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About Rubrics

WHAT IS A RUBRIC?

A rubric is a form of assessment that evaluates a student's work on a numbered scale. Students are assigned a numbered point that is indicative of the quality of their work. The description assigned to a number can vary from being very detailed and specific to very simple as in the example below:

1	2	3	4	5
poor	below average	average	above average	excellent

When using a scale of 1 to 10, think percentagewise when evaluating a student's work. For example:

6 = 60%	7 = 70%	8 = 80%	9 = 90%	10 = 100%
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HOW WE USED RUBRICS IN OUR WRITING PROGRAM

Throughout the course of this text, we use the term "rubric" interchangeably with "contract" or "assignment." When we refer to "our rubrics," we are referring to the blackline masters of the student contracts. Our rubrics are set up so that each assignment is worth a total of 100 points or a multiple thereof. This facilitates in assigning a letter grade to the finished product. Those points are then broken down and assigned to each part of the writing process. For example:

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Pre-writing	5 points
Rough draft	50 points
Final draft	40 points
Presentation	5 points
Total	100 points

Each part of the writing process is then broken down even further to state specifically what each point is for. For example, if the final draft is worth 40 points, those points might be broken down as follows:

- a. Used correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar (10 points)
- b. Corrections from conference were made (10 points)
- c. Followed the correct format (10 points)
- d. Neatness and care were taken in publication (10 points)

We developed all the writing rubrics in this book to go along with thematic units we were teaching in our fifth-grade classrooms. Although each assignment focuses on a particular theme, each one can easily be modified to meet your individual classroom needs. We have included information with each rubric elaborating on how you might modify the assignment. Once you become familiar with the format of our rubrics, you may feel comfortable designing your own to better meet your teaching style, interests, or students' needs. We have also included a section at the back of the book to help guide you through this.

Also, we feel it is important to state that this was not the only form of "English" instruction going on in our classrooms. Textbooks were used primarily as reference materials, but our mornings started with what we have termed our *ASAP Time* (Assignments, Skills, And Proofreading) (see Chapter 2). Time was also spent during one unit outlining a section in our text that focused on how to use the writing process, as well as many elements of writing, to become a better writer (see Chapter 2). We believe it was all of these components used together that added to the improvement and growth we saw among our students throughout the course of a school year.

A major advantage in using our program is that every individual student's needs are met. A teacher is always faced with a wide range of abilities in any classroom, from students who perform far below grade level to those who excel well beyond. Unlike worksheets or "story starters," with the use of these rubrics, students are challenged to put what they know about writing to use. With every assignment, students build on their knowledge and learn new skills that are appropriate and apply to the purpose of *their* writing. It becomes a yearlong process that builds with each new assignment.

WHY USE RUBRICS?

Once you have the experience of working with rubrics, you may wonder how you ever got along without them. There are many good reasons to

teach using this tool. Below is an outline and explanation of how rubrics can benefit both you and your students in the classroom.

- Ensure teacher and student accountability
- State your expectations
- Reduce teacher subjectivity
- Ensure that the writing curriculum is met

Ensure Teacher and Student Accountability

Teacher accountability is a growing factor in all school districts these days. How to be accountable for the curriculum you are teaching, as well as how to grade students and be accountable for the grades you issue, are covered with the use of our rubrics. The rubric itself is a tool that explains at a glance what you are teaching, your pedagogy, and how the students will be graded.

Student accountability for an assignment is also an important issue. As teachers, many times we do too much for the students, taking on many of their responsibilities. With the use of a rubric, students are held accountable for their work. They know exactly what is expected, when parts are due, and how they will be graded. It then becomes the *student's* responsibility to ensure that all requirements for the assignment are met.

Our rubrics are set up in the form of a contract where a student's signature is required for each assignment. We have found it especially helpful in the elementary grades to require a parent signature as well. This ensures that the parents are also aware of what their child's specific responsibilities are. We have therefore provided you with both options in our reproducible pages.

State Your Expectations

With the use of a rubric, there are no surprises for the students. Everything that is required is spelled out, and students know exactly how they will be graded. Excuses such as "I didn't know . . ." or "You never said . . ." are eliminated because the expectations are written, and students are encouraged to refer back to them. By stating your public criteria in contract form, there is never any question about what is expected from the students.

Reduce Teacher Subjectivity

One of the hardest parts of grading any writing project is trying to remain objective. With the use of a rubric, it is much easier to do so because the assignment is broken down into smaller, more manageable parts. It is stated exactly how points are to be issued for each part of the project. As a result, teacher subjectivity is virtually eliminated.

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Ensure That the Writing Standards Are Met

Each state is governed by a set of National Standards for education. Each school district, in turn, is governed by its own state's standards. Listed below are some of the National Standards that are covered using our rubrics.

National Standards for Language Arts (2002)

- Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
- Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
- Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts.
- Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and nonprint texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
- Students use a variety of technological and informational resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
- Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.
- Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
- Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

Meeting Your School District's Standards

As we developed these writing rubrics, we planned backwards. We studied the curriculum standards that were required in our school district and created our writing rubrics to meet those needs. Throughout the course of the year, using the variety of assignments included in this book (along with our reading program and poetry unit), all standards were covered and met.

One of our most important jobs, as educators, is to know our district's standards and to develop a curriculum that meets them. Using the rubrics included in this book, most writing standards will be met. We do advise you, however, to examine your school district's standards and adapt the rubrics as needed. Please refer to Chapter 15, "How to Create Your Own Rubrics," for more information on how to do this.