

Chapter 3.7

Rubrics as an Assessment Tool in Distance Education

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INTRODUCTION

Effective communication of the grading process to students is a concern that many online instructors face. The purpose of this entry is to show how the use of a rubric as an assessment tool clarifies for distance education instructors and their students the expectations, criteria, and performance levels of assignments, plus—more importantly—how the rubric details the description of the earned grade.

Many student activities can be assessed similarly in a distance learning situation to the building-based environment. There are traditional assignments, such as multiple choice tests and homework, which measure students' ability to absorb content information. Alternate assessments—such as paintings, stories, projects, essays, portfolios, journals, web page designs, simulations, group activities, PowerPoint® presentations, self-evaluations, etc.—ask the student to demonstrate their knowledge about the learning

process or the quality and effectiveness of some product that they have authored.

Herman, Aschbacher, and Winters (1992) describe the process of creating alternative assessments to include linking assessment and instruction, selecting assessment tasks, setting criteria, ensuring reliable scoring, completing student self-assessment activities, and identifying decision making moments. Often, when adopting the ideas of alternative assessments, instructors focus only on creating new and innovative activity directions without matching them to reliable scoring. Montgomery (2002) identifies that traditional grading for these alternative assessments often is through proofreader marks or teacher comments in the margins of the document that can be open to interpretation. Without specific criteria identified that match the learning objective for the activity, the grading becomes subjective and non-effective for student improvement (Andrade 2000; Herman, Aschbacher & Winters, 1992; Montgomery 2002; & Sanders, 2001).

WHAT IS A RUBRIC?

The Latin *rubrica terra* (or red earth) is the origin of the word “rubric.” The evolution of the word over time moved from marking sections of medieval manuscripts with red notations to the identification of various sections of rules. The term rubric today is a set of rules for grading a classroom activity that includes defining the outcomes to be evaluated at a basic through mastery level (Marzano, Pickering, & McTighe, 1993; Popham, 1997; Taggart, Phifer, Nixon, & Wood, 1998).

A rubric lists the criteria of the activity that matches the instructional performance objectives of the lesson or course. The rubric can be categorical—a simple checklist—to see if various parts of the assignment are present. It can offer details on scoring which identifies each specific criteria of the activity plus degrees of performance, usually using words that describe

the levels as poor, good, better, and best. Or the rubric can be holistic where there is a summative list of characteristics sorted by performance that can be used to show overall what is exemplary, standard, or poor work. One type of rubric that can be utilized effectively to assist the communication between asynchronous teachers and students who are at a distance is called either the detailed or descriptive rubric.

Descriptive Rubric

Once the instructional and performance objectives have been identified for a lesson or course, the following step is to design the alternative assessment including both the directions of the activity plus the rubric with scoring criteria and performance levels. Both criteria and performance levels are “described” in a grid format so that students visually can see that they can move from one level to the next higher level to obtain a higher grade (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Sample descriptive rubric format

	Performance Low	Performance Basic	Performance Standard	Performance Commendable
Criterion 1	Poor	Good	Better	Best
Criterion 2	Poor	Good	Better	Best
Criterion 3	Poor	Good	Better	Best

Figure 2. Sample graded descriptive rubric format

	Performance Low 0 Points	Performance Basic 1 Point	Performance Standard 3 Points	Performance Commendable 5 Points
Criterion 1	Poor	Good	Better	Best
Criterion 2	Poor	Good	Better	Best
Criterion 3	Poor	Good	Better	Best
Criterion 4	Poor	Good	Better	Best
Criterion 5	Poor	Good	Better	Best

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