

## Student Use of Rubrics in Academic Programs

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Faculty and students alike may not understand how to design and use rubrics to enhance student learning in core performance areas like scholarly writing and critical thinking. For faculty, well-designed and implemented rubrics are tools to communicate cherished educational outcomes and to build these outcomes developmentally in their programs. For students, rubrics are performance targets that must be sufficiently clear to help them benefit from each developmental learning opportunity and to envision a performance that they have yet to achieve. Ultimately, the relationship between teacher and student is altered by using rubrics as a means to communicate sophisticated learning outcomes because the rubric creates the possibility of opening dialogic teaching and learning arrangements as a powerful communication tool. Students may learn to use rubrics for learning only when a complex set of conditions are met.

In a study on students' use of rubrics for scholarly writing and critical thinking completed in Educational Administration and Foundations, we found that rubrics must be designed and refined: 1) to be aligned to actual student work and relevant comparisons to the qualities of scholarly writing found in the field; 2) to capture qualitatively distinct performance levels; 3) to represent primary traits that are a matter of agreement among faculty as much as possible and represent good faith efforts to continuously improve the scale and its use; 4) to represent underlying forms of critical thinking as performance targets; and 5) to be used in combination with other powerful assessment practices, such as self-assessment and aligned feedback. Without these features, rubrics function much like grades, as a *post hoc* form of judgment of little use for learning.

In the six courses in which the rubric was piloted and revised in two semesters, masters level students found the rubric least useful. Doctoral students questioned whether they needed to make scholarly writing and critical thinking outcomes explicit, but they rated the rubric with increasing favor during the courses in which it was used. Initially used with advanced undergraduates, instructors dropped the rubric when their students seemed confused by it. It may be that the earliest and most complex draft of the rubric that they used was too sophisticated for them and/or represented too great a shift from teacher judgment of final products to a more dialogic learning process that used the rubric as a tool. Later drafts incorporated student feedback and enhanced its utility for shaping student performance, self-assessment, and faculty feedback. The alignment of these factors was critical to making the rubric useful.

Overall, the rubric became a useful tool for faculty and graduate students, but it required both groups to change perceptions about formative and summative aspects of assessment to which they had been socialized by years of schooling. For faculty and students alike, the rubric introduced a level of discomfort and required reviewing personal assumptions about the teacher-student relationship. Learning was required of both groups for the rubric to be integrated into classroom teaching, learning, and assessment.

One outcome of the project was a departmental discussion of the rubric and the role of scholarly writing and critical thinking in the EAF program. The rubric opened up ongoing discussions about grading and sharing collective views about acceptable levels of performance in this area by graduate students. The current draft of the rubric is now posted at the EAF web site.