

What is a rubric?

A rubric is a coherent set of criteria for students' work that includes descriptions of levels of performance quality on the criteria. Sounds simple enough, right? Unfortunately, this definition of *rubric* is rarely demonstrated in practice. The Internet, for example, offers many rubrics that do not, in fact, describe performance. I think I know why that might be and will explain that in Chapter 2, but for now let's start with the positive. It should be clear from the definition that rubrics have two major aspects: *coherent sets of criteria* and *descriptions of levels of performance* for these criteria.

The genius of rubrics is that they are descriptive and not evaluative. Of course, rubrics can be used to evaluate, but the operating principle is you match the performance to the description rather than "judge" it. Thus rubrics are as good or bad as the criteria selected and the descriptions of the levels of performance under each. Effective rubrics have appropriate criteria and well-written descriptions of performance.

What is the purpose of rubrics?

Like any other evaluation tool, rubrics are useful for certain purposes and not for others. *The main purpose of rubrics is to assess performances.* For some performances, you observe the student in the process of doing something, like using an electric drill or discussing an issue. For other performances, you observe the product that is the result of the student's work, like a finished bookshelf or a written report. Figure 1.1 lists some common kinds of school performances that can be assessed with rubrics. This list by no means covers every possible school performance. It is just meant to help you think of the types of performances you might assess with rubrics.

This list is not meant to suggest what your students *should* perform. State standards, curriculum goals, and instructional goals and objectives are the sources for what types of performances your students should be able to do. When the intended learning outcomes are best indicated by performances—things students would do, make, say, or write—then rubrics are the best way to assess them. Notice that the performances themselves are not learning outcomes. They are *indicators* of learning outcomes. Except in unusual cases, any one performance is just a sample of all the possible performances that would indicate an intended learning outcome. Chapters 2 and 3 cover this point in greater detail. For now, know that the purpose of the list in Figure 1.1 is to describe some of these performances, so you can recognize them as performances and as

suitable for using rubrics, when they are appropriate indicators of your goals for student learning.

About the only kinds of schoolwork that do not function well with rubrics are questions with right or wrong answers. Test items or oral questions in class that have one clear correct answer are best assessed as right or wrong. However, even test items that have degrees of quality of performance, where you want to observe how appropriately, how completely, or how well a question was answered, can be assessed with rubrics.

Rubrics give structure to observations. Matching your observations of a student's work to the descriptions in the rubric averts the rush to judgment that can occur in classroom evaluation situations. Instead of *judging* the performance, the rubric *describes* the performance. The resulting judgment of quality based on a rubric therefore also contains within it a description of performance that can be used for feedback and teaching. This is different from a judgment of quality from a score or a grade arrived at without a rubric. Judgments without descriptions stop the action in a classroom.

Figure 1.1 Types of Performances That Can Be Assessed with Rubrics

Type of Performance	Examples
Processes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Physical skills Use of equipment Oral communication Work habits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Playing a musical instrument Doing a forward roll Preparing a slide for the microscope Making a speech to the class Reading aloud Conversing in a foreign language Working independently
Products <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Constructed objects Written essays, themes, reports, term papers Other academic products that demonstrate understanding of concepts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Wooden bookshelf Set of welds Handmade apron Watercolor painting Laboratory report Term paper on theatrical conventions in Shakespeare's day Written analysis of the effects of the Marshall Plan Model or diagram of a structure (atom, flower, planetary system, etc.) Concept map

However, the reliability advantage is temporary (one can learn to apply general rubrics well), and it comes with a big downside. Obviously, task-specific rubrics are useful only for scoring. If students can't see the rubrics ahead of time, you can't share them with students, and therefore task-specific rubrics are not useful for formative assessment. That in itself is one good reason not to use them except for special purposes. Task-specific rubrics do not take advantage of the most powerful aspects of rubrics—their usefulness in helping students to conceptualize their learning targets and to monitor their own progress.

Why are rubrics important?

Rubrics are important because they clarify for students the qualities their work should have. This point is often expressed in terms of students understanding the learning target and criteria for success. For this reason, rubrics help teachers teach, they help coordinate instruction and assessment, and they help students learn.

Rubrics help teachers teach

To write or select rubrics, teachers need to focus on the criteria by which learning will be assessed. This focus on what you intend students to *learn* rather than what you intend to *teach* actually helps improve instruction. The common approach of “teaching things,” as in “I taught the American Revolution” or “I taught factoring quadratic equations,” is clear on content but not so clear on outcomes. Without clarity on outcomes, it's hard to know how much of various aspects of the content to teach. Rubrics help with clarity of both content and outcomes.

Really good rubrics help teachers avoid confusing the task or activity with the learning goal, and therefore confusing completion of the task with learning. Rubrics help keep teachers focused on criteria, not tasks. I have already discussed this point in the section about selecting criteria. Focusing rubrics on *learning* and not on *tasks* is the most important concept in this book. I will return to it over and over. It seems to be a difficult concept—or probably a more accurate statement is that focusing on tasks is so easy and so seductive that it becomes the path many busy teachers take. Penny-wise and pound-foolish, such an approach saves time in the short run by sacrificing learning in the long run.

Rubrics help coordinate instruction and assessment

Most rubrics should be designed for repeated use, over time, on several tasks. Students are given a rubric at the beginning of a unit of instruction or an episode of work. They tackle the work, receive feedback, practice, revise or do another task, continue to practice, and ultimately receive a grade—all using the same rubric as their description of the criteria and the quality levels that will demonstrate learning. This path to learning is much more cohesive than a string of assignments with related but different criteria.

Rubrics help students learn

The criteria and performance-level descriptions in rubrics help students understand what the desired performance is and what it looks like. Effective rubrics show students how they will know to what extent their performance passes muster on each criterion of importance, and if used formatively can also show students what their next steps should be to enhance the quality of their performance. This claim is backed by research at all grade levels and in different disciplines.

Several studies of student-generated criteria demonstrate that students can participate in defining and describing the qualities their work should have. Nancy Harris and Laura Kuehn (Higgins, Harris, & Kuehn, 1994) did research in their own team-taught classroom to see what sorts of criteria primary school students could generate for a “good project.” They found that their students, in grades 1 and 2, were able to define criteria for group projects. At the beginning of the year, most of the criteria were about process (for example, the group members getting along with each other). In December, students were able to view examples of projects, and with continued brainstorming and discussion they began to see the importance of substantive criteria (for example, the information contained in the project). By the end of the year, about half the criteria students chose were about process and half were about product. This study shows us that students need to learn how to focus on learning—and, more important, that they can begin to do this as early as 1st grade.

Andrade, Du, and Wang (2008) investigated the effects of having 3rd and 4th graders read a model written assignment, generate their own list of criteria, and use rubrics to self-assess the quality of the written stories and essays they then produced. A comparison group brainstormed criteria and self-assessed their drafts but did not use the rubric. Controlling for previous writing ability, the group that used the rubrics for self-assessment wrote better overall, and specifically in the areas of ideas, organization, voice, and word choice. There were no differences between the groups in the areas of