

Using Rubrics for Holistic Scoring in English 420 and 421

Generally, communication is effective and interesting not when it meets this or that particular characteristic but, rather, when it appeals to an audience in a general, comprehensive way. People usually appreciate written and spoken texts because they find the overall text and message appealing, and this sense of overall quality is often hard to convey to students. Even if a writer or speaker "nails" *x*, *y*, and *z*, a text may fail to interest.

One way to employ this intuitive aspect of communication is to use holistic grading. In this approach, the instructor develops criteria but develops the criteria for each paper along the grading scale and refers to these criteria in an end comment. Though these criteria can identify particular traits of the papers (Bean, *Engaging Ideas* 257), they likely work best when they generally describe papers and convey the general intuitive sense of efficacy. Instructors can direct their students to these general descriptions.

A holistic *rubric* is an itemized listing of these criteria useful for both teachers and students in judging the overall quality of written work. Students appreciate their level of specificity, and teachers sometimes find them useful for making more precise distinctions of quality across a broader range of student abilities. Holistic scoring can also help teachers manage the paper load. In contrast with analytical scoring, which rates particular features of a text separately, holistic scoring focuses on the sum of the parts.

Rubrics normally should be tied specifically to a given project, but they do share some general characteristics. It is helpful to begin with a general rubric, as in the Sample (next page) and then develop a more specific rubric tailored to a given assignment (e.g., for the Corporate Web Project). You can use numbers or letter grades. Some teachers find numbers more useful as a starting point, then they translate to grades later. Both samples use a 6-point scale, which might be translated to letter grades as follows: 6=A, 5=B+, 4=B-, 3=C, 2=D, F=1

The sample rubric has been adapted from Elliot, Plata, and Zelhart, *A Program Development Handbook for the Holistic Assessment of Writing*, Lanham, MD: Univ. Press of America, 1990.

--DB, 9/15/04

* This discussion and sample rubric is on the Web in PDF format at this address:

<http://pw.english.purdue.edu/resources/rubric.pdf>

Sample: General Rubric for a Multiple Document Project or Portfolio

Level 6

Very well organized, often carefully reasoned, presented, or contextualized. The quality of the documents is consistent. The writing is precise. Citations are documented properly.
Uses specific examples and/or visual content for support, elaboration, evidence, or illustration
High level of stylistic fluency, good sentence variation and a style appropriate to the purpose
Good word choice that may be unusually striking, vivid, or creative
Virtually free of grammatical or mechanical errors

Level 5

Generally well organized, with only occasional lapses in reasoning, presentation, or precision. Citations are documented properly.
One of the documents is somewhat weaker than the others
Cites some examples or evidence, but they might be fairly general or require more support
Good stylistic fluency with frequent sentence variation
Good word choice that may be vivid or striking
Few, if any, grammatical or mechanical errors

Level 4

The documents are organized but they suffer from lapses in reasoning, presentation, or contextualization
More than one of the documents has weaknesses that hurt the overall unity of the project.
Cites examples and evidence, but they are often overly general or unexplained
Occasional lapses in style, with some of them hurting the effectiveness of the project
Some errors in grammar and mechanics, but they do not necessarily distract the reader

Level 3

Documents attempt to achieve the rhetorical purpose, but most fail due to problems with faulty logic, imprecise examples, superfluous information, or poor visual presentation
The documents are very inconsistent in quality, even within an individual document
Infrequent citation of examples, evidence, or information. Visuals aren't that relevant.
Some sentence variation, but stylistic fluency is often awkward
Repetitious or poor word choice throughout
Errors in grammar and mechanics distract the reader from the content and continuity of the documents

Level 2

Documents attempt to develop a response to the rhetorical occasion but they usually fail due to such errors as faulty logic, imprecise examples, superfluous ideas, or poor visual presentation
Documents are inconsistent in quality throughout
Infrequent or no citation of examples, evidence, or information. Weak use of visuals.
Poor stylistic fluency, sentence variation
Repetitious or poor word choice
Numerous errors in grammar and mechanics

Level 1

The content of the documents is incomplete, off-topic, and/or poorly presented
Documents are inconsistent in quality throughout
Infrequent or no citation of examples, evidence, or information
Poor stylistic fluency, sentence variation
Repetitious or poor word choice
Numerous errors in grammar and mechanics.