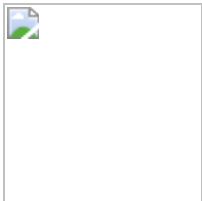


Rubric Do's & Don'ts (Opinion)

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The new question-of-the-week is:

Do you use rubrics? Why or why not? If you do, how do you use them most effectively? If you don't, what do you use instead?

I know that I am in the minority, but I'm generally not a big fan of rubrics.

In my experience, I feel like they tend to take too much time for me to create; having students co-create them is obviously much better, but doing that takes even more time. Often students don't really pay much attention to them, anyway, and they can

often result in formulaic student work and/or serve to discourage students who are facing the most challenges.

I prefer to show students good examples of previous student work, and research has shown that strategy is often more effective than having rubrics.

There is one case where I do use them, and I've written extensively about it at My Revised Final Exams (And An Important Lesson). In this case, I use an "Improvement Rubric" where students can compare their writing at the beginning of the year with what they can do at the end of the year and measure their improvement in several specific areas. Based on that self-assessment, they then determine in what areas they would like their next year's teacher to help them on.

However, I'm always open to discovering that I might be missing something, so contributions to this series have given me a lot to think about ...

You might also be interested in The Best Rubric Sites (And A Beginning Discussion About Their Use).

Today, Kathy Dyer, Allyson Caudill, John Cox and Ashley Blackley, and Lisa Sibaja share their recommendations.

'I Love Rubrics'

Kathy Dyer is an educator with over 25 years' experience. She served as a public school teacher, principal, and district assessment coordinator. A frequent contributor to the Teach. Learn. Grow. education blog, her work has also been featured on eSchool News, Education Dive, Ed Circuit, and Getting Smart:

I love rubrics—a word picture (or even visual) of where I am in my learning at any time. A rubric provides the scaffolding to guide me to the next level in my work as a learner. One semester when I was teaching middle school leadership, I let my students develop the rubric for the final project of that class. While it was a bit laborious and time-consuming, it was interesting for me (and them) to learn what they thought would show proficiency on the standards. And it surfaced for me that no one had ever taught them to appropriately use a rubric before. When teaching a graduate class, I again had my students develop the rubric. The interesting aspect of that exercise was that when the rubric was applied to their final product, there were some dissatisfied learners.

Whether the teacher devises the rubric, or the learners do, there is value in the process of developing and using a rubric. Getting clarity about what proficiency looks like is critical for the entire classroom learning team. Judy Arter and Jan Chappuis pose this question, “What does it look like when students are at a beginning or intermediate level of achievement on the reasoning proficiencies, performance skills, and product development we want?”

As part of my formative-assessment practice, I use rubrics. Think of rubrics as serving three primary purposes: 1) a detailed explanation of the learning targets, 2) a tool that supports learners in the self-assessment practice, and 3) a mechanism for providing feedback to learners about where they are in their learning so they can build a plan to get where they need or want to be. And some use them for grading. Steps to using rubrics include:

Step 1 – Provide learners with copies of the rubrics. Have learners process with a partner. Have learners discuss what it is and why you might use it. What do they notice about the rubric?

Step 2 – Have learners ask questions. Learners should write down questions that surface with their partner and try to answer as many as possible.

Step 3 – Square up to answer questions. Whatever questions the pair couldn’t answer, allow time for pairs to join another pair to see if they can as a quad answer more questions.

Step 4 – Collect remaining questions and dialogue whole group. This step is often key to surfacing areas in the rubric that need more clarity. If the “how to use” question has not been adequately addressed, this is a good time to get clarity on that topic.

Step 5 – Translate the rubric. Sometimes missed, this translation step helps learners demonstrate their comprehension of the rubric contents. There are several strategies you can use to have learners put the rubric in their own words. One part of this step that makes a difference is if there are work samples for each level of the rubric for learners to access. Think about what best supports any reading-comprehension activity. My favorite way to use work samples is to have learners match the work sample to the rubric descriptor. This serves as a good demonstration of the learner’s comprehension of the rubric.

While some might consider this Step 6, helping learners use rubrics for goal setting, self-assessment, peer assessment, and feedback are some of the ways we can teach learners to use rubrics. One of my favorite strategies for learners to get feedback from either teachers or peers is the use of highlighters on the rubric. Have learners use yellow highlighters to self-assess, and the feedback provider uses a blue highlighter. Where there is agreement, statements will be green.

Be warned, once we take the time to teach our learners about rubrics and their effective use, they begin to ask for them. Then once we teach learners to co-create rubrics, they want to be involved. And guess what? The quality of work increases as the depth of understanding the learning target increases. Rubrics are one tool we can use to help learners get clear on where they are going (learning target), where they are (self-assessment), and what it takes to meet the target.

‘Peer Reviews’

*Allyson Caudill, John Cox, & Ashley Blackley (@readysetcoteach), are national-board-certified co-teachers from Raleigh, N.C., who specialize in co-teaching for English-learners at the elementary level. With 18 years of experience between them, they have been teaching together for four years, are featured in several professional texts, and have presented at multiple education conferences on the topics of inclusion, collaboration, literacy, & language. **Website/Blog:** www.readysetcoteach.com **Twitter:** [@readysetcoteach](https://twitter.com/readysetcoteach)*



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Rubrics are a very powerful tool not only for assessment purposes but also to facilitate peer feedback. Rubrics are especially useful for speaking and writing activities. Properly aligned, kid-friendly rubrics are a great way for students to engage in peer editing because they provide a structure for authentic discourse and purposeful feedback. In the elementary grades, we take the time to teach students

how to engage in productive discussions and explicitly model the correct way to both give and take constructive criticism. Regular peer feedback focused on growth can help lower the affective filter and build a healthy and positive classroom culture.

Before final assessment of a writing assignment, students are given three opportunities to improve their work. The first is the self-edit and reflection. During this phase, students learn the rubric and use it to assess their own work. Giving them the rubric and expectations upfront increases learner autonomy so that they can be in control of their own learning. Second is peer reviews. This phase is all about students exchanging and assessing each others' work using the provided rubric. Then students discuss why they gave certain scores as well as at least one positive and something to improve. For students who need help providing clear, specific, and related feedback, we provide sentence frames to guide them. For example:

"I gave you a _____ for this section because _____."

"Something you did well was _____."

"Something you could improve is _____."

The final step is a time for students to make any necessary revisions. For speaking assignments, the process is slightly different. For example, if we are working on retelling a story, the first phase is students using the provided resources (visuals, word banks, etc.) to formulate their retell. Then, they get with their partner and retell the story as the partner scores using the rubric (Quick tip: Put the rubrics in sheet protectors and give students dry erase markers for scoring). Following the scoring, students discuss using the sentence frames. This way, when it comes time to orally retell to us (the teachers) for a grade, they have already had multiple opportunities to practice and improve. Our philosophy is that rubrics are meant more for growth than evaluation.

With rubrics outlining expectations clearly and the opportunity to peer assess each other's work using these rubrics, we find students are more successful and work is higher quality. Collaboratively interacting with rubrics and participating in peer critiques also allows students to learn valuable habits of character such as problem-solving, perseverance, communication, and collaboration. Adding the opportunity for questions allows students to clear up confusion and engage in a meaningful discourse to ensure that the student has a true takeaway from the experience.

To summarize, the effectiveness of rubrics entirely depends on how they are used. For us, it's more about the process of revision and facilitating productive peer interactions. These eventually lead to increased student achievement and higher-quality work.

Rubrics With English-Language Learners

Lisa Sibaja (B.F.A., UNC-Charlotte; M.A., Winthrop University) has taught visual art and ESL, as well as Spanish and theater arts. She has worked with students in pre-K through high school for the past 25 years while promoting literacy and cultural awareness in North Carolina, Northern Virginia, Maryland, and Buenos Aires (Argentina):

Over the years, I developed rubrics for student work and utilized them to increase students' reflection about their own progress. Through this experience, rubrics seem ideally suited for productive language assignments such as oral presentations, voice recordings, writing assignments, and projects. When students complete peer rubrics, they learn to recognize the strengths of others and watch for common pitfalls and errors. By having students complete self-evaluations, they understand the lesson expectations, check for key vocabulary, and develop organizational skills through a clearly defined structure. Utilizing rubrics in the classroom is a process, but it's well worth it if they help students take more ownership over their own learning.

Before creating any product, I provide a rubric to the class, and we review the rubric together as a group. Younger students, newcomers, and students unaccustomed to working with rubrics use checklists that might have picture and number support. We look for concrete items that are either present or missing from an assignment such as an introduction, transition words, and a conclusion. Then, I provide good and not-so-good examples of work to clarify expectations. After groups complete a recording or project, I use the rubric to provide feedback for each student. We discuss the first assignment collectively to make sure everyone understands the criteria.

Next, we have a similar assignment where students have the opportunity to complete a rubric for a peer's submission. Now, they know what to look for, so we once again practice with a concrete checklist. After years of tinkering with ways to effectively use rubrics in the classroom, it becomes clear that students need specific guidance to understand how to produce constructive criticism and encourage their peers. Before starting the peer-review process, we talk about appropriate language and discuss examples through role play. I review students' comments to make sure the suggestions are respectful and positive.

At the end, EL students complete a self-evaluation. I find these to be the most difficult because students are either too critical or too lenient when addressing their own work. I review the student's checklist to make sure they understand what the expectations are for the rubric and show an appropriate level of effort. When possible, we then move from concrete checklists to more open-ended rubrics in order to increase expectations.

Providing feedback and encouraging meta-cognition is key to improving student growth. With practice, self-reflection increases students' skills when producing English language. More importantly, the type of self-reflection and peer feedback students gain through the use of rubrics helps create a sense of community in the classroom that helps us all encourage each other.

Thanks to Kathy, Allyson, John, Ashley, and Lisa for their contributions!

Please feel free to leave a comment with your reactions to the topic or directly to anything that has been said in this post.

Consider contributing a question to be answered in a future post. You can send one to me at lferlazzo@epe.org. When you send it in, let me know if I can use your real name if it's selected or if you'd prefer remaining anonymous and have a pseudonym in mind.

You can also contact me on Twitter at [@LarryFerlazzo](https://twitter.com/LarryFerlazzo).

Education Week has published a collection of posts from this blog, along with new material, in an e-book form. It's titled [Classroom Management Q&As: Expert Strategies for Teaching](#).

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I am also creating a [Twitter list including all contributors to this column](#).

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