Assess
FOR SUCCESS

Using Rubrics to Promote Learning

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What is the issue?

Rubrics are generally thought of as assessment-related documents or tools which are typically presented in textual form as a table, grid or matrix (Dawson, 2017). They can be really useful for students and assessors because they **outline the expectations for student work**, setting out the characteristics that denote the attainment of standards or explaining aspirational qualities for each level (Bearman and Ajjawi, 2021). They can help learners clarify expectations, reduce anxiety, improve self-efficacy and enhance the ability to self-regulate (Panadero and Jonsson, 2013). They can also help markers to assure inter-assessor reliability, reduce time spent grading, and make feedback easier by highlighting clear strengths, weaknesses and aspects to improve.

This guide aims to help you to consider the educational possibilities that rubrics might afford by thinking carefully about what you hope your students do with them. We will highlight some common pitfalls to avoid. We will also briefly indicate further detailed resources you might use to help you design your rubrics if you're starting from scratch, or if you wish to review and hone existing ones. However, the main aim of this guide is to focus less on the artefact itself, and more to demonstrate the value of seeing rubrics as living documents which promote learning activities that can invite dialogue, spark student insight and enhance success. We will suggest that, together with other assessment artefacts (like assignment briefs, or exemplars), rubrics might usefully prompt students to think deeply about assessed tasks, study carefully,

> help learners clarify expectations, reduce anxiety, improve self-efficacy and enhance the ability to self-regulate

interact with one another and discuss potential outcomes so long as we pay careful attention to strategies which encourage learners to work with them dynamically, rather than seeing them as recipes which they should slavishly follow in order to maximise their grades. We are particularly keen to show how rubrics can support student learning, as discussed towards the end of the guide.

What do we mean by the term 'rubric'?

All rubrics to some degree specify the elements assessors are looking for in a student's work, coupled with descriptions of what those elements might look like at each level, from low (including not yet satisfactory) to high. In higher education, the levels that are portrayed on most rubrics tend to be consistent with institutional grading schemes and their associated indicative descriptors (for instance, the NUI marks bands and grade descriptors indicated here).

However, in practice, rubric designs actually vary considerably in terms of format and type, so the term 'rubric' can be rather opaque, and may cause colleagues to leap to assumptions, talk at cross-purposes or miss out on promising design choices or interventions which might support and enhance student learning and boost success.

Here are some of the kinds of rubrics you might encounter:

Holistic rubrics may simply outline overall judgments of competence in each level-related column (that is, in aggregate form, without rows).

By contrast, **analytic rubrics** provide discrete criteria, together with more detailed descriptions for each criterion at each level

in practice, rubric designs actually vary considerably in terms of formats and types

	Fail	Pass	3rd	2.2	2.1	1st
Assignment x	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬ ▬▬▬

Example structure of holistic rubric

	Fail	Pass	3rd	2.2	2.1	1st
Criterion 1	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬
Criterion 2	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬
Crierion 3	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬
Criterion 4	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬
Criterion 5	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬	▬▬▬ ▬▬▬

Example structure of analytic rubric

Both these types of rubric can be **generic**, that is, the same rubric can be used across a variety of tasks, or **task-specific**, that is, each rubric only applies to the task type for which it was designed. Dawson (2017) usefully observes, however, that the specificity of task-specific rubrics may vary considerably: these can include a specific instance of assessment in a particular module, or a task-type (for instance, rubrics for team work or scientific writing) which you can use across a range of individual tasks. A task-specific rubric is sometimes applied very broadly to student assignments at Departmental or even University level.

The purposes of different types of rubric

These variations in rubrics, amongst others, bring into sharp focus both the decision-making of rubric design and the uses to which they are put in learning, teaching and assessment. Dawson (2017) helpfully highlights the value of reflecting on and discussing your rubric's **intention/purpose**, where you don't simply think about the physical artefact being created, but also consider what purpose you want it to achieve. He notes that rubrics were mainly initially introduced for teachers, to help them to quickly and reliably grade/score student work. Indeed, 'rubrics tools' in online platforms may focus mainly on streamlining and efficiency to **make the job of grading more manageable** for teachers, especially with large cohorts or teaching teams. However, and most importantly for our guide, there has subsequently been an increasing shift towards using rubrics in ways which focus as much, if not more, on **rubrics as tools which can support student learning and student**

success, moving them well beyond 'secret' tools which only teachers see and use to score student work, and instead foregrounding them as developmental tools that are shared, used by and co-constructed with our students.

Research informed thinking about rubrics

Rubrics are typically deemed to help with transparency, and, as a result, are nowadays often offered to students in advance, so that assessment criteria, standards and expectations are no longer secret teachers' business but are made public to students and the wider community. Bearman and Ajjawi (2018, p. 2) note 'there is evidence that clear criteria encapsulated in rubrics help both educators' communication of the standards and students' learning (Reddy and Andrade, 2010; Panadero and Jonsson, 2013; Jonsson, 2014).' Rubrics can be shared with learners before they start a task to help them establish appropriate goals, and this can improve students' performance, communicate expectations, reduce anxiety, support feedback processes and enhance relationships (Jonsson and Panadero, 2022). Whilst this is typically seen as a good thing, it's important to remember the following:

- We shouldn't confuse writing things down or simply publishing a rubric with active and engaging communication, otherwise students may not understand what the rubric means (O'Donovan et al., 2004).
- Being unequivocally explicit about what counts as quality work is much easier said than done (even among fellow markers), and there are limitations to the achievability and even the apparent neutrality of 'transparency' (Bearman and Ajjawi, 2018).
- Rubrics can't fully capture the kinds of complex or tacit knowledge typically valued in higher education, especially when authentic tasks require deep rather than mechanistic thinking. Frequently expert, especially professional, judgments are extremely nuanced, tacit, and holistic, so disaggregating criteria for scoring can be artificial and mechanistic (Sadler, 2007), when in many instances the whole is more than the sum of its parts.
- Well-meaning attempts to make rubrics crystal clear can cause over-specification and reductionist approaches (O'Donovan et al., 2004) which may lead students towards gaming and instrumentalism rather than attainment (Torrance et al., 2005). Besides, we don't want students to atomise learning, seeing criteria as 'pea-sized bits to be swallowed' on only a single occasion (Sadler, 2007, p. 390). So, we need to take care that a good-

hearted quest for 'transparency' doesn't inadvertently stifle creativity or push students into 'criteria compliance' (Torrance, 2007), so they end up using the rubric as a tool which demands obedience. Bell et al. (2013) found many students thought of rubrics and other materials as a 'recipe' for satisfaction of lecturers' expectations. This highlights how important it is to design and use rubrics in such a way that they, together with other activities and assessment materials, act as **bridges to future performance**, but avoid 'traps that can result in a rubric becoming a task-focused checklist' (Ferrell and Knight, 2022).

Rubrics can support student learning

Bearing these important caveats in mind, several research projects have focused very productively on **using rubrics formatively** (Panadero et al., 2016). Rubrics have, for instance, been investigated as tools which encourage students to self-assess and generate self-feedback, with findings showing that students who were provided with rubrics after they produced a draft essay resulted in improved performance (Lipnevich et al., 2014). Rubrics have also been shown to support self-efficacy and self-regulation when used as an intervention which helps students compare their own attempt with criteria, so as to become aware of whether they need to change their initial attempt (Jonsson and Panadero, 2022). In turn, rubrics can be used as tools which explicitly give students a chance to interrogate criteria and standards, opening up dialogue with staff which helps students learn to see what quality looks like (O'Donovan et al., 2004) and improve their learning (Rust et al., 2003). This social constructivist approach (which assumes that standards are socially constructed rather than fixed or absolute) can also usefully stimulate discussion for staff (Bloxham et al., 2019). Students have been shown to find rubrics useful and perceive them as valuable, and involving students in the co-creation of the rubric has been identified as a powerful implementation tactic (Cockett and Jackson, 2018).

Practical advice

When **designing rubrics,** you need to think carefully about what you want your rubric to achieve, that is, is it primarily for speeding up marking, or to support student success and active learning? Resources which can help you make informed design choices include:

- Getting students involved in putting rubrics into their own language, or co-designing them.
- Creating rubrics for students to use in order to evaluate the work of their peers in, say, group

assignments; these might focus on process issues, punctuality, contribution etc.

- Involving students in applying rubrics to sample resources and orchestrating shared discussions which clarify views of quality and what 'good' looks like in relation to each sample.
- Encouraging learners to generate self-feedback, by using rubrics during a formative assessment process of write, (use rubric), revise, resubmit.
- Getting your students to use the rubric to self-assess their work and requiring them to submit their rubric with their summative assignment, to spark insights and dialogue into why and how their self-assessment judgment differs from expert judgments (Boud, Lawson and Thompson, 2013).
- Inviting students to: explain how they used the rubric to influence their thinking when tackling the assignment; to reflect on what other possibilities they considered that might have helped them fulfil the assignment brief; or to comment on which criteria were most challenging to fulfil and why? (Bearman and Ajjawi, 2021).
- Asking students to articulate how their work has met the criteria. This can help expand their understandings of the complexity and flexibility of criteria and surface any assumptions about their meanings, inviting deep learning and rich dialogue. Such conversations can productively build on other self-assessment by focusing students' attention explicitly on how and why they put the criteria into practice in their response to the assignment.
- Using the rubrics as a formative in-class tool which stimulates feedback discussions.
- Using rubrics to provide consistent summative assessment feedback and streamlining the feedback process. When used summatively, markers can then be asked to accompany a rubric (with the levels achieved highlighted) with tailored and personalised feedback information, annotations, or free text comments (for instance, three strengths and three aspects to work on in future) on a student's performance. The marker can also provide a narrative about the difference between their judgement and the student's self-assessment, along with in-text comments.
- Orchestrating teaching team conversations around rubrics to discuss issues of quality and standards and to induct new members.

To sum up

Rubrics work best when they are viewed as a tool to support learning rather than an over-specified formula to follow. It's rarely the case that simply issuing rubrics without virtual or actual dialogue is effective in helping students to produce work of the right standard. Some level of dialogue is needed, even if this is just a 'Questions and Answers about using Rubrics' page, with an opportunity for students to post further questions.

Over to you – what might you do next?

To make rubrics work well within your programme we suggest you could:

✔ Review any rubrics you are currently using within your programmes, alongside all the other assessment artefacts you provide to students, and decide to what extent they fit your purposes.

✔ Find time within your programme team meetings to discuss what kinds of issues you want to further address around rubrics and what kinds of rubrics you want to use (holistic or analytic, generic or task specific?)

✔ Within your team, agree either to all read the same resource from those suggested in this guide, or share out the readings, and use this groundwork to inform your decisions.

✔ Discuss with student ambassadors/student reps how rubrics can best be used to support student learning.

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