Write a rubric that grades itself.

Esta lección en español

A rubric is a promise to the student: here is exactly what good looks like. Most rubrics break the promise in the boxes, where "good evidence" and "strong evidence" sit side by side and mean whatever the grader was feeling at 11pm. This lesson shows how to write the boxes so two teachers land on the same score.

What is a rubric?

A grid. Down the side, the **criteria**: the three to five things the work must do (make a claim, support it, follow the conventions). Across the top, the **levels**: how well, usually four steps. In each box, a **descriptor**: what the work looks like at that level for that criterion.

The descriptors are the whole rubric. The criteria and levels are just the frame they hang in.

Why it matters

A rubric with clear descriptors does three jobs at once. It tells the student what to aim at before they start. It lets you grade thirty papers in the same mood you graded the first. And it gives you a sentence to write in the margin that the student can act on, because the sentence is already in the box.

A rubric with vague descriptors does none of these. It is a grade with a grid drawn around it.

How to write one yourself, today, free

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1. Pick three to five criteria, and name them as things the work does

"Claim", "Evidence", "Organization", "Conventions". Not "Effort" or "Creativity". If you cannot point to it on the page, it is not a criterion.

2. Write the top level first, as a description, not a judgment

The test for every descriptor: **could a stranger check it against the paper without asking what you meant?** "Uses two or more specific details from the text and explains how each supports the claim" passes. "Uses strong evidence" fails, because strong is in the grader, not on the page.

3. Write the bottom level next, then fill the middle

The bottom is what a student who missed the point produces. The middle levels are then real steps between the two, each one losing one specific thing. Counting words (two details, one detail, none) is fine when the count is what matters. Avoid "some", "several" and "adequate": they are judgments dressed as counts.

4. Score two anchor papers before you use it

Take one strong paper and one weak one from a past class, with names removed, and score both with the rubric. Wherever you hesitated, a descriptor is vague. Fix the box, not the paper.

5. Give the rubric to the students before they write

A rubric the student sees only after the grade is a rationale, not a promise.

The one rule: a descriptor describes the work. If a word in the box could be argued about ("clear", "good", "sufficient"), replace it with what you would point at to prove it.

A worked example

A MADE-UP RUBRIC FOR A ONE-PARAGRAPH ARGUMENT, MIDDLE SCHOOL. NO REAL STUDENT APPEARS ON THIS SITE.

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Criterion	4	3	2	1
Claim	One sentence states a position that can be argued with, and the paragraph stays on it.	One sentence states a position, but the paragraph drifts from it once.	A position is implied but never stated in one sentence.	No position; the paragraph reports or summarizes.
Evidence	Two or more specific details from the text, each followed by a sentence saying how it supports the claim.	Two or more specific details, but at least one is not explained.	One specific detail, or details that are general rather than from the text.	No details from the text.
Conventions	No errors in capitalization, end punctuation or sentence boundaries.	One or two such errors; meaning is never unclear.	Three to five such errors, or one that makes a sentence unclear.	Errors throughout; more than one sentence is unclear.

Read the Evidence row across. Each step to the left adds one nameable thing: a detail, then an explanation, then a second detail. A stranger could count them. That is what "grades itself" means.

Something to keep: the blank template and the five steps

Criterion (a thing the work does)	4: describes the work	3: loses one thing	2: loses another	1: missed the point

1. Three to five criteria, each a thing you can point to on the page.

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2. Top level first: describe, do not judge.

3. Bottom level next, then the middle, each step losing one nameable thing.

4. Score two anchor papers. Where you hesitate, fix the box.

5. Hand it out before they write.

Try it

A MADE-UP PARAGRAPH BY A MADE-UP STUDENT, ON A MADE-UP STORY. SCORE IT WITH THE WORKED-EXAMPLE RUBRIC.

the main character should not have run away from home. She says her parents never listen to her, and the story shows them ignoring her at dinner. She also has nowhere safe to go. running away made everything worse for her

Give a score for Claim, Evidence and Conventions, and one reason each.

– Show the answer

Claim: 4. The first sentence states a position that can be argued with, and every sentence after it stays on that position.

Evidence: 3. Two specific details from the text (the parents ignoring her at dinner; having nowhere safe to go). The first is explained by the sentence before it. The second is stated and not explained, so it is not a 4.

Conventions: 2. Three errors: "the" and "running" are not capitalized, and the last sentence has no end punctuation. The rubric says one or two errors for a 3, three to five for a 2. Meaning is never unclear, but the count decides, and that is the point. The box decided, not the mood.

Where DRAGEN helps

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You now have a rubric a stranger could apply. DRAGENgrade is that stranger. You give it your rubric and the students' work; it suggests a score for each criterion with the reason, quoting the student's own words. You approve or change every grade. Student work stays on the school's computer. It is in development, with pilot teachers shaping it.

Source: Susan M. Brookhart, *How to Create and Use Rubrics for Formative Assessment and Grading* (ASCD, 2013), on descriptive rather than evaluative language. The worked rubric and the paragraph are invented. Written by Chase Alexander Hought, M.S., BCBA.

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