

Constructing Your Own Rubric

What are the Parts of a Rubric?

Rubrics are composed of four basic parts in which the professor sets out the parameters of the assignment. The parties and processes involved in making the rubric can and should vary tremendously, but the basic format remains the same. In its simplest form, the rubric includes a task description (the assignment), a scale of some sort (levels of achievements, possibly in the form of grades), the dimensions of the assignment (a breakdown of the skill/ knowledge involved in the assignment), and descriptions of what constitutes each level of performance (specific feedback) all set out on a grid.

You can use your own method of creating a grid or table for your rubric, or you can use a simple Microsoft Word table to create the grid using the “elegant” format found in the “auto format” section. There are usually three and four scale dimensions in rubrics. These are the most common although an instructor can use more. It is not advised to go over five scale dimensions. That becomes too cumbersome for both the instructor and student.

Example of 3-Scale Level Rubric

Title

Task Description

	Scale Level 1	Scale Level 2	Scale Level 3
Dimension 1			
Dimension 2			
Dimension 3			
Dimension 4			

Part-by-Part Development of a Rubric

Part 1: Task Description

The Task Description is almost always originally framed by the instructor and involves a “performance” of some sort by the student. The task can take the form of a specific assignment, such as a paper, a poster, or a presentation. The task can also apply to overall behavior, such as participation, use of proper lab protocols, and behavioral expectations in the classroom.

We place the task description, usually cut and pasted from the syllabus, at the top of the grading rubric, partly to remind ourselves how the assignment was written as we grade, and to have a handy reference later on when we may decide to reuse the same rubric.

More important, however, we find that the task assignment grabs the students’ attention in a way nothing else can, when placed at the top of what they know will be a grading tool. With the added reference to their grades, the task assignment and the rubric criteria become more immediate to students and are more carefully read. Students focus on grades, Sad, but true. We might as well take advantage of it to communicate our expectations as clearly as possible. ***For reading and grading ease, rubrics should seldom, if ever, be more than one page long.**

Part 2: Scale

The scale describes how well or poorly any given task has been performed and occupies yet another side of the grid to complete the rubric’s evaluative goal. Terms used to describe the level of performance should be tactful but clear. In a generic, or starter, rubric, words such as “mastery,” “partial mastery,” “progressing,” and “emerging” provide a more positive, active, verb description of what is expected next from the student and also mitigate the potential shock of low marks in the lowest levels of the scale. Some professors may prefer to use nonjudgmental, noncompetitive language, such as “high level,” “middle level,” and “beginning level,” whereas others prefer numbers or even grades.

Here are some commonly used labels compiled by Huba and Freed (2000, p. 180):

- Sophisticated, competent, partly competent, not yet competent
- Exemplary, proficient, marginal, unacceptable
- Advanced, intermediate high, intermediate, novice
- Distinguished, proficient, intermediate, novice
- Accomplished, average, developing, beginning

Do not hesitate to construct your first rubric, see how students perform with it, how comfortable it was for you grading, and then refine it based on your experience.

Example of Rubric Using First Two Parts (From Dr. Patterson):

Critical Geopolitical Analysis Essay

Task Description: This assignment is a geopolitical analysis of some geopolitical discourse. In other words, you should write HOW people make an argument. How do different authors characterize different conflicts, issues, and so forth? This assignment asks you to think critically about mainstream ideas. An example of a topic a student may write about: DO NOT write that Iran is a rogue state. Instead, DO WRITE about why we call Iran and rogue state and what it means to be called a rogue state. This essay will be 7-10 pages using any citation style as long as you are consistent. No endnotes. Please consult the outline sheet on how to construct the essay. Your essay should include an Introduction, Theory/Literature, Background, Analysis, Conclusion, Appropriate college-level writing, and Citations.

	Excellent	Competent	Needs Work
Dimension 1			
Dimension 2			
Dimension 3			
Dimension 4			

Part 3: Dimensions

The dimensions of a rubric lay out the parts of the task simply and completely. A rubric can also clarify for students how their task can be broken down into components and which of those components are most important. Is it the grammar? The analysis? The factual content? The research techniques? And how much weight is given to each of these aspects of the assignment? Although it is not necessary to weight the different dimensions differently, adding points or percentages to each dimension further emphasizes the relative importance of each aspect of the task.

Dimensions should actually represent the type of component skills students must combine in a successful scholarly work, such as the need for a firm grasp of content, technique, citation, examples, analysis, and a use of language appropriate to the occasion. When well done, the dimensions of a rubric (usually listed along one side of the rubric) will not only outline these component skills, but after the work is graded, should provide a quick overview of the student's strengths and weaknesses in each dimension.

Dimension need not and should not include any description of the quality of performance. "Organization," for example, is a common dimension, but not "Good Organization." We leave the question of the quality of student work within that dimension to the scale and the description of the dimension.

Breaking up the assignment into its distinct dimensions leads to a kind of task analysis with the components of the task clearly identified. Both students and professors find this useful. It tells the student much more than a mere task assignment or a grade reflecting only the finished product. Together with good descriptions, the dimensions of a rubric provide detailed feedback on specific parts of the assignment and how well or poorly those were carried out. This is especially useful in assignments such as oral presentations in which many different dimensions often come into play.

Part 4: Description of Dimensions

Dimensions alone are all-encompassing categories, so for each of the dimensions, a rubric should also contain at the very least a description of the highest level of performance in that dimension. A rubric that contains only the description of the highest level of performance is called the scoring guide rubric.

Scoring guide rubrics allow for greater flexibility and the personal touch, but the need to explain in writing where the student has failed to meet the highest levels of performance does increase the time it takes to grade using the scoring guide rubrics.

For most tasks, many prefer to use a rubric that contains at least three scales and a description of the most common ways in which students fail to meet the highest level of expectations. Usually, the rubric begins with the highest level and then the next level down on the scale indicates the difference between that level of performance and the ideal, whereas the last level places the emphasis on what might have been accomplished but was not. This puts the emphasis not on the failure alone, but also on the possibilities.

Sample Rubric for Conducting an Experiment in the Lab

Task Description: Conduct the assigned lab using the procedures and methods described below. Turn in your laboratory report at the beginning of the next class period.

	Exemplary	Competent	Needs Work
Materials	All materials needed are present and entered on the lab report. The materials are appropriate for the procedure. The student is not wasteful of the materials.	All materials needed are present, but not all are entered on the lab report, or some materials are absent and must be obtained during the procedure. The materials are appropriate for the procedure.	All materials needed are not present and are not entered on the lab report. The materials are not all appropriate for the procedure or there are some major omissions.
Procedure	The procedure is well designed and allows control of all variables selected. All stages of the procedure are entered on the lab report.	The procedure could be more efficiently designed, but it allows control of all variables selected. Most stages of the procedure are entered on the lab report.	The procedure does not allow control of all variables selected. Many stages of the procedure are not entered on the lab report.
Courtesy and Safety	While conducting the procedure, the student is tidy, respectful of others, mindful of safety, and leaves the area clean.	While conducting the procedure, the student is mostly tidy, sometimes respectful of others, sometimes mindful of safety, and leaves the area clean only after being reminded.	While conducting the procedure, the student is untidy, not respectful of others, not mindful of safety, and leaves the area messy even after being reminded.
Purpose	Research question and hypothesis are stated clearly, and the relationship between the two is clear. The variables are selected.	Research question and hypothesis are stated, but one or both are not as clear as they might be, or the relationship between the two is unclear. The variables are selected.	Research question and hypothesis are not stated clearly, and the relationship between the two is unclear or absent. The variables are not selected.
Data Collection	Raw data, including units, are recorded in a way that is appropriate and clear. The title of the data table is included.	Raw data, including units, are recorded although not as clearly or appropriately as they might be. The title of the data table is included.	Raw data, including units, are not recorded in a way that is appropriate and clear. The title of the data table is not included.
Data Analysis	Data are presented in ways (charts, tables, graphs) that best facilitate understanding and interpretation. Error analysis is included.	Data are presented in ways (charts, tables, graphs) that can be understood and interpreted, although not as clearly as they might be. Error analysis is included.	Data are presented in ways (charts, tables, graphs) that are very unclear. Error analysis is not included.
Evaluation of Experiment	The results are fully interpreted and compared with literature values. The limitations and weaknesses are discussed and suggestions are made as to how to limit or eliminate them.	The results are interpreted and compared with literature values, but not as fully as they might be. The limitations and weaknesses are discussed, but few or no suggestions are made as to how to limit or eliminate them.	The results are not interpreted in a logical way or compared with literature values. The limitations and weaknesses are not discussed, nor are suggestions made as to how to limit or eliminate them.

Sample Staged Rubric for Research Paper

Task Description: Write a research paper on the popular culture topic of your choice. Your paper should be based on primary resources, although you should, of course, include whatever secondary sources are available on that topic. In addition to whatever other primary sources you use, you are required to create, distribute, analyze, and utilize the results of a survey on your topic. The survey must include at least 10 questions and must be distributed to at least 30 people to be valid.

	Excellent	Average	Weak
Preliminary bibliography (Stage 1) Due Week 2 of Class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> All possible primary sources are listed. <input type="checkbox"/> All possible secondary sources are listed. <input type="checkbox"/> Formatting follows a recognized style. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Some primary sources are listed but not all. <input type="checkbox"/> Some secondary sources are listed but not all. <input type="checkbox"/> Formatting includes all relevant information but follows no known format. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> No primary sources are listed. <input type="checkbox"/> No secondary sources are listed. <input type="checkbox"/> No recognizable format style is used and information on many entries is partial.
Working Thesis (Stage 2) Due Week 3 of class	The thesis is clearly written, allows for a compelling paper whether your research proves the thesis correct or not.	The thesis is unfocused and too simplistic. What are you going to do if your results prove you wrong?	This is not a thesis, working or otherwise. Where are you planning to focus this paper?
Survey (Stage 3) Due Week 4 of class	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Questions relate clearly to the thesis. <input type="checkbox"/> Questions are as clear as possible and do not "lead." <input type="checkbox"/> There are at least 10 questions in addition to those relating to demographics. <input type="checkbox"/> Survey formats (multiple choice, likert scale, yes-no) are appropriately used. <input type="checkbox"/> The demographic questions are limited to those that might make a difference to your thesis. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Some questions do not seem to relate to your thesis. <input type="checkbox"/> Questions show a bias toward a desired result; you are leading your respondents or failing to allow them to disagree if they wish to. <input type="checkbox"/> Survey formats (multiple choice, likert scale, yes-no) are not always used to their best advantage. <input type="checkbox"/> Demographic questions are too general and either too many or too few. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Questions seem unrelated to your thesis; you need to rethink either the thesis or the survey. <input type="checkbox"/> Questions do not allow for any flexibility of response. <input type="checkbox"/> Survey formats are not well selected for the types of questions you are asking. <input type="checkbox"/> Demographic questions are unclear and seem to have no relevance to thesis or topic.
Survey Analysis (Stage 4) Due Week 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> SSPS or Excel was effectively used to collate, cross-reference, and analyze the data. <input type="checkbox"/> Every method was used to gain as much information from the data as possible. <input type="checkbox"/> The results were presented in both narrative and graphic forms. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> SSPS or Excel was used to collate, cross-reference, and analyze the data, but there are some mistakes in how used. <input type="checkbox"/> More information can be wrung out of these data. <input type="checkbox"/> The results were presented in narrative or graphic forms but not both. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> SSPS or Excel was not used or was used incorrectly. <input type="checkbox"/> Very little analysis of the data was done. <input type="checkbox"/> The results were not written up in narrative or generated in graphic form.
Outline or mind-map (Stage 5) Due Week 8	The outline or mind-map shows clearly where every aspect of the research done will go in the final paper.	The outline or mind-map gives a general idea of how the research will fit into the final paper, but some parts are missing or some connections are unclear.	The outline or mind-map is unfocused or incomplete.

Stevens, Dannelle D. and Antonia J. Levi. *Introduction to Rubrics: An Assessment Tool to Save Grading Time, Convey Effective Feedback, and Promote Student Learning*. Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2005.

**You may also contact Gwendolyn Hale at the Writing Center (1036) or drop by to check out more books on rubrics.