Teaching with Writing (TWW) Tip

Revising Writing Rubrics: Two options

Many instructors use rubrics to help students understand the goals of assignments, to clarify their feedback on writing, and to save time in assessment. While rubrics can be very helpful in promoting student learning, they are by no means simple to construct and can even produce some unwelcome consequences. It can be challenging to codify (and quantify) the features of effective writing, leading to vague categories. At other times, instructors may feel hemmed in or confined by rubrics, forced to specify everything that could be a point of assessment. This tip presents original rubric language and suggestions for revisions to deal with these concerns.

Features present or absent vs. qualitative differences between features: Often when we think of writing projects, it's easy to divide them into sections like introduction/body/conclusion, summary/interpretation, or introduction/methods/results/discussion. However, if a rubric merely identifies the presence of this textual feature, i.e., 10 points for introduction, without describing the features of an effective introduction, it can be harder to select a score.

Original: Introduction _____ 10 pts

                              Methods _____ 20 pts

                              Results _____ 30 pts

                              Discussion _____ 40 pts

Using a rubric that identifies specific textual features can help students to understand the functions of individual sections of a document and to visualize the differences between excellent, adequate, and substandard work.

Revised:

	Excellent	Sufficient	Insufficient
Introduction	Introduction specifies the experimental goals and establishes a context in research (10 pts)	Introduction specifies the experimental goals (7 pts)	Introduction incorrectly identifies experimental goals or is incomplete/absent (5-0 pts)
Methods	Methods section describes equipment and interventions correctly and concisely (20 pts)	Methods section describes equipment and interventions correctly (15 pts)	Methods section contains gaps or errors (10-0 pts)

Every student who scores "sufficient" in both categories earns 22 points (73%) while every student who scores "excellent" in both earns 30 (100%). It clearly differentiates the observable features of excellent and sufficient attempts and removes the range of potential scores between. The "insufficient" category still employs a range to differentiate between a failed effort and the total absence of a required textual feature.

Itemized list of features vs. a range of acceptable strategies: While some assignments may require specific organizational structures, types of evidence, or other formal requirements, rubrics can also be used when you prefer to give students more freedom in their strategy of response. The rubric below not only requires the instructor to differentiate between potentially overlapping categories, but it also requires multiple distinctions between adjacent categories (what makes a particular performance better than fair but worse than excellent?).

Original:

	Excellent	Good	Fair	Poor	Failure
Summary					
Evidence					
Analysis					
Writing					

Rather than creating a grid and drawing absolute (and perhaps arbitrary) distinctions between categories, instructors might use a sliding scale to indicate the degree to which a student's strategies of response meet assessment goals and expectations.

Revised:

Summary is concise and well detailed ⟷ Summary lacks detail or is overbroad

Selects strong textual evidence ⟷ Textual evidence is weak or insufficient

Rubrics of this kind identify textual features of strong writing but do not necessarily specify what counts as "well-detailed summary" or "strong" textual evidence. Rubrics like these can be useful for assessing drafts in progress and encouraging revision when accompanied by comments and suggestions.

For more information on rubric design, check out our tip on Backward Design for Grading Rubrics.

Learn more

- Danielle D. Stephens and Antonia J. Levi, Introduction to Rubrics
- Maja Wilson, Rethinking Rubrics in Writing Assessment
- Association of American Colleges & Universities VALUE rubric development project

Further support: Visit us online at http://writing.umn.edu/tww. To schedule a phone, email, or face-to-face teaching consultation, click here.

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