

Creating and Using an Online Rubric for Maximum Effectiveness

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Ah, the rubric: so often used in the college classroom, so often misunderstood, so many times maligned. Yet it remains an extremely effective assessment tool in presenting students with a detailed breakdown of why they

earned their grade and how it can be improved. And the rubric is used in a large number of distance learning courses, often simply brought over from their face-to-face course counterparts. Yet using the rubric in an online classroom is different, for the online classroom has its own needs and considerations in making this unique learning environment one of maximum effectiveness to the students.

Doing this comes in knowing how to create and how to use an online rubric. Here's how:

CREATING AN ONLINE RUBRIC FOR MAXIMUM EFFECTIVENESS

A RUBRIC MUST ALWAYS BE DEVELOPED WITH COURSE OUTCOMES AND THE ONLINE STUDENT IN MIND

A rubric can never be tossed together willy-nilly, but rather it must be crafted based on course outcomes and the online student. Thus, rather than being merely a scoring sheet one is reading as if a golf or bowling scorecard, it must be developed with helping the student to stay engaged and to look forward to reading the



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rubric—no matter what the grade. Added to this must be a direct tie-in to course outcomes (and perhaps general outcomes dictated by your school). Too often online educators forget the differences between online and face-to-face students in their classroom environments, and thus a rubric that may work well in the physical classroom will not have maximum effect in the online one. The more of our online student profile (and course outcomes) we incorporate into the rubric the better will be that rubric.

INCORPORATE ALL ASPECTS OF YOUR ASSIGNMENT INTO THE RUBRIC

Students are given assignments with various components, and if we leave any out of the rubric it gives the impression those components really didn't amount to much. Including these items in the rubric can be done in specific language (i.e., writing out the components as they appear in the assignment) or in general/holistic language. There is a bonus to this: students are reminded that all parts of an assignment are important, and thus their focus for detail can be improved. Also, be sure the rubric only evaluates measurable criteria; that a student really tried hard, was interested in the subject, or studied for many hours are examples of items that cannot be quantifiably or qualitatively measured, and thus have no place in a rubric.

INCORPORATE ALL ASPECTS OF YOUR STANDARDS INTO THE RUBRIC

Beyond the specifics of what makes up each assignment—such as, is there a properly constructed thesis statement? (English) ... has the correct formula been used in solving the equation? (Math) ... are all topographical features of a volcano included? (Geography)—our standard for what equates to excellent, good, fair, et cetera must be included. This serves two

purposes: it identifies the differences of one grade over another and it gives the student a clearer understanding of where more effort might be needed.

CHOOSE CAREFULLY THE VOCABULARY INCORPORATED INTO THE RUBRIC

Terms should be variants of achievement that are short, such as excellent, good, satisfactory, and needs improvement; students need to immediately determine under which category they have received grades. If wording is too long or jumbled it will only result in students asking the instructor for clarification and/or allow for gray areas in a final grade evaluation (never good). [Note: A numeric scale may be used, such as 1, 2, 3, et cetera, but each number must also have a definition of its value.] Also, pay attention to all other vocabulary and phrase or sentence structure throughout the rubric, as it should be easy to understand and not long. A rubric is never a substitute for the great American novel!

ALWAYS GIVE AN EXPLANATORY BREAKDOWN OF POINTS

Students use a rubric for three purposes: to determine their overall grade for an assignment, to see the grade breakdown of the assignment, and to understand where improvement is needed. This last area dictates language in each square of each item in the rubric be specific to what resulted in the corresponding grade. It is here where a combination of the assignment expectations and your standards will mesh. Again, be sure this is written in short sentences or phrases that easily and quickly can be understood.

BE SURE TO INCORPORATE COLOR, BOLD, ETC., BUT DON'T OVERDO IT

The online class is all about engaging the students—this is crucial when there

are no physical walls of a classroom to lock in a student and no physical presence of an instructor. Thus, every aspect of the distance learning classroom needs attention to any detail that can maintain, even improve, student engagement. And so the rubric must be presented in a visual manner that is appealing, that asks for attention. By using color, as well as some bold, underlining, and highlighting (but not italics: this can make some writing difficult to read), students can view the rubric as friendly and helpful, with various headings and/or important notations made to stand out for easier or “most important” reading. A black-and-white rubric with no variation of text used in the online classroom can quickly be passed over or skimmed over by the student, thus turning into wasted effort by the instructor. But be careful: too many or too much of color, bold, and/or highlighting can make a rubric difficult to read—a balance must be struck.

MAKE SURE THE LAYOUT IS EASY TO READ

When a student comes upon a rubric its layout should make it a quick and inviting info bulletin; immediately, each rubric category, its weight, and descriptive text should not warrant any further explanation or cause any puzzlement as to what belongs to what. Also, a rubric should be rather short, with a limit of 4 to 10 items (under 4 items and the rubric begins to take on more of a “feel good” descriptor; more than 10 can intimidate or lose the reader) and no more than a page in length. Also, each item listed in the rubric should focus on only one skill or learning outcome; again, this makes the info quick and easy to digest. Finally, the overall template of the rubric should remain the same for each assignment in the course—changing this around for various assignments only adds confusion and extra time for the student.

CONNECT EACH SCORE TO PERFORMANCE IN THE WORKPLACE

An underutilized yet very important part of a rubric is to transition its information beyond the online classroom, thus having a “How This Applies to Work”-type of category takes the rubric into third dimension territory. Here, several words or a few phrases/sentences can tie in each skill to its use and importance in the professional world. This will take the rubric from simply being used as a grading tool to a reminder of how information taught in the online class is useful in work—where students will be far longer than in school. (Note: Depending on the course taught, the “real world” connecting info can be specific to a profession or generic for most work situations.)

USING AN ONLINE RUBRIC FOR MAXIMUM EFFECTIVENESS

POST AN EXAMPLE OF YOUR RUBRIC FOR DAY ONE OF CLASS

The first day of a course for an online student (and this can often be prior to the course beginning) is one of discovery—getting to know the layout of the course delivery system (Blackboard, eCollege, et al.) and the placement of course materials, as well as rules and regs posted by the instructor. Here, too, the student should be introduced to the rubric; post an example in a prominent location so students have a chance to study it, to understand how it will be used. This would be the time for any questions they might have regarding the rubric; you want students fully prepared for the rubric’s debut in their first assignment.

EXPLAIN TO STUDENTS THE WHY AND HOW OF USING A RUBRIC

Along with an example of the rubric must also be a short explanation as to why

a rubric is used and how it can be helpful to the student, in the classroom and in the professional world. There might be students who have not experienced rubrics, and for the first time certainly most (if not all) students in your class will be experiencing your layout of the rubric. This explanation can also minimize questions students might have without it, thus saving you time.

ALWAYS HAVE YOUR RUBRIC APPEAR AT THE SAME LOCATION FOR EACH ASSIGNMENT

Students like familiarity in the online course, especially students new to distance learning; anything that moves along this comfort is a help to not only the student but the instructor, for it cuts down on student questions and minimizes stress and frustration. Merely having your rubric appear at the same location each time a student assignment is returned—such as at the end of the assignment—tells students, “Hey, I’m your good ol’ rubric, living in the same place, with not only your grade but details on how you earned it!” It’s reassuring to know where the rubric can always be found.

CONSIDER GIVING COMMENTS THAT PERSONALIZE THE GRADING OF EACH SECTION

The rubric is designed with language that is used for all students in a class; structuring individual comments per student in each rubric would take an extensive amount of time. Yet instances will occur where it is important to add an additional note to a rubric item; this not only personalizes the rubric but also goes to greater length in helping the student to improve or to increasing a student’s confidence

because of something especially good done by him or her in the assignment. Be sure these comments are in bold, underlined, or highlighted so they stand out from the usual verbiage in the rubric.

INCLUDE A SUMMARY COMMENT THAT ALWAYS ENDS WITH A POSITIVE OBSERVATION

The rubric does a great job in breaking down the why of a grade, but the overall comment gives the instructor’s general thoughts on the student’s efforts. This, again, personalizes the rubric (such a big help in cementing a strong student-instructor bond), and the student receives some general feedback from one who is an expert in the subject. And always ending with a positive sentence or two motivates the student into doing better, especially if the grade is not the greatest.

HONE, SAND, AND POLISH YOUR RUBRICS AS COURSE EXPERIENCE DICTATES

A re-evaluation of the rubric should be done prior to each new course, as requirements of the course can change, observations of previous students’ efforts may determine more emphasis of one area than another, and/or unexpected student confusion over some language in the rubric or part of the rubric’s layout may warrant some tweaking. This should always be done under the umbrella of the course outcomes, so the rubric is always in sync with these.

Remember: Billboards and résumés present a summation of information in nuggets; yet careful thought, layout, and language must be the foundation of each if it is to be effective.