

# An Overview of Rubrics

## What are rubrics?

At its simplest, a rubric is a scoring or rating guide, typically intended to standardize the evaluation of some group of objects, often for purposes of comparison. Committees evaluating grant proposals use scoring rubrics to help assure some consistency in ratings. Purchasing agents often use elaborate rubrics to evaluate competitive proposals for projects from software development to building design and construction. Elementary and secondary educators have long practice with developing and applying rubrics for a variety of assessment purposes. In higher education, the terms may be less familiar than the practice, which is common but often tacit. When large-scale assessment is planned, however, shared, explicit understandings become particularly important.

There are two major categories of rubrics: analytic and holistic. An analytic rubric provides the means to assess for multiple criteria across several levels of achievement, while a holistic rubric assigns a few levels of performance that encompass several criteria. Resulting in a single designation such as a letter grade or numeric score, a holistic rubric may be best suited to single assignments where a gross judgment is desired (for example, for a short homework assignment) or for an assignment where separating criteria is particularly difficult (certain kinds of writing assignments). An analytic rubric is better suited to meet needs for complex projects, where varied levels of performance along different criteria are more likely, or for major purposes such as whole-portfolio review or program assessment. Because it breaks down the learning objective into several dimensions for each of several criteria, an analytic rubric can guide both formative and summative assessment and can generate meaningful input for ongoing program improvement. For purposes of this web site, the term *rubric* generally substitutes for the phrase *analytic rubric*.

Rubrics are typically structured in two dimensions: (1) they identify characteristics or components of the outcome being assessed, and (2) they identify and describe levels of performance for each component. For this reason, a matrix is very often an ideal presentation format for a rubric. This site provides links to numerous [examples](#) of such rubric matrices and to several [resources](#) that provide directions or templates for developing useful rubrics.

## What benefits do rubrics offer, and to whom?

In a nutshell, rubrics in education are used both to guide student learning and to assess student learning outcomes. Rubrics

- describe what various levels of performance look like;
- articulate the criteria against which student work or learning is judged; and
- provide an objective guide for assessment.

Rubrics are especially helpful in assessing complex skills or higher-order learning such as communication and critical or integrative thinking.

Rubrics can be used effectively

- for a single assignment in an individual course,
- for consistency of desired learning outcomes across a group of sections or classes (e.g., themed learning communities for first-year students),
- for culminating projects that include a reflection or self-evaluation component (as in a senior capstone experience, service-learning project report, or graduation portfolio),
- for program-level assessment (for program improvement and to support accreditation needs), and
- for campus- or institution-level assessment of particular student learning outcomes (such as the Principles of Undergraduate Learning or undergraduate research experiences across departments).

Rubrics can be helpful pedagogically in guiding students to stretch themselves, to work toward high but realistic goals. When rubrics are shared with students as part of an assignment, learners understand more clearly how

the assignment will help them develop, what standards are expected for their work, and how their performance will be assessed.

Most instructors, especially the experienced, have internalized these kinds of standards (the substance beneath expressions like "I know it when I see it"), so creating rubrics is often simply a process of getting it all down for purposes of communicating those standards with colleagues and students. Of course, faculty members are responsible for clarifying the content and skills their students should learn, whether or not rubrics are made explicit. Shared rubrics become particularly important for large-scale processes such as program-level or cross-campus assessments of student learning outcomes. Use of clearly defined rubrics can help reduce the extent of subjective interpretation inevitable with letter grades or simple checklists. When many reviewers are engaged in assessing for the same criteria, use of common rubrics can help improve consistency among evaluators as well as the assessments of a single evaluator across time.