



Assessing Outcomes and Improving Achievement

Tips and Tools for Using Rubrics

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CHAPTER 2:

What is a Rubric?

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A rubric is not a technical specification, like how to build a bridge. Nor is it a checklist for ailing student performances in need of therapy. It is certainly not a Gotcha Grid for wayward writers. It is not even, as Merriam Webster said, an authoritative rule, although it meant that at one time.

When it was first born into the English language, “rubric” meant the color red, because monks passing their lives away in medieval monasteries, beautifully hand-copying their Latin texts, used red ink for headings. The word spent the next thousand years or so meaning “heading,” and gradually its mission crept to include “classification.”

Old issues of *College English* contain many uses of the word “rubric” as a heading or classification, including this one from a 1962 article called “An Existential Examination of King Lear”:

This new humility is in remarkable contrast to the old arrogance. Under this general rubric of human relations, the tragedy of King Lear can be seen as a profound study of the nature of evil (Vol. 23, Issue 7, p. 548).

And then in the October 1981 issue, the word occurs in an article called “The Validity of the Advanced Placement English Language and Composition Examination.” For the first time, it has something to do with scoring:

The readers were trained to score the essays holistically, considering their overall quality, form, and content together. They used a nine-point scale and were guided by a scoring guide or “rubric.”

The appended rubric seems old-fashioned and vague compared with the matrices we are accustomed to now. It begins:

General Directions: Reward the essays for what they do well in response to the question. After you have read an essay and determined its score, you may raise that score one point if the essay is very well written. A badly written essay must be given a score no higher than four.

The tone suggests we may be invited to tea following the session.

Since then, the scoring rubric has evolved into a more precise, technical, scientific-looking document. It carries a tone of certainty, authority, and exactitude. That facade is deceptive, however, because a rubric is more like a cake than a rock. It contains whatever we put in it, not what nature designed.

Different people like different kinds of cake, and there are many ways to bake them.

So what is a rubric?

A rubric is the creation of the people who made it rather than a mirror reflection of some permanent and absolute reality.

A rubric is a series of choices. Unfortunately, like a phone booth, it can be stuffed with only so many bodies. Some things have to be left out, because if we included everything it would have to be printed in eight-point type on a bed sheet.

So we choose the things we think are most important, at least for our particular students, at this point in their lives. The hard part is that our students are all over the map in their skill levels and their linguistic and intellectual needs. Still, the rubric is our best judgment about what matters most in the stage of human development we think our students are currently in.

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A rubric is an uneasy balance between generality and specificity. We want every statement to be general enough to encompass all the things we value, but it must be specific enough to spell out our meanings.

A rubric is one of the most carefully written documents in history. The signers of the Declaration of Independence could not have spent more time haggling over words than most committees charged with creating a rubric. Every member morphs into a lawyer, a judge, and a philologist with thesaurus in hand, and every word is dissected and analyzed before it is included.

A rubric is the record of negotiated compromises, the lingering detritus of struggles for dominance by purists and poets and pragmatists. In these contests, some win and some lose. No one gets everything they want and everybody gets a little something. The rubric is the final scorecard.

The rubric is a product of many minds working collaboratively to create new knowledge. It will, almost by definition, be more thoughtful, valid, unbiased, and useful than any one of us could have conceived of working in isolation. The discussions that haven't killed it have made it stronger.

The rubric is not a universal statement of truth for the ages. Like the Constitution, it is a living document that must change with the times. It should change a bit slowly, only when someone cares enough to mount a serious challenge to the status quo. The rubric will have to become a pretty bad match for our needs before we stop complaining about it and do something, but eventually we will.

Ultimately, our rubric is the very best of our collective professional and intellectual selves at this little point in time, in our small spot on the planet. It is the finest description of what we think is important for our students, right now, in the service of their learning. Most importantly, it is a statement of our mutual commitment to be guided by the highest and most carefully considered values in our professional practice. It is what we promise to teach.

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