

Build a Rubric for Scoring Papers and Projects

Rubrics provide a standardized format for feedback and assessment of projects and papers that are more difficult to assess than traditional measures like multiple-choice tests. They contain definitions of the components or features of the project that you expect to evaluate along with descriptions of what those features might look like when performed at different levels (e.g., at an exemplary level vs. a poor level). Rubrics not only help you and your students understand what the key components of the project are and how they will be evaluated, but they can also increase your efficiency and consistency, especially if more than one person will be providing feedback and assessment.

Designing Your Rubric

Most rubrics adopt a multiple row and column table design, with core attributes, features, or qualities in the left-most column, each in its row, and at least three columns across the top to indicate different levels of performance, from lowest (second column) to highest (fourth column). Table 1 provides a typical example of this structure.

Table 1. Typical Design Structure for a Rubric

	Below Expectations	Meets Expectations	Exceeds Expectations
<i>Core Attribute 1</i>	Description of how attribute would manifest when below expectations	Description of how attribute would manifest when at expectations	Description of how attribute would manifest when exceeds expectations
<i>Core Attribute 2</i>	Description of how attribute would manifest when below expectations	Description of how attribute would manifest when at expectations	Description of how attribute would manifest when exceeds expectations
<i>Core Attribute 3</i>	Description of how attribute would manifest when below expectations	Description of how attribute would manifest when at expectations	Description of how attribute would manifest when exceeds expectations
<i>Core Attribute 4</i>	Description of how attribute would manifest when below expectations	Description of how attribute would manifest when at expectations	Description of how attribute would manifest when exceeds expectations

Step One

The first step is to define what the core attributes of the assignment are. What are the big things you will be looking for? What would you call them, and what would they look like at varying levels of performance? If your rubric is designed to assess a major paper or report, elements may be related to the content of the paper, the structure, references, and writing mechanics. If your rubric is designed to assess a project, it

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might include the same core attributes as a paper (if the project is also written up) but also include things like professionalism (e.g., timely client communication; always appeared in professional dress with name badge displayed) and theoretical foundation (e.g., adopted an appropriate model from the textbook and applied it consistently).

Once you have defined these core attributes, given each one a short name and a brief description. For example:

1. Background: The history and context of the subject.
2. Research: Current evidence-based guidance from your survey of the literature.
3. Structure: Clearly organized arguments and evidence to support hypotheses.
4. Mechanics: Spelling, grammar, punctuation, and format.

Place each core attribute in its own row of a table like the example above. This will form the first column of your rubric.

Step Two

Now that have the core attributes defined and placed in the first column of your table, you need to determine how many performance benchmarks you will use. Most rubrics contain a minimum of three benchmarks, but some rubrics have five or more. Just remember that the more you have, the harder it will be to clearly articulate the differences between them. We recommend that you start with three until you know you will need more. Performance benchmarks generally have with at least one level below and above what you would consider acceptable (e.g., the equivalent of a high C to low B grade work). You've seen the example above, which uses below, meets, and exceeds expectations, but you could also use "Unsatisfactory," "Satisfactory," and "Exemplary."

Once you have identified your performance benchmarks, place them each in their own column to the right of your core attributes, from lowest to highest.

Step Three

Now that you have your core attributes defined in the first column and the performance benchmarks in the 3 (or more) columns to the right, you need to articulate what each benchmark MEANS in relation to each core attribute. What kinds of attributes would indicate that a core attribute warrants a "Below Expectations" rather than a "Meets Expectations?"

The descriptors within each of the columns for level of performance should describe multiple characteristics to help you (or another instructor who uses it) and the student understand what it means to achieve each core attribute at different levels. For example, the descriptors for "Mechanics" under "Below Expectations" might say "*spelling errors are prevalent; contains significant grammatical errors, writing lacks expository logic (e.g., transition sentences, thesis statement); fails to account for counter arguments.*" Many instructors find it easier to begin by defining the lowest (the biggest/most common mistakes you see in such projects/papers) and working their way up from there.

Optional

Will points be assigned? Some instructors like to provide a range of points associated with each performance benchmark in order to simplify grading. For example:

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1. Background (25 pts)
2. Uses (25 pts)
3. Strategies (25 pts)
4. Research (10 pts)
5. Structure Guide (10 pts)
6. Mechanics (5 pts)

While this can be helpful in grading, it also adds a significant level of complexity because they have to be distributed across your performance benchmarks. Are the maximum points achieved by getting “exemplary” for every core attribute? If so, what grade would someone get if they got all “Meets Expectations:” B? C? Some find it easier to use percentages, also referred to as “weighting,” for the core attributes. This lets you assign more “power” to the big things (e.g., Research, Structure) and less to the small things (e.g., mechanics). You can then just assign any point value you like to the performance benchmarks (e.g., 1, 5, 10 points) since the final grade will be the total of the points received from each performance benchmark multiplied by the weight for each attribute.

Either way, you will still have to “test” your rubric out to make sure it does not allow substandard performance to get a “passing” grade, or sufficient performance to get a grade that is too low or failing. If you are new to rubrics, we recommend NOT using points or weighting until you have built, tested, and become familiar with using them. You can consider the middle of three performance benchmarks to be a “C or B” and the highest to be an “A” and then use your own judgement for those students who are in between.

Building and Implementing Your Rubric

Create a table. Determine how many rows and columns by looking at the content you generated during the planning stage. Our example content contains six rubric elements and four performance benchmarks. Accounting for headings and a comment column, our example rubric will require eight rows and six columns.

(For ease of viewing, the steps below correspond to a sample rubric that appears on page 3 of this handout.)

1. Core Attributes should be entered in the leftmost columns, starting with row 2.
2. Performance Benchmarks should be entered into the top row, starting with column 2.
3. Optional:
 - a. The bottom row will be reserved for tallying points (if you use them).
 - b. Distribute points to each benchmark. Decide whether a student could receive a high grade for work that is deficient in one or more areas. For example, could an exemplary paper rife with spelling and grammar mistakes still receive an “A.” Could a student with a “Below Expectations” rating on “Theoretical Framework” still get the equivalent of B or an A? Test and adjust your rubric point distribution to avoid these concerns.
 - c. The final cell in the top row will be reserved for qualitative feedback (optional).
4. Write measurable, objective descriptions of each core attribute at each of the different performance benchmarks.

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- a. Include quantitative data such as page counts, number of sources, or number of errors where applicable.
 - b. Think carefully about qualitative descriptions to make sure they are clear to you and to students.
5. Look across all your performance benchmarks to evaluate them for consistency: Does each one build on the previous one? Do they use the same language and descriptors (often, but not always true)?
 6. Test your rubric for consistency—try to “game” the system and get a passing grade for work that you as the instructor would say is not passing work. Try to give a student the equivalent of a C grade with exemplary or acceptable ratings on the most important core attributes.

Before the Course Begins

When the rubric is complete, discuss it with any graders or teaching assistants who will be using it. Where warranted and time permits, consider training sessions with deidentified student work where all graders grade the same projects and then discuss and remediate any significant differences (e.g. some give passing grades and some failing grades to the same work). Discuss each core attribute and performance benchmark to build consistency.

At the Beginning of the Course

Post the rubric along with other assignment information in your course. At the time that you discuss the assignment with your students, you should ALSO discuss the rubric itself. Go over each Core Attribute and Performance Benchmark with them to develop a shared understanding of what you are looking for and how you will be grading. Tell students you expect them to self-assess their own work, and/or have them do peer reviews prior to submitting their completed work (recommended) so they have a chance to revise their work accordingly before you first see it.

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Sample Rubric

	Unsatisfactory	Developing	Satisfactory	Exemplary	Comments
Critical Thinking <i>(25 points possible)</i>	<i>Hypotheses are present but may be incomplete or loosely connected with the data.</i> (<i>< 17 pts</i>)	<i>Hypotheses are present and consistent with the data</i> (17-19 pts)	<i>Number and quality of hypotheses are sufficient for the given case and clearly connected to data</i> (20-22 pts)	<i>All relevant hypotheses clearly articulated and of high quality and prioritized effectively</i> (23-25 pts)	
Self-Directed Learning <i>(25 points possible)</i>	<i>Sometimes recognizes gaps in knowledge; objectives are superficial or lack relevancy</i> (<i>< 17 pts</i>)	<i>Usually identifies gaps in knowledge in order to develop relevant student learning objectives</i> (17-19 pts)	<i>Routinely identifies gaps in knowledge in order to develop relevant student learning objectives</i> (20-22 pts)	<i>Routinely identifies gaps in personal and group knowledge to develop beneficial learning objectives</i> (23-25 pts)	
Health Systems Thinking <i>(25 points possible)</i>	<i>Rarely recognizes costs of health care as a barrier to treatment and care</i> (<i>< 17 pts</i>)	<i>Usually recognizes costs of health care as a barrier to treatment and care and may integrate into care plans</i> (17-19 pts)	<i>Considers cost of health care as a barrier and integrates into care plans</i> (20-22 pts)	<i>Considers cost of health care and adjusts treatment options with respect to financial concerns</i> (23-25 pts)	
Teaching <i>(10 points possible)</i>	<i>Little or no visual aids and relevant teaching strategies (i.e. discussions, hands-on activities, quizzing)</i> (<i>< 6 pts</i>)	<i>Makes attempt to use visual aids or relevant teaching strategies (i.e. discussions, hands-on activities, quizzing)</i> (6-7 pts)	<i>Always uses visual aids or relevant teaching strategies (i.e. discussions, hands-on activities, quizzing)</i> (8 pts)	<i>Uses a variety of visual aids and relevant teaching strategies effectively (i.e. discussions, hands-on activities, quizzing)</i> (9-10 pts)	
Group Learning <i>(10 points possible)</i>	<i>Rarely contributes ideas for group improvement or responds to the ideas of others</i> (<i>< 6 pts</i>)	<i>Sometimes provides ideas for group improvement and supports the ideas of others</i> (6-7 pts)	<i>Often provides actionable ideas for group improvement and supports and solicits the ideas of others</i> (8 pts)	<i>Routinely provides actionable ideas for group improvement and actively solicits and supports the ideas of others</i> (9-10 pts)	
Presentation <i>(5 points possible)</i>	<i>Presentation is disorganized; significantly too long or too short.</i> (<i>< 3 pts</i>)	<i>Some attempt was made to organize presentation; significantly too long or too short</i> (3 pts)	<i>Presentation is organized; longer or shorter than allotted time</i> (4 pts)	<i>Presentation is well-organized and clearly focused; within allotted time</i> (5 pts)	
Total Points:					

Commented [SA1]: Benchmarks are placed in row 1

Commented [SA2]: Elements are placed in column 1.

Commented [SA3]: Benchmarks are described with measurable, unbiased language. We suggest beginning with the top-level benchmark and work backward. Use the same language structure in each column, for each benchmark.

Commented [SA4]: Points or weights are assigned, testing to be sure they are distributed properly (in this example, a student could spell every single word incorrectly and still receive an "A").

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Blank Rubric Template

	Benchmark 1	Benchmark 2	Benchmark 3	Benchmark 4	Comments
Element 1 <i>(X points possible)</i>					
Element 2 <i>(X points possible)</i>					
Element 3 <i>(X points possible)</i>					
Element 4 <i>(X points possible)</i>					
Element 5 <i>(X points possible)</i>					
Presentation <i>(X points possible)</i>					
Total Points:					

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