

RUBRICS AND RUBRIC DEVELOPMENT

Rubrics have become a useful tool in the assessment of student work online. They provide clarity in expectations for student performance and assist in turning subjective assessments of assignments, such as responses to discussion questions, into more objective measures of student work. Consequently, developing skill in the design of rubrics is important. The following material is provided in order to simplify and demystify the process of rubric development.

Designing Rubrics

Stevens and Levi (2004) delineate four stages involved in rubric development for any assignment:

1. *Reflecting.* Take some time to think about the expectations for the assignment. What are the expectations and how will they be communicated to learners?
2. *Listing.* Once the expectations have been determined, begin to develop learning objectives. What are the details and learning objectives for this assignment?
3. *Grouping and Labeling.* Next, group similar expectations and skills, then label them according to performance levels. What are the categories of expectations and how are performance levels determined? What constitutes basic performance, for example? What constitutes proficiency? What would exceptional performance look like?
4. *Application.* Apply the skills and labels from Step 3 to the grid format of the final rubric.

The sections that follow provide more detail to assist with the rubric development process.

Determining Gradable Activities

As the course is being developed, consider the activities that will be assessed and graded. The following are elements to consider:

- Activities should directly relate to course learning objectives.
- All course activities should relate to one another.
- Activities should be based on previous experience with like assignments.
- Activities should relate to the skill set of students entering the course or should help develop new skills.

Thinking about the activities in this way should help to delineate learning objectives for the activities being developed as well as provide a means to link them to course outcomes.

Determining Performance Levels for Activities

The following questions assist in determining the desired performance levels on activities:

- What evidence can students provide that would show they have accomplished what you want them to? In other words, what does proficiency look like?

- What are the highest expectations for student performance? In other words, what would exceptional (generally termed *distinguished*) performance look like?
- What is the worst performance you can imagine beyond not doing the assignment at all?

Using Rubrics in Assessment

The following is an example of how a rubric for online discussion might be introduced and used in an online course:

Attached is a rubric for participation in online discussions. The way to use this rubric is to look at the "gradable" items listed down the left-hand side of the grid. Across the top are the performance levels, which roughly (and I do mean roughly!) equate to grades. To earn an A, for example, you would not need to fill in all of the boxes down the right-hand column—your performance in discussions might be extremely strong with a combination of items from the *two* columns on the right (Proficient and Distinguished) and maybe even one item that you feel shows basic performance. The idea is to look at the total picture of your discussion performance.

So, at mid-term and again at the end of the term, what I want you to do is to send me an e-mail (I'll nudge you at mid-term) telling me where you think you fall on the rubric. For example, you might say that for including and applying course concepts and theories, you feel that you fall into the proficient category, while you feel you are distinguished in applying real-world examples and applications of the theories. You'll go through each category and tell me where you think you fall on the grid. I don't generally give mid-term grades, so what I'll be doing is responding to your e-mail with my own assessment based on your self-assessment. I hope that's not too confusing! If there's a discrepancy in our perceptions, we'll discuss it. If we agree, then great!

At the end of the term, I'm going to ask you to do this again. But, this time, I'm going to ask you to tell me what grade you think you've learned as well. Questions about this? Please ask!

Reconciling Differences

Rubrics define how grades will be determined, thus reducing conflicting opinions and grade appeals. If differences occur, however, students should be encouraged to use the rubric to illustrate how they see their performance differently from the way in which the instructor sees it. This opens discussion between the instructor and student that can lead to performance improvement and clarification of expectations.