



The Value of Descriptive, Multi-Level Rubrics

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Educational Leadership, 81(6).

March 1, 2024

<https://www.ascd.org/el/articles/the-value-of-descriptive-multi-level-rubrics>

Single-point rubrics have become popular in schools, but they may be leading teachers astray.



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Have you heard the joke about the four teachers who walk into a rubrics bar? The first teacher asks the bartender for a holistic rubric with a four-point scale. “That’s a popular choice,” says the bartender. The second teacher orders an analytic rubric with five traits. “One of our favorites,” replies the bartender. The third teacher says, “Make mine a developmental rubric with six colored shot glasses.” “My pleasure,” comes the reply. When it’s the fourth teacher’s turn to order, she says, “I’d like a single-point rubric, please.” The bartender looks perplexed. “I’m sorry ma’am,” he replies, “but you can’t order that here. This is a *rubrics* bar.”

While the joke may or may not evoke a chuckle, we use it to make a serious point about rubrics. Let us explain.

What's a Rubric?

A rubric is an assessment tool consisting of three essential elements: 1) a set of *criteria* aligned to learning goals; 2) a *performance scale* typically consisting of three or four levels, and 3) *descriptors* that differentiate the levels of performance on the scale (Andrade, 2000; Brookhart, 2013; McTighe & Frontier, 2022). As suggested by the joke, there are three main types of rubrics—holistic, analytic, and developmental. All three rubric types share these three elements but render them in different ways.

Two general types of rubrics – holistic and analytic – are widely used for both providing feedback and grading student products and performances. A holistic rubric provides an overall impression of a student's work by considering all criteria simultaneously. Holistic rubrics yield a single score or rating for a product or performance. Figure 1 displays an example of a holistic rubric for a scientific investigation.

An analytic rubric, by contrast, divides a product or performance into distinct traits or dimensions and considers each independently. Thus, a *separate* rating is provided for each trait. Figure 2 presents an example of an analytic rubric for an oral presentation, showing three traits described across a 4-point performance scale.

Each identified trait in an analytic rubric is evaluated independently. As Figure 2 illustrates, a student may display a deep understanding of the topic but be weaker in their delivery – or vice-versa. Thus, an analytic rubric can provide more specific feedback to both learners *and* teachers to inform needed improvements.

A third type of rubric – developmental – describes growth along a fixed, novice-to-expert continuum, in which each level represents a key benchmark on the road to high-level performance. A familiar example can be seen in the sport of karate, where six different colored belts signify varied skills levels. Similarly, the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages' well-known set of performance descriptors is a developmental rubric that is used in world language courses to gauge a learner's performance level *and* growth in listening, speaking, reading, and writing in the target language. It is worth noting that developmental rubrics are generally not linked to age or grade - they simply describe current performance levels.

FIGURE 1. A Holistic Rubric for a Scientific Investigation

4	<p>The student's investigation includes a stated hypothesis, follows a logical and detailed procedure, collects relevant and sufficient data, thoroughly analyzes the results, and reaches a conclusion that is fully supported by the data. The investigative process and conclusion are clearly and accurately communicated in writing so that others could replicate the investigation.</p>
3	<p>The student's investigation includes a hypothesis, follows a step-by-step procedure, collects data, analyzes the results, and reaches a conclusion that is generally supported by the data. The process and findings are communicated in writing with some omissions or minor inaccuracies. Others could most likely replicate the investigation.</p>
2	<p>The student's stated hypothesis is unclear. The procedure is somewhat random and sloppy. Some relevant data is collected but not accurately recorded. The analysis of results is superficial and incomplete and the conclusion is not fully supported. The findings are communicated so poorly that it would be difficult for others to replicate the investigation.</p>
1	<p>The student's investigation lacks a stated hypothesis and does not follow a logical procedure. The data collected is insufficient or irrelevant. Results are not analyzed, and the conclusion is missing or vague and not supported by data. The communication is weak or non-existent.</p>

Source: McTighe, Doubet, Carbaugh, 2020

FIGURE 2. An Analytic Rubric for an Oral Presentation

	Content Knowledge <i>The speaker...</i>	Organization <i>The speaker...</i>	Delivery <i>The speaker...</i>
4	Demonstrates a deep understanding of the topic. Presents accurate and relevant information in detail. Uses illustrative examples and cites multiple sources of research or references when applicable.	Presents a clear and smoothly connected introduction, body, and conclusion. The theme, thesis or main idea is evident. Uses a logical and coherent structure throughout and transitions smoothly between ideas.	Maintains eye contact with audience throughout the presentation. Uses appropriate and confident body language. Speaks clearly and audibly. Uses engaging and varied vocal tone. Demonstrates genuine enthusiasm for the topic.
3	Demonstrates a general understanding of the topic. Presents accurate information and uses a few illustrative examples. Cites some references when applicable.	Presents a clear introduction, body, and conclusion. The theme, thesis or main idea is mostly evident. The presentation is generally well organized but there are a few problems with sequence and transitions.	Makes eye contact with the audience during most of the presentation. Uses appropriate volume but occasionally appears stiff in both body language and tone. Demonstrates an interest in the topic.
2	Demonstrates a shallow understanding of the topic. Presents some information but not all is accurate or relevant. Speaks in generalities, does not use examples and fails to cite research or references.	Attempts to present a theme, thesis or main idea, but it is not easy to follow. The sequence and transitions between the introduction, body, and conclusion are not always clear.	Only occasionally makes eye contact with the audience. Display stiff body language, sometimes out of sync with the words. Speaks in an uneven volume, sometimes too low to be heard. Delivers the talk in a monotone.
1	Demonstrates a lack of understanding of the topic. Information is irrelevant or inaccurate. No examples are used, or they do not apply. No research or references are cited.	Is disorganized. There is no clear beginning, body or conclusion. The theme, thesis or main idea of the presentation is not clear. The presentation is very difficult to follow.	Does not make eye contact with the audience. Speaks at a very low volume. Delivery is stiff and awkward.

Source: Jay McTighe

The Problem with Single-Point Rubrics

In recent years, a related tool, known as a single-point rubric, has become increasingly popular with educators. Yet, as the “punch line” of the joke implies, it is actually *not* a rubric. Consider the following example of a single-point rubric (Figure 3) and see if you can tell why we make this point.

FIGURE 3. A Single-Point Rubric for Visual Artwork

Feedback: Areas Needing Work	Success Criteria	Feedback: Areas of Strength
	Composition Effective use of elements of art and principles of design in organizing space.	
	Originality Evidence of development of unique ideas.	
	Visual Impact Sensitivity in use of line, color, and form to effectively convey ideas and mood.	
	Craftsmanship Skill in use of media tools and technique. Attention to detail and care for results.	

Source: Milford Mill (MD) High School Art Department

At first glance, the distinction between a single-point rubric and the other types of rubrics is not always easy to discern. It has to do with the focus on only one level of performance. As researcher Jarene Fluckiger (2010) explains:

The difference between a single and a multiple-point rubric is in the number of levels of performance described. The single point rubric describes only one level of performance, the proficient level. Therefore, the single-point rubric has only one set of criteria, or “one point,” and that is the list of criteria, which shows proficient competence appropriate to the grade or learning context (p. 19).

As this explanation and the example in Figure 3 reveal, a single-point rubric only contains one of the three essential elements of a rubric: a set of criteria. It does *not* include a performance scale and lacks detailed, descriptive language to explain the criteria and differentiate levels of performance. So even though it may be a useful tool for some purposes, it is clearly misnamed. A more apt name would be something like a *criterion-based feedback tool*.

Using Rubrics for Feedback

Rubrics can serve two general purposes: they can provide *feedback* (formative), and they can be used for *evaluation* (summative, for example, for grading). To be most effective for either purpose, a rubric must include the three elements described earlier in the article. These elements are essential to providing effective feedback to both learners and teachers to guide improvements in learning and instruction.

To be helpful, feedback must be specific, descriptive, understandable to the learner, actionable, and timely (Wiggins, 2012). In other words, a rubric needs to yield information that describes students’ current levels of performance, reveals explicit areas of strength and weakness, and suggests or implies specific actions that can be taken to improve performance.

In their article “The Power of Feedback,” John Hattie and Helen Timperley (2007) describe feedback as the “second part” of teaching. The first part is teachers’ initial instruction to help students acquire new knowledge and skills, combined with assessment procedures to evaluate students’ understanding and level of mastery. The second part – feedback - relates to three major questions:

1. Where am I going?
2. How am I going?
3. Where to next?

“Where am I going?” relates to the learning goals or destination. It tells students what they’re expected to learn and be able to do after engaging in a particular set of learning tasks. “How am I going?” describes the progress students have made toward those goals. In other words, it tells students exactly where they are on their learning journey. “Where to next?” identifies what actions students need to undertake to make better progress, and it clarifies what students need to do to achieve the learning goals.

A more recent study by Hattie and a team of colleagues (2021) asked more than 3,000 high school and college students which of these three feedback components they found most helpful in improving essays they submitted online. Not surprisingly, students consistently preferred the “Where to next?” information.

Well-developed descriptive rubrics, especially analytic rubrics like the one in Figure 2, are helpful for offering three different kinds of feedback: teacher feedback, peer feedback, and student self-assessment. The key is in the performance-level descriptions.

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Rubrics support feedback because they turn what could be a “judging” task into a “matching” task. In other words, when students and teachers use rubrics to provide feedback, they are not primarily judging or evaluating areas of strength and weakness, but rather matching the work to the closest performance-level description. The advantage of full-blown rubrics for feedback purposes is that suggestions for improvement are indicated in the performance-level description for the next level of work. The feedback-giver can add individual comments as needed, of course, but the heavy lifting on the next step for learning progress is done by the rubric. Analytic rubrics are particularly useful for this task because they consider each of the salient traits, one at a time, allowing for more detailed feedback than the more general, overall descriptions found in holistic rubrics.

Developmental rubrics can serve as tools for feedback and improvement in a similar way. While a student’s present performance is noted by the associated developmental-level descriptor, the next level in the progression specifies the necessary skills needed to advance – and these become teaching and learning targets for subsequent instruction by the teacher and practice by the learner.

A One-Legged Stool

Advocates for the use of single-point rubrics make the case that they should be used as tools for feedback, not evaluation and grading (Fluckiger, 2010; Wilson, 2018). We have already noted that single-point rubrics contain only one of the three essential elements of a rubric: a set of criteria. Without a performance scale, it lacks the performance-level descriptions that are the basis for using rubrics as feedback.

As we saw, the performance-level descriptions support students and teachers in matching student work to a level of work and providing suggestions for improvement in the description of the next level of work. Without the descriptive scale, effective suggestions for improvement can only be made by students or teachers who have both a sure grasp on the content area *and* an understanding of how learning progresses in that area. That is basically unfair and unhelpful to many students. The lack of a performance scale also means that single-point rubrics are not able to function as a connector for students between their learning and their final grade, as true rubrics do.

While single-point rubrics may have some value, we think of them as a one-legged stool – it may get you off the ground, but it is far from being adequate. We believe the use of more detailed, descriptive rubrics are far superior tools for feedback. And that is *our* single point!

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