How to Provide Better Feedback Through Rubrics

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Well-crafted rubrics create a shared language that lets teachers and students work together.

Jay McTighe and Tony Frontier

A rubric is an evaluation tool consisting of a set of criteria, a fixed scale (e.g., 4-point, 7-point), and descriptors that distinguish the differences in the levels of the scale (Arter & McTighe, 2001). The term has its origins in the Latin word *rubrica* meaning "red earth" or colored soil used to mark things of importance. The term also references the large, red opening word in biblical manuscripts, indicating the text that follows deserves attention. Today, these meanings persist, since a well-crafted rubric signals to students the qualities that are most important in their work.

Rubrics are typically used by teachers to judge the degree of students' understanding, proficiency levels of skills, the quality of their products or performances, and their growth from one level to the next. But beyond being evaluation tools, rubrics can be an excellent way to give feedback for improving teaching and learning.

FIGURE 1. Holistic Rubric for a Public Service Message on a Billboard, Poster, or Website

Levels	Descriptors
Expert 4	The billboard, poster, or website conveys a clear and compelling message that calls for public action to address a need. The overall graphic design is well coordinated, with words and visuals working together to enhance the message and the call to action.
Proficient 3	The billboard, poster, or website conveys a message for the public but does not call for specific action. The overall graphic design is generally coordinated. The words and visuals work together in support of the message but do not communicate needed actions by the public.
Emergent 2	The billboard, poster, or website suggests a message, but it is unclear exactly what the viewers should take from it. The visuals do not clearly support the words of the message or communicate needed public action.
Novice 1	No clear message is evident. The visuals seem random and do not convey any message. The overall graphic design is sloppy and unappealing.

Source: McTighe, J., Doubet, K., & Carbaugh, E. (2020). *Designing authentic performance tasks and projects: Tools for meaningful learning and assessment.* ASCD. Used with permission. Copyright © ASCD.

Well-crafted rubrics provide a shared language that lets teachers and students work together to navigate the most important attributes of deep learning and effective performance.

Three types of rubrics are commonly used in schools:

■ A *holistic* rubric provides an overall impression of a student's performance, yielding a single rating or score. Figure 1 shows a holistic rubric for a project asking students to create a public service message (McTighe, Doubet, & Carbaugh, 2020). Holistic rubrics gauge the overall quality or impact of a student's work; for example, to *what extent* did the story entertain its readers or to *what extent* was the argument convincing?

■ An *analytic* rubric also contains a performance scale but divides a targeted product or performance into distinct elements or traits and judges each independently. Figure 2 shows an analytic rubric for mathematical problem solving.

■ A *developmental rubric* describes growth along a proficiency continuum, ranging from novice to expert. Think of the six different colored belts in karate that designate various proficiency levels. Developmental rubrics are well suited to subjects that emphasize skill development over time, such as physical education or world languages.

What Makes a High-Quality Rubric?

An effective rubric is grounded by clear and appropriate criteria that serve as the basis for judging student responses, products, or performances. In essence, the criteria specify what "success" looks like. In a standards-based system, the criteria should be derived primarily from the targeted standards or outcomes being assessed, rather than from any specific assignment or assessment task. For example, if a teacher is focusing on expository writing, the rubric's criteria for *any* such writing task would target accuracy (information presented is correct and appropriate descriptive vocabulary is used); completeness (all relevant aspects of the topic are addressed); clarity (precise, well-chosen, academic vocabulary is used to suit audience and purpose; organization (information is logically framed and sequenced); and conventions (proper punctuation, capitalization, spelling; etc. is used).

When a high-quality rubric is used effectively, teachers *and* learners benefit. For teachers, good rubrics:

■ Specify the salient qualities of successful performance, based on targeted standards.

■ Support sound evaluation by describing important distinctions in the degree of understanding, proficiency, or quality from one level to the next.

■ Serve as teaching targets, since they reflect the qualities embedded in standards.

■ Provide feedback to teachers on how their instruction might need to be adjusted.

For students, high-quality rubrics:

■ Serve as learning targets, since they identify the key qualities of successful learning and performance.

■ Communicate how their work

FIGURE 2. Analytic Rubric for Mathematical Problem Solving

Level	Traits and Descriptors			
	Reasoning	**Computation**	**Representation**	**Communication**
4	An efficient and effective strategy is used and progress toward a solution is evaluated. Adjustments in strategy, if needed, are made, or alternative strategies are considered. There is sound mathematical reasoning throughout.	All computations are performed accurately and completely. There is evidence that computations are checked. A correct answer is obtained.	Abstract or symbolic mathematical representations are constructed and refined to analyze relationships, clarify or interpret the problem elements, and guide solutions.	Communication is clear, complete, and appropriate to the audience and purpose. Precise mathematical terminology and symbolic notation are used to communicate ideas and mathematical reasoning.
3	An effective strategy is used, and mathematical reasoning is sound.	Computations are generally accurate. Minor errors do not detract from the overall approach. A correct answer is obtained once minor errors are corrected.	Appropriate and accurate mathematical representations are used to interpret and solve problems.	Communication is generally clear. A sense of audience and purpose is evident. Some mathematical terminology is used to communicate ideas and mathematical reasoning.
2	A partially correct strategy is used, or a correct strategy for solving only part of the task is applied. There is some attempt at mathematical reasoning, but flaws in reasoning are evident.	Some errors in computation prevent a correct answer from being obtained.	An attempt is made to construct mathematical representations, but some are incomplete or inappropriate.	Communication is uneven. There is only a vague sense of audience or purpose. Everyday language is used, *or* mathematical terminology is not always used correctly.
1	No strategy is used, or a flawed strategy is tried that will not lead to a correct solution. There is little or no evidence of sound mathematical reasoning.	Multiple errors in computation are evident. A correct solution is not obtained.	No attempt is made to construct mathematical representations, *or* the representations are seriously flawed.	Communication is unclear and incomplete. There is no awareness of audience or purpose. The language is imprecise and does not use mathematical terminology.

Source: McTighe, J. (2013). *Core learning: Assessing what matters most.* School Improvement Network, p. 91. Copyright © 2013 Jay McTighe. Used with permission.

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To help students understand a rubric's relevant language, teachers should explicitly teach key vocabulary contained in standards and associated rubric criteria.

will be judged, presenting important distinctions in the degree of understanding, proficiency, or quality from one level to the next.

■ Enable them to self-assess their work and performance based on the success criteria.

■ Provide feedback that affirms areas of strength and informs needed improvements.

Leveraging Rubrics to Provide Effective Feedback

Feedback is descriptive information that's used to affirm areas of strength in learning and performance and point to areas needing improvement (Frontier, 2021). Grant Wiggins (2012) argued that to be most effective, feedback must provide information that is *specific*, *understandable*, *timely*, and *actionable*. A well-constructed rubric can provide the basis for *specific* feedback that is *understandable* to the learner, ensuring the learner knows exactly what they have done well and what they need to do next to improve. *Timely* and *actionable* describe how the rubric should be used if we want students to receive feedback in the manner we intend—to guide their next efforts toward deeper learning and improved performance.

Holistic rubrics are appropriate when a rubric's primary purpose is to assign a grade for an assignment or summative assessment task. However, a letter grade or a numerical score, on their own, don't provide feedback. How can students improve their writing skills, for instance, if all they receive is a "3" (or a "B–") on a holistic rubric for their essay? Without more detailed information, learners are left to guess what to do differently on their next essay.

Accordingly, we strongly recommend using analytic rubrics as feedback tools. Since they identify and evaluate distinct traits important to effective performance, analytic rubrics provide more detailed, targeted feedback to students about the strengths of their performance and areas needing attention. Analytic rubrics can also provide valuable feedback to teachers. For example, if a teacher notices a high percentage of students are showing weakness on a particular trait, that information suggests the need for greater instructional emphasis on that dimension of performance. Since there are several traits to consider, using an analytic scoring rubric may take a bit more time than assigning a single score. But we believe that the more specific feedback that results is well worth the effort.

Figure 3 summarizes key "do's and don'ts" for constructing and using rubrics in a manner that meets Wiggins' criteria for effective feedback.

Guiding *Students* to Use Feedback from Rubrics

Presenting students with a well-developed rubric and reviewing it with them is necessary, but not sufficient, to guarantee that students will get the most benefit possible from that feedback. Research on how feedback is used by those who receive it notes that "the ability to receive feedback well is not an inborn trait, but a skill that can be cultivated" (Stone & Heen, 2014,

FIGURE 3. Designing and Using Rubrics as Tools for Effective Feedback

Feedback Qualities	Effective design and use of a rubric	Ineffective design and use of a rubric
Specific	*The rubric…* • objectively and precisely describes the most important qualities (the success criteria) of effective learning and performance. *Effective feedback…* • specifically describes the most relevant aspects of student work as related to the most important aspects of a specific level of success criteria. • affirms areas of strength and informs specific actions the learner should take to improve their learning and performance.	*The rubric…* • uses general language like "good" or "excellent" to describe differences between levels. • confuses quantity with quality by focusing on surface features (e.g., number of slides). *Ineffective feedback…* • is ambiguous or vaguely worded. • is presented as general praise ("good job!") or a vague suggestion ("Try harder.").
Understandable	*The rubric…* • is explained using tangible examples to illustrate the key traits, associated success criteria, and key differences in quality at each level. • employs important academic language that's been explicitly taught to students. *The feedback…* • enables the learner to articulate (in their own words) the strengths and weaknesses of their work. • shows the student specific actions that they can take to improve their learning and performance.	*An ineffective rubric…* • is based on hidden criteria "in the teacher's head". • uses terms and jargon that have not been taught to the learner. *The feedback…* • gives a numerical score or grade, but does not explain the relationship among the grade, their work, and the most important attributes of quality. • leaves the student wondering what they could do to improve. • overwhelms the student.
Timely	*The rubric…* • is presented in advance for learner to use formatively to guide strategy and effort to produce work of high quality or evidence of deep understanding. *The feedback…* • is provided to the student while it can still be used to improve their learning or performance.	*The rubric…* • is only revealed to the student when it is used to provide a summative judgment or grade. *The feedback…* • is given solely as a summative grade or score. • is given well after the student has done the work.
Actionable	*The rubric…* • is used by the student to describe the goal, the current level of quality or depth of understanding, and strategies he/she can use to improve. • is used by the student to guide self-assessment and reflection. *The feedback…* • is delivered with the expectation that it be used to make focused revisions, corrections, or other changes to improve the quality of learning or performance. • includes opportunities for students to revise, practice, or refine their work in the future.	*The rubric…* • is solely used by the teacher, not shared with or used by the student. • is really a "single use" set of specifications that can't be transferred to any other task or learning goal. *The feedback…* • is given with no expectation that the student does anything with it. • is given with no opportunity for students to use the feedback to revise, practice, or refine their work. • is given with only a vague statement of hope that the student might use it in the future.

Source: Adapted from Frontier, T. (2021). *Teaching with clarity.* ASCD. Used with permission.

FIGURE 4. Analytic Rubric for Public Speaking

	Volume	Rate of Speech/Pacing	Eye Contact	Posture
4	Speaker projects with a strong, clear voice that can easily be heard by all.	Speech is delivered at a comfortable and appropriate pace.	Speaker establishes and maintains excellent eye contact throughout.	Speaker maintains excellent posture, displaying both confidence and composure.
3	Speaker speaks at a volume that can generally be heard without strain.	Speech is delivered at an appropriate pace with only occasional pauses.	Speaker makes eye contact with the audience but has occasional lapses.	Speaker maintains good posture and composure.
2	Speaker uses a soft voice that makes it difficult to hear the message.	Speech is too slow or too fast with frequent pauses.	Speaker makes intermittent eye contact with the audience.	Speaker displays poor posture and displays a lack of confidence.
1	Speaker speaks extremely softly and/or mumbles so that the message cannot be heard or understood.	Speech is halting and uneven with long pauses OR speech is delivered so rapidly that the audience can't understand.	Speaker makes little or no eye contact with audience.	Speaker slouches and fidgets, displaying extreme discomfort and lack of confidence.

Feedback and Suggestions for Improvement:

Goals and Actions for Improvement:

p. 8). In other words, students need to be taught the meaning of rubrics and how feedback works if we expect them to highly benefit.

For instance, to help students understand a rubric's relevant language, explicitly teach key vocabulary contained in standards and associated rubrics. If *explanation* or *justification* appear frequently in your priority standards and success criteria, for example, these terms should be highlighted as learning goals and included in vocabulary lessons and assessments.

One method we highly recommend is using examples of student work—anonymous samples from previous classes or ones you've created—to make more concrete the often-abstract criteria in rubrics and bring feedback to life. Teachers might:

- Show students one or two examples of high-quality work, highlighting how the success criteria are evident within them. Highlight specific traits that are most important to the targeted standard. Then show several more samples and ask students to identify where they see the success criteria appearing in each.
- To help students identify distinctions among the different performance levels described in rubrics, use a set of

anonymous student work samples that range in quality. Present the diverse examples and ask students to rank order them into three or four sets and to give a rationale for their placements by describing the differences they see between the sets, using the language of the success criteria.

■ To help learners see how to use rubric criteria and level descriptors as feedback, ask students to identify specific ways that lower-level examples could be improved. Model this process through a "think aloud" to get students started.

Another good practice is to teach students how to use success criteria from a rubric to self-assess and set future learning goals. This practice is based on the recognition that the most effective learners are *metacognitive*—they self-assess their performance, welcome and use feedback, learn from their mistakes, and set goals to improve their performance (Wiggins & McTighe, 2004). Two simple graphic additions to a rubric, illustrated in Figure 4, can support the cultivation of these learning habits (McTighe, 2013). The first is the inclusion of two tiny check boxes at the bottom of each cell of an analytic rubric. The student uses the check boxes on the left to self-assess their work before they turn it in. The teacher uses the other box for his or her evaluation. Ideally, the two judgments should match. Any discrepancy raises an opportunity to discuss the success criteria in relation to a student's work.

The bottom of the rubric includes a section for feedback comments (from the teacher or peers) and a space for the student to identify learning goals and action steps to improve their performance, based on external feedback and self-assessment. These minor additions turn an evaluation instrument into a tool for feedback, self-assessment, and goal setting.

Of course, teachers will need to explicitly teach students how to self-assess their work against criteria and model how to set improvement goals. But imagine the impact if every K–12 teacher, across subject areas, embraced this practice and encouraged their students to regularly self-assess and identify specific action goals!

A Shared Road Map

Well-crafted rubrics can serve as a shared road map for teaching and learning. They mark the most important routes for teachers and students to navigate as they walk the circuitous path to deeper learning and more effective performances. When educators use those rubrics to teach students how to discuss and describe that terrain, rubrics become the basis for the specific, understandable language of feedback—which students can leverage to guide their next steps to improvement.

Reflect & Discuss

Do rubrics function effectively as a feedback tool in your classroom or school? Why or why not?

Based on the criteria McTighe and Frontier discuss, in what ways could you improve the design and clarity of your analytic rubrics?

What steps could you take to help students better understand and use rubrics for assignments?

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Jay McTighe (jay@mctighe-associates.com) is a veteran educator, speaker, and author or coauthor of 17 books, including the Understanding by Design® series with Grant Wiggins. His most recent publications are *Assessing Student Learning–by Design* (Teachers College Press, 2021) and *Designing Authentic Performance Tasks and Projects* (ASCD, 2020). Follow him on Twitter @jaymctighe. **Tony Frontier** (tonyfrontier@gmail.com) is an associate professor at Cardinal Stritch University and works with teachers and school leaders internationally to help improve student learning. His most recent book is *Teaching with Clarity: How to Prioritize and Do Less So Students Understand More* (ASCD, 2021).