and holistic rubric).

Frisbee, D. A & Waltman, K.K. *Developing a Personal Grading Plan*. NCME Instructional Module for Educational Measurement: Issues and Practice, Fall 1992. Available on-line at http://depts.washington.edu/grading/plan/frisbie1.htm#foot1#foot1.

Huba, M.E. & Freed, J.E. (2000) *Learner-Centered Assessment on College Campuses*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon.

Stevens, D.D. & Levi, A. (2005) *Introduction to Rubrics: An Assessment Tool to Save Grading Time, Convey Effective Feedback, and Promote Student Learning*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Walvoord, B.E. & Anderson, V.I. (1998). *Effective Grading: A Tool for Learning and Assessment*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. (NB: Walvoord and Anderson call rubrics Primary Trait Analysis (PTA) Scales).