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## PART THREE

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# The Assessment Toolbox

## Using a Scoring Guide or Rubric to Plan and Evaluate an Assignment

### Some Valuable Ideas You'll Find in This Chapter

- Rubrics are terrific tools for student learning as well as for assessment.
- Rubrics can speed up the grading process.
- Rubrics come in many formats, and no one format is best for every situation.
- Use a rubric as a tool to plan your assignment: write the rubric before you write the assignment that it will evaluate.

Educators are increasingly recognizing the value of performance assessments (Chapter Two): papers, projects, field experiences, performances, and other assignments that ask students to perform or demonstrate their skills. This chapter and Chapter Ten explain how to plan, create, and evaluate these kinds of assessments.

### What Is a Rubric?

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A *rubric* is a scoring guide: a list or chart that describes the criteria that you and perhaps your colleagues will use to evaluate or grade completed student assignments. At a minimum, a rubric lists

the things you’re looking for when you evaluate assignments. The list is often accompanied by guidelines for evaluating each of those things.

One of the great things about rubrics is that they have no rules. There is no single correct way to write or format rubrics. Any format that you’re comfortable with is fine, so long as you fulfill the rubric’s purposes, articulated in Table 9.1. This chapter discusses just four of the many ways to format rubrics: checklists, rating scales, descriptive rubrics, and holistic scoring guides. It also discusses structured observation guides—qualitative assessment tools that are somewhat related to rubrics.

Some faculty and staff are put off by the jargony nature of the word *rubric*. If this is the case, simply substitute in your discussions a term such as *scoring guide* or *grading criteria*.

Why Use a Rubric? \_\_\_\_\_

Using a rubric to grade student assignments makes your life easier and improves student learning in the ways shown in Table 9.1.

Checklist Rubrics \_\_\_\_\_

A checklist rubric is a simple list indicating the presence of the things you’re looking for in a completed assignment. Exhibit 9.1 is an example.

Checklist rubrics are used most often in primary grades (Did you write your name on your paper? Did you show all your work?). In higher education, expectations are more sophisticated (Did you summarize very well or merely adequately?), so checklist rubrics are used less often. Faculty might choose them when they observe student performance in laboratory or studio settings (Did the student wear goggles? Follow safe practices? Clean up at the end of the lab?). Students might use them to self-assess their work before they turn it in (Have I proofread my paper? Does my bibliography use proper formatting conventions? Did I include at least eight references?).

Rating Scale Rubrics \_\_\_\_\_

A rating scale rubric is a checklist with a rating scale added to show the degree to which the things you’re looking for are present in completed assignments. Exhibits 9.2 and 9.3 are examples of rating

Table 9.1. Advantages of Rubrics

<i>Rubrics help clarify vague, fuzzy goals.</i> A goal such as, “Demonstrate effective writing skills” is admittedly vague—what <i>are</i> effective writing skills?—but difficult to clarify succinctly (Chapter Eight). A rubric can provide this clarification.
<i>Rubrics help students understand your expectations.</i> If you distribute a rubric with an assignment, students will understand better what you want them to do and where they should focus their energies. You’ll have fewer questions from students, and they may find the assignment a richer, more rewarding experience.
<i>Rubrics can help students self-improve.</i> If you encourage students to use the rubric to self-evaluate their work before turning it in, in order to make sure the assignment is complete and up to acceptable standards, you are helping them develop the important lifelong skill of metacognition (Chapter Eight): understanding how they learn by reflecting on how they learn.
<i>Rubrics can inspire better student performance.</i> Rubrics show students exactly what you value and what you’ll be looking for when you evaluate their assignments. Knowing what you expect will motivate some (not all!) to aim for the targets you’ve identified.
<i>Rubrics make scoring easier and faster.</i> While it may seem that using a scoring guide adds an extra burden to the grading process, rubrics actually make the grading process faster because they remind you of what you’re looking for. You also won’t need to write as many comments on papers.
<i>Rubrics make scoring more accurate, unbiased, and consistent.</i> Rubrics ensure that every paper is evaluated using the same criteria.
<i>Rubrics improve feedback to students.</i> Marked rubrics give students a clearer picture of their strengths and weaknesses than a few comments scrawled on their papers.
<i>Rubrics reduce arguments with students.</i> By making evaluation criteria explicit, rubrics stop student arguments (“Why did he get a B– when I got a C+?”) cold. You can focus your conversations with students on how they can improve their performance rather than defending your grading practices.
<i>Rubrics improve feedback to faculty and staff.</i> If a number of students aren’t demonstrating understanding of a particular concept or skill, rubrics bring this to your attention. The consistency of rubrics can help track changes in student performance as you refine your teaching. Rubrics can help determine, for example, whether introducing collaborative learning activities into classes has improved students’ analysis skills.

Exhibit 9.1. A Checklist Rubric for a Web Site

- ☐ The purpose of the site is obvious.
- ☐ The site’s structure is clear and intuitive.
- ☐ Titles are meaningful.
- ☐ Each page loads quickly.
- ☐ The text is easy to read.
- ☐ Graphics and multimedia help convey the site’s main points.
- ☐ The design is clean, uncluttered, and engaging.
- ☐ Spelling, punctuation, and grammar are correct.
- ☐ Contact information for the author or sponsor is given.
- ☐ The date each page was last updated is provided.

Exhibit 9.2. A Rating Scale Rubric for an Oral Presentation

<i>The presenter . . .</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>
Clearly stated the purpose of the presentation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Was well organized	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Was knowledgeable about the subject	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Answered questions authoritatively	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Spoke clearly and loudly	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Maintained eye contact with the audience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Appeared confident	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Adhered to time constraints	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Had main points that were appropriate to the central topic	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Accomplished the stated objectives	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Source: Adapted with permission from Sharon B. Buchbinder and Donna M. Cox from a rubric used by faculty in the Health Care Management Program, Towson University.

scale rubrics for assignments. Exhibit 9.4 is one used by students to evaluate their peers, and Exhibit 9.5 is one used by field experience supervisors. (Chapter Seven has more information on obtaining assessment information from field experience supervisors and student peers.) Exhibit 13.4 is a rating scale rubric to evaluate portfolios, and Exhibit 19.3 is one to evaluate assessment reports.

The major shortcoming of rating scale rubrics is that performance levels are not clearly described. In the rubric in Exhibit 9.3, the difference between “outstanding” and “very good” articulation of information and ideas isn’t clear. The vague nature of rating scale rubrics can lead to several problems:

- *Faculty and staff may be inconsistent in how they rate performance.* One faculty member might rate a paper “outstanding” in its articulation of information and ideas, while another faculty member might rate the same paper “very good” in this respect.
- *Students don’t receive thorough feedback.* Yes, students can learn from a completed rating scale rubric that their paper’s organization was relatively weak and their grammar was relatively strong, but from the scored rubric alone, they won’t learn exactly how their organization was weak or how it might be improved.
- *Rating scale rubrics can lack credibility with some audiences.* Some might look skeptically on the faculty rating 85 percent of

Exhibit 9.3. Rating Scale Rubric for an Information Literacy Assignment

Indicate the student’s skill in each of the following respects, as evidenced by this assignment, by checking the appropriate box. If this assignment is not intended to elicit a particular skill, check the Not Applicable box.

	<i>Outstanding (A)</i>	<i>Very Good (B)</i>	<i>Adequate (C)</i>	<i>Marginally Adequate (D)</i>	<i>Inadequate (F)</i>	<i>Not Applicable</i>
1. Identify, locate, and access sources of information.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Critically evaluate information, including its legitimacy, validity, and appropriateness.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Organize information to present a sound central idea supported by relevant material in a logical order.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Use information to answer questions and solve problems.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Clearly articulate information and ideas.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Use information technologies to communicate, manage, and process information.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Use information technologies to solve problems.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Use the work of others accurately and ethically.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. What grade are you awarding this assignment?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
10. If you had to assign a final course grade for this student today, what would it be?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Exhibit 9.4. A Rating Scale Rubric for Evaluating Fellow Group Members

Your name:

Name of the group member you're evaluating:

<i>This group member...</i>	<i>Almost Always</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Rarely</i>
1. Did his or her fair share of the work.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Participated actively in the group's activities.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Contributed useful ideas, suggestions, and comments.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Listened carefully.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Was considerate of others and appreciated their ideas.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Asked others to clarify their ideas if necessary.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Expressed disagreements respectfully.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Did not dominate the conversation or interrupt others.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Tried to help the group reach consensus.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Helped the group stay on the topic.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Helped the group not waste time.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Helped me learn more than if I had worked alone.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

student essays "excellent" and the rest "very good." (Using external raters such as prospective employers would make the ratings more credible.)

Rating scale rubrics are quick and easy to create and use, however, so they do have an important place in many assessment programs, especially for relatively minor assignments.

Descriptive Rubrics

Descriptive rubrics replace the checkboxes of rating scale rubrics with brief descriptions of the performances that merit each possible rating. Exhibit 9.6 is an example of a descriptive rubric, as is Exhibit 15.1. Other examples are in Appendix C of *Effective Grading* (Walvoord & Anderson, 1998), *Learning Centered Assessment on College Campuses* (Huba & Freed, 2000), and *Introduction to Rubrics* (Stevens & Levi, 2004).

Descriptive rubrics are increasingly popular because they explicitly document faculty and staff standards for student

Exhibit 9.5. A Rating Scale Rubric for Health Education Field Experience Supervisors

Evaluate the student under your supervision using the following scale:

- 5 = Superior for an entry-level health educator
- 4 = Slightly better than an entry-level health educator
- 3 = Acceptable for an entry-level health educator
- 2 = Slightly less than an entry level-health educator
- 1 = Seriously deficient
- N/O = Not sufficient observation for evaluation

	5	4	3	2	1	N/O
1. Access, use, and evaluate current, reliable health knowledge.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Demonstrate word processing skills.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Read, interpret, and use research information.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Demonstrate problem-solving skills.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
5. Develop appropriate educational materials.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Use audiovisual equipment skillfully and appropriately.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
7. Demonstrate teaching skills.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
8. Demonstrate promotional or publicity skills.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Use knowledge of learning styles in development of presentations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
10. Sensitive to individual differences.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
11. Know how and where to refer clients or students for further help and information within organizational guidelines.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Develop a professional network.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. Show positive work attitude and ethic.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. Demonstrate willingness to work beyond minimum expectations.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
15. Display professional appearance appropriate to the organization.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Source: Adapted with permission from a rubric used by faculty in the Department of Health Science, Towson University.

performance (what Chapter Fifteen calls *local standards*). Students, faculty, accreditors, and other audiences all clearly understand exactly what an "outstanding" or "inadequate" rating means.

But coming up with succinct, explicit descriptions of every performance level for everything you're looking for in completed assignments is not easy! This process can require negotiation, try-outs, and revisions and can therefore be time-consuming.

Exhibit 9.6. Descriptive Rubric for a Slide Presentation on Findings from Research Sources

	Well Done (5)	Satisfactory (4–3)	Needs Improvement (2–1)	Incomplete (0)
Organization	Clearly, concisely written. Logical, intuitive progression of ideas and supporting information. Clear and direct cues to all information.	Logical progression of ideas and supporting information. Most cues to information are clear and direct.	Vague in conveying viewpoint and purpose. Some logical progression of ideas and supporting information, but cues are confusing or flawed.	Lacks a clear point of view and logical sequence of information. Cues to information are not evident.
Persuasiveness	Motivating questions and advance organizers convey main idea. Information is accurate.	Includes persuasive information.	Includes persuasive information with few facts.	Information is incomplete, out of date, or incorrect.
Introduction	Presents overall topic. Draws in audience with compelling questions or relating to audience's interests or goals.	Clear, coherent, and related to topic.	Some structure but does not create a sense of what follows. May be overly detailed or incomplete. Somewhat appealing.	Does not orient audience to what will follow.
Clarity	Readable, well-sized fonts. Italics, boldface, and indentations enhance readability. Text is appropriate length. Background and colors enhance readability.	Sometimes fonts are readable, but in a few places fonts, italics, boldface, long paragraphs, color, or background detract.	Overall readability is difficult, with lengthy paragraphs, too many fonts, dark or busy background, overuse of boldface, or lack of appropriate indentations.	Text is very difficult to read. Long blocks of text, small fonts, inappropriate colors, or poor use of headings, indentations, or boldface.
Layout	Aesthetically pleasing. Contributes to message with appropriate use of headings and white space.	Uses white space appropriately.	Shows some structure but is cluttered, busy, or distracting.	Cluttered and confusing. Spacing and headings do not enhance readability.

Source: Adopted with permission from a rubric developed by Patrica Ryan, lecturer, Department of Reading, Special Education, and Instructional Technology, Towson University.

Thus, while descriptive rubrics might be considered the gold standard of rubrics, don't feel that you need to develop them for every assignment. Descriptive rubrics are a good choice under the following circumstances:

- You are undertaking important assessments whose results may contribute to major decisions such as accreditation, funding, or program continuance.
- Several faculty and staff are collectively assessing student work, because descriptive rubrics' clear descriptions make scoring more consistent across faculty and staff.
- It is important to give students clear, detailed feedback on their strengths and weaknesses.
- Skeptical audiences will be examining the rubric scores with a critical eye.

Holistic Scoring Guides

Sometimes assessment projects are so massive that faculty and staff don't have time to complete a rating scale rubric or descriptive rubric for every assignment. Perhaps they must read and score 1,500 entering students' essays to decide who should enroll in a developmental writing course. Perhaps they must review 150 senior portfolios to get an overall sense of the writing skills of graduates. The major purpose of such summative assessments is not to give feedback to individual students but to make decisions within a tight time frame.

In these situations, holistic scoring guides may be a good choice. They do not have a list of the things you're looking for in completed assignments. Instead, they have short narrative descriptions of the characteristics of outstanding work, acceptable work, and unacceptable work. Exhibit 9.7 is an example of a holistic scoring guide. Exhibit 13.1 includes another brief example, as does Figure 5.2 of *Developing Outcomes-Based Assessment for Learner-Centered Education* (Driscoll & Wood, 2007).

Holistic scoring guides have two major shortcomings. First, it can be difficult for faculty and staff to assign scores consistently, because few student works will meet any one description precisely. Second, holistic scoring guides do not yield feedback on students' strengths and weaknesses.

Structured Observation Guides

Some faculty and staff find it difficult to come up with a rubric or holistic scoring guide to evaluate student work. Some may simply be uncomfortable with the idea of quantifying their evaluations

Exhibit 9.7. A Holistic Scoring Guide for Students in a Ballet Program

**A:** Active learner – Enthusiastic – Very energetic – Fully engaged in every class – Able to accept corrections – Able to make and synthesize corrections – Able to maintain corrections – Able to self-assess – Shows continuous improvement in major problem areas – Connects movement sequences well – Demonstrates strong dynamic phrasing – Very musical – Continuously demonstrates correct epaulment – Demonstrates advanced understanding and applies correct alignment, fully extended classical line, full use of rotation, and use of classical terminology – Daily demonstrates commitment to the art form and addresses areas of weaknesses without instructor input

**B:** Active learner – Enthusiastic – Energetic – Engaged in every class – Able to accept most corrections – Able to make and synthesize most corrections – Able to maintain most corrections – Able to self-assess – Shows improvement in major problem areas – Connects movement sequences relatively well – Demonstrates adequate dynamic phrasing – Generally musical – Generally demonstrates correct epaulment – Demonstrates understanding and generally applies correct alignment, classical line, and use of classical terminology – Continues to address areas of weakness and shows general improvement

**C:** Active learner but not fully physically/mentally engaged in class – Able to accept most corrections – Not quite able to make and synthesize corrections – Not yet able to maintain corrections – Unable to fully self-assess – Shows some improvement in major problem areas – Connects some movement sequences – Demonstrates limited dynamic phrasing – Almost musical – Working toward correct epaulment – Working on understanding and applying correct alignment, continuing to find classical line, unable to fully execute artistry and use classical terminology – Continues to address areas of weakness but unable to demonstrate consistent visible improvement

**D:** Not an active learner/lacks sufficient energy – Not physically or mentally engaged in class – Unable to accept/understand most corrections – Unable to make and synthesize corrections – Unable to maintain corrections – Unable to self-assess – Shows very little improvement in major problem areas – Seldom connects movement sequences well – Demonstrates marginal dynamic phrasing – Seldom musical – Unable to demonstrate correct epaulment – Unable to apply correct alignment, demonstrate classical line, execute artistry, or use classical terminology – Seldom addresses areas of weakness – Unable to demonstrate visible improvement in most areas of weakness – Lacks self-motivation

*Source:* Adapted with permission from a holistic scoring guide used by the faculty of the Department of Dance, Towson University.

and prefer a qualitative approach. Some may never have thought about what they expect and value in student work. Yes, these faculty have been awarding grades (they “know an A when they see it”), but they have done so more on instinct than anything else. These faculty may prefer a structured observation guide: a rubric without a rating scale. Structured observation guides are subjective, qualitative—but nonetheless direct and valid—assessments of student learning (Chapter Two).

To develop a structured observation guide, take informal notes the next time you grade an assignment. What made you decide to give one paper an A? Why did you give another a C? After all the

Exhibit 9.8. A Structured Observation Guide for a One-Act Play

<i>The effectiveness of each of the following in conveying the production's meaning or theme:</i>	<i>Notes</i>
Pace and rhythm	
Characterizations	
Stage presence and business	
Stagecraft: Costume, lighting, set, and sound designs	
Creative vision and risk taking	
"Sparkle" and audience engagement	
Total integrated production effect	

assignments are graded, look through your notes for any common patterns or themes. You may identify some factors you noted repeatedly. These may represent your implicit goals and expectations for your students and can become the factors of a structured observation guide (Exhibit 9.8).

Structured observation guides can be helpful in several ways:

- They can help faculty articulate learning goals (Chapter Eight).
- They can help faculty articulate the criteria for rating scale rubrics or descriptive rubrics.

- They can help faculty assess ineffable goals like attitudes and values (Chapter Twelve).
- They can be used by students to evaluate the work of their peers.

Creating Effective Rubrics

It may strike you as curious that this chapter, on creating a rubric or scoring guide for an assignment, comes before the chapter on creating the assignment itself. Shouldn't we first create the assignment and then the scoring guide? But think of planning a road trip. When we use a map to plot a route, we first locate our destination and then chart the most appropriate route to get there. When we teach, we are taking our students on a journey. Our assignments are more effective if we first clarify what we want students to learn from the assignment (the destination) and then design an assignment that will help them achieve those ends (the route to get there). Creating assignments thus begins not by writing the assignment itself but by writing the criteria or standards that will be used to evaluate it.

If this process differs from your experience and therefore seems daunting ("How can I possibly create grading criteria when I don't know what I'm asking students to do?"), use an iterative process to create an assignment. First, list your learning goals: the most important things you want students to learn by completing the assignment. Then draft the assignment itself. Next, use the drafted assignment to refine your learning goals into more complete evaluation criteria. Once you've spelled out the evaluation criteria, revise the assignment so it will elicit the work described in the criteria.

Rubrics are not difficult to create, although descriptive rubrics can be time-consuming. The suggestions that follow may be helpful.

Look for Models

Rubrics are increasingly widespread assessment tools, so it makes sense to begin creating a rubric by looking for models that you can adapt to your circumstances. (If you use or adapt someone else's rubric, ask for permission and acknowledge the work of the original author.)

Start with a simple online search, as many colleges, programs, and faculty post rubrics there. If you subscribe to a discussion list on teaching in your discipline, post a query asking for examples of rubrics. Rubrics are far more common in basic (K-12) education than in higher education, so if you search for, say, science lab report rubrics, you may find more examples from high school than college. Don't despair; high school rubrics can still give you good ideas.

A number of Web sites offer free templates and other simple software for creating and saving rubrics; use search terms like *rubric generator*, *rubric builder*, or *create rubrics* to find them.

List the Things You're Looking For

Start creating a rubric by listing the traits or criteria you want students to demonstrate in the completed assignment. Chapter Eight and the questions in Table 9.2 may be helpful.

Discussing these questions collaboratively with other faculty and staff can be immensely helpful. Even if you are developing a rubric for a course that you alone teach, it can be helpful to discuss these questions with other faculty in your discipline or in related disciplines.

If the initial list you generate is long, it probably needs to be pruned. A long rubric makes assignments more time-consuming to score and makes it harder for your students to understand the chief skills that they are to focus on as they complete the assignment. Effective rubrics can have as few as three criteria and generally have no more than eight or so. Lengthy rubrics may be more appropriate when the assignment is a holistic, culminating experience such as a senior thesis or field experience in which students are expected to demonstrate a broad range of learning outcomes.

So review your list and reduce it to the most significant tasks, skills, or abilities that you'd like students to demonstrate. Discard anything that isn't a high-priority goal or observable in this particular assignment. (Enthusiasm for science might not be observable in a lab report, for example.) Perhaps a group of similar skills can be combined into one category.

Now edit the list so that each criterion is expressed in explicit, concrete terms, preferably action verbs or clear adjectives, as discussed in Chapter Eight. "Writing quality" tells students and colleagues little about what you're looking for; "organization and structure" tells them far more. Think twice about terms like "adequate organization," "appropriate vocabulary," or "acceptable grammar" that don't tell students or colleagues what kind of organization, vocabulary, or grammar is acceptable.

Table 9.2. Questions to Help Identify What You're Looking for in Student Work

Why are we giving students this assignment? What are its key learning goals? What do we want students to learn by completing it?
What are the skills we want students to demonstrate in this assignment?
What are the characteristics of good student work? What are the characteristics of good writing, a good presentation, a good lab report, or good student teaching?
What specific characteristics do we want to see in completed assignments?



### Leave Room for the Ineffables and the Unexpected

Some faculty and staff have found that students who are given rubrics along with an assignment do exactly what the rubric tells them to do but no more. The result is solid but somewhat flat and uninspired products. To encourage originality, creativity, effort, and that unexpected but delightful something extra, build these qualities into the rubric. You might tell students, for example, that 10 percent of the assignment score will be based on effort, originality, or insight.

### Create the Rating Scale

If you are creating a rubric other than a checklist, once you have listed the things you're looking for, the next step is defining the levels that make up the rating scale. Faculty and staff who have never articulated their learning goals or evaluation criteria before may find it helpful to first develop and use the qualitative structured observation guide described earlier.

**Create at least three levels.** At a minimum, you will need to include performance levels for adequate and inadequate performance, plus an exemplary level to motivate students to do better than merely adequate work. You may want to add a category between exemplary and adequate, and you may wish to add an "almost adequate" category. Usually no more than five levels are needed. If faced with too many levels, faculty and staff may have a hard time distinguishing consistently between, say, 6 and 7 on a 10-point scale.

**Label each level with names, not just numbers.** Don't ask, for example, for a rating of 1 through 5, with 1 being Best and 5 being Worst. People will have different conceptions of 2, 3, and 4 unless you spell them out. There is no hard and fast rule on how to label each performance level. Use descriptors that are clear and relevant to you, your colleagues, and your students. Labels that work well for one assignment or discipline may not work for another. Examples of possible performance levels are:

- Exceeds standard, meets standard, approaching standard, below standard
- Complete evidence, partial evidence, minimal evidence, no evidence
- Excellent, very good, adequate, needs attention
- Letter grades (A, B, C, D, F)

Whatever labels you choose, make sure that they make clear which category represents minimally acceptable performance. If

you use letter grades, for example, does C or D represent minimally acceptable performance?

**If you are developing a descriptive rubric, fill in its boxes.** In other words, create brief descriptors for each trait at each performance level. (If you are creating a holistic scoring guide, once you have defined the performance levels, your next step is to create a written description for each performance level.) What exactly do you want to see in an exemplary assignment? An adequate assignment? What kind of work merits a failing grade?

This task can be easier if you look at a few samples of student work. Choose a range of student work—good, bad, and mediocre—and consider the following questions:

- Which samples represent exemplary work? Why? Would it be realistic to establish these as the targets we aim for in all students?
- Which samples are unacceptably inadequate? Why?
- What kinds of student performance represent minimally acceptable work for a graduate of our program or college?
- How do the exemplary, acceptable, and inadequate samples differ?

Setting standards is discussed further in Chapter Fifteen.

If the work of creating a descriptive rubric seems overwhelming or contentious, start by creating a rating scale rubric. Once faculty use it, they may come to realize that they need a rubric with greater clarity and may be ready to invest the time and effort to develop a descriptive rubric.

### Try Out the Rubric

Use the rubric to score some actual samples of student work, including some of your students' best and worst work. Are your standards appropriate, unrealistically high, or insufficiently challenging? Revise the rubric if necessary to improve its clarity and value. Chapter Three discusses ways to avoid biases and inconsistencies as you use a rubric.

### Keeping the Scoring Burden Manageable \_\_\_\_\_

One of the reasons that traditional multiple-choice tests continue to be popular is that they can be scored quickly. Finding time to evaluate performance assessments can be a challenge, especially for

faculty who are teaching courses with high enrollments. Chapter Six offers a number of suggestions for minimizing the burden of assessment. Here are some more:

- *Don't waste your time scoring assignments with obviously inadequate effort.* Establish what Barbara Walvoord and Virginia Anderson (1998) call gateway criteria, and give them to students, in writing, with the assignment. Then return or fail assignments that don't meet those minimum standards.
- *Try Richard Haswell's (1983) minimal marking strategy.* Instead of correcting student writing errors, put a check in the margin on the line of the error, and have the student figure out what's wrong on that line and what the correction should be.
- *Investigate software designed to score essays.* The latest software is based on artificial intelligence and is a promising means of scoring writing samples. Chapter Six offers suggestions on investigating assessment technologies.

### Time to Think, Discuss, and Practice

One of Belleville College's general education goals is, "Students will be able to write effectively." The faculty has decided to assess this by asking all graduating students to write a one-page review and analysis of arguments for and against making community service a college graduation requirement. Create a descriptive rubric to assess these papers, following the three steps suggested in Chapter Five of *Effective Grading* (Walvoord & Anderson, 1998):

1. Begin by brainstorming descriptions of a perfect paper, an unexceptional but acceptable paper, and an unacceptable paper. (Faculty are assessing only the finished paper, not the writing process.)
2. Use your brainstormed descriptions to make a list of the criteria or traits that will count in the evaluation.
3. For each trait, construct a three-point scale, where 3 = exemplary, 2 = acceptable but unexceptional, and 1 = unacceptable. These are descriptive statements.
4. Exhibit 9.9 is a student submission for this assignment. Use your rubric to evaluate this paper. Compare your completed rubrics. Are you all in reasonable agreement? Does the rubric appear to work the way you intended, or does it need refinement?

#### Exhibit 9.9. A Student Essay on Making Community Service a Graduation Requirement

Of all the requirements for graduation, community service is not usually one of them. However, some colleges are considering adding this as a prerequisite to receiving a diploma. This idea has caused disputes between some students, who do not wish to volunteer, and faculty, who feel that volunteering should not be required in order to graduate from an institute of higher learning.

One opinion is that as a graduating college student, you should not only be well educated, but also well rounded in general, and community service is one aspect that will help you to become a more well rounded person in general. This is the opinion of the people who advocate for community service. By requiring students to perform so many mandated hours of community service, they feel that the students will become enriched in ways that a classroom cannot provide.

Another opinion of faculty is that students do not have to volunteer in order to get a good education, which is the primary function of a university, and therefore, required community service should not be necessary in order to receive a diploma. Some students share this opinion also. They feel that community service should be a personal opinion based on personal interests and reasons for wishing to volunteer. They believe that if students are forced to volunteer in order to receive the diploma they have worked so hard for, since the community service work is not coming from their hearts, they will not be giving their all, simply going through the motions to satisfy the requirement.

If students are required to provide a certain number of community service hours, this may also detract from their attention to their school work, causing grades to suffer. Some faculty have taken this into consideration. They are not sure if creating mandatory community service hours is worth the possible decline in students' GPAs because they are so concerned with finding places to conduct community service and finding the time to perform their mandated hours.

Another question that is concerning the faculty of universities is whether or not there are enough locations in which students could perform community service. For some colleges that are not located around a large city, the number of places that needs volunteer work may not be sufficient enough to accommodate all the students that are attending the school. If there are not enough open spaces in volunteer organizations outside of the school, should the university be obligated to create situations in which volunteers are needed in the school so that students can perform their needed hours of community service?

All of these questions and concerns need to be adequately addressed before a decision is made at any university or postsecondary school. They should be addressed not only with faculty and staff of the school, but also students, in order to hear their points of view.

### Recommended Readings

The following readings are recommended along with the references cited in this chapter.

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- Tierney, R., & Simon, M. (2004). What's still wrong with rubrics: Focusing on the consistency of performance criteria across scale levels. *Practical Assessment, Research and Evaluation*, 9(2). Retrieved September 16, 2008, from <http://PAREonline.net/getvn.asp?v=9&n=2>.

## CHAPTER 10

# Creating an Effective Assignment

### Some Valuable Ideas You'll Find in This Chapter

- Every assignment should help students achieve important learning goals.
- Give students a variety of assignments, not just traditional essays and research papers.
- Ask yourself if students will learn significantly more from a thirty-page assignment than a five-page assignment—enough to justify the time that they and you will spend on it.
- Break apart large assignments into pieces that are due at various times.
- Address plagiarism consistently and collaboratively across campus through education as well as consequences.

When we ask students to write an essay, complete a research project, create a work of art, use laboratory materials, or give a speech, providing clear instructions and guidance on what students are to do and why will help them learn what we value. This is where prompts—the subject of this chapter—come in.

### What Is a Prompt?

A prompt is simply an assignment: the statement or question (usually written) that tells students what they are to do in a performance