

Part 3: Grading Writing

To grade a piece of writing is simply to let the writer (and others) know how well it matches a set of criteria specific to that task. There's the rub: what are the specific criteria? What does an A paper look like? A C? Some professors find scoring guides or rubrics (basically, a set of features and corresponding rating levels) useful either for responding to or evaluating student writing. Other professors find rubrics constraining or annoying. My own recommendation is to follow your personal preferences. However, whether or not you formally use a scoring guide, it's useful to make explicit the qualities that you value in a paper.

Generic rubrics for writing are pretty simple, focusing more or less on six elements: Focus (quality of the controlling idea), Development (quality of the evidence or support for main ideas), Organization, Conventions (including paper format, appropriate documentation), Style (including sentence varieties, diction, and voice), and Mechanics (grammar, punctuation, usage). These can be set up in a simple grid of however many scoring levels make sense. For example, see Figure 1:

Figure 1: Generic Grading Rubric

	Unacceptable	Weak	Adequate	Strong
Focus				
Development				
Organization				
Conventions				
Style				
Mechanics				

Features can be weighted to reflect their importance in a paper. An example in which the instructor might assign points by circling appropriate categories, then totaling them to reach a score for the paper:

Figure 2: Rubric with different values for each element

Focus:	1	2	3	4	5			
Development:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Organization:	1	2	3	4	5			
Conventions:	1	2	3	4				
Style:	1	2	3					
Mechanics:	1	2	3	4				

Figure 3: Rubric tied specifically to an assignment

	1-3 (needs improvement)	4-6 (accomplishes the task)	7-9 (represents the strongest work on this criterion)
Accuracy, clarity, elegance in your summary and presentation of source materials			
Identification and discussion of key issues from your sources			
Ambition, insights, and thoughtfulness			
Editing, documentation, and presentation			

Rubrics tend to be most useful if you go a step beyond identifying categories and scoring levels, to providing descriptors of scores at each level. The next page has such a rubric, which I developed to help people evaluate college application essays:

	Strong	Adequate/Fine	Weak
1. Quality of narrative or presentation of events or information	Writer tells a vivid story or presents information in an engaging fashion that makes it seem unique to the individual. Subject seems deliberately chosen and not just grabbed from convenience or stereotype.	Writer presents a clear account or set of information in a way that certainly meets that task but may be standard or common enough that any number of students could have generated the narrative or information.	The narrative or presentation is very short or very general (as if going through the motions) or perhaps, even, unclear or off-topic.
2. Quality of analysis; quality of insights drawn from events or information presented	Analysis goes well beyond the obvious to show keen insights and perceptive skills of reflection. The writer may include careful and sustained discussion of the general points raised, developing them further, generating nuances.	Analysis is present, even explained. However, the conclusions may be rather stock, even obvious (“and so I learned the value of perseverance”) or their development may come largely through repetition or restatement.	Analysis is missing or very brief, so much as to seem perfunctory or obligatory. Analysis may not connect to the narrative or information.
3. Quality of voice, personality, or style	The writer has an effective flair for language and is able to present him or herself in a way that reveals an interesting personality, conveying the kind of wit, sensibility, or other qualities that would make him or her exciting to have in class.	The writer uses language effectively. The personality revealed is competent but not necessarily distinct or distinguished. Little is risked, on the one hand, but competence is clear, on the other.	The voice or style may be elementary or flat. Or the writer may be stretching so much (e.g. for vocabulary) as to raise questions about his or her control of language. Or the writer may seem so quirky as to be off-putting.
4. Integrity of the writing: how the parts fit together	Elements of the piece are arranged in an organic matter, reflecting the subject. As a result there may be surprises, even risks, but these achieve coherence.	Organization is safe and clear, if somewhat formulaic and predictable. (One example would be generalization, anecdote, commentary.)	Elements of the writing could be rearranged with little negative effect; as a result, the writing seems disorganized.
5. Quality of editing and proofreading	Nothing about the grammar, usage, or punctuation draws the reader’s attention.	While there may be an error or two, the reader is generally confident that the writer can control language.	Reader’s attention is drawn to enough errors in grammar, usage, or punctuation as to be distracting

The advantage of such a rubric is that it makes clear both to the faculty member and, even more importantly, to the student, what the basis was for each level. The disadvantage is that it takes considerable effort to develop this sort of rubric.

Beyond Generic Rubrics

Generic rubrics have limitations. “Development,” for example, is an awfully broad category, and what might be merely adequate development for one kind of writing, might be superior in another. Furthermore, what we mean by development can vary. Is it the amount of evidence? The kind of evidence? The existence of analysis? The presentation of facts? The list could go on. As a result, I recommend developing rubrics that are specific to each assignment or type of assignment, so that you can specify the criteria that make sense for the task. Investing that time will pay off in the quality of your feedback. Fortunately, you don’t have to start from scratch; on page 31 is a fairly complete menu from which you might select and construct elements in a given assignment or type. (I’ve based this on a rubric at Western Washington University. Please see http://pandora.cii.wvu.edu/cii/resources/writing/writing_rubric)