

CREATING EFFECTIVE RUBRICS: What Really Counts

"If our students can read [a] rubric and know what the expectation is, this greatly enhances their ability to reach it. You can tell them to 'reach for the stars,' but if they're just grappling out there in the dark, they're not going to make it. With the rubric they've got a clear-cut route. They know what has to be done."

*Lorrie LaCroix, middle school teacher
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In an era of increased accountability for districts, teachers, and students, assessment has taken center stage as a crucial component of maintaining high standards for all. All too often, however, individual teachers have divergent opinions about what "quality" work looks like. A district-wide rubric or set of rubrics can be useful tools to help teachers identify what quality looks like and communicate their expectation to students, parents, and colleagues.

What is a rubric?

Simply put, a rubric is a short document describing varying levels of quality, from excellent to poor, for a specific assignment.² Rubrics can provide a number of advantages for teachers. First, they help clarify expectations for teachers and students about what quality work looks like and what skills are being targeted. Second, they provide a clear and concise means of communication within and beyond the classroom. Third, they can be powerful in helping students to take responsibility for their own learning, particularly when they have contributed to the development of the rubric used.

What guidelines should I use when developing a rubric?

One good rule of thumb is that a rubric should be based on specific, objective criteria rather than on subjective terminology. Many teachers are familiar with the readily available "generic" rubrics, using language such as "advanced," "poor," etc. While these might provide good starting points when developing a rubric, it is important to *describe* what levels of quality look like rather than relying on vague terminology that is subject to different interpretations.

Another pitfall to watch out for is including indicators that are either too task-specific or too general. When writing a rubric, it is important to remember that the aim is to define student progress towards a skill rather than towards a particular test. The indicators listed in the rubric should define progress towards proficiency at a skill rather than towards accomplishing one specific task. Students may be able to master a specific performance task without being able to apply that skill to a new problem.³

How are schools using rubrics?

Many teachers are asking students to assess their own work or that of a classmate using a rubric. Kara Staunton, a 7th grade teacher at Reid Middle School in Pittsfield, MA, writes, "This process really forces them to consider whether or not they have fully completed the assignment... The students like feeling as if they have a voice. And surprisingly, they are harder graders than I am!"⁴ Many teachers also report that developing rubrics collaboratively with their classes really helps students clarify what is expected and why.

In addition to the use of rubrics for specific assignments, many teacher teams have begun to develop and use rubrics as a means to ensure consistency of expectations across and between grade levels. For example, K-5 teachers in the Somerset Public School District have developed reading comprehension rubrics to be used in all disciplines. Grade-level teacher teams met and discussed what proficiency in reading looks like for the average student, then articulated indicators for the achievement of proficiency. Throughout the 2002-2003 school year, teachers will pilot the

(Continued on page 2)



(Continued from page 1)

rubric with students. As a follow-up, they plan to look collaboratively at student work in March, using the reading comprehension rubrics as the basis for discussion. In this way, they plan to develop more consistent language and expectations from classroom to classroom and from grade level to grade level.

If you are interested in learning more about rubrics or in having *CLASP Consulting* support the development of rubrics in your district, go to our web site at www.massnetworks.org or call Laura Christian at (617) 783-9988, X 121.

¹ Lorrie LaCroix: "Changing Schools in Long Beach," Focused Reporting Project, Vol. 1, No. 2: Spring 1997. Online: www.middleweb.com/CSLB2rubric.html.

² Adapted from Heidi Goodrich Andrade, "Using Rubrics to Promote Thinking and Learning." *Educational Leadership*, Volume 57 Number 5, February 2000. Online: www.ascd.org/readingroom/edlead/0002/andrade.html.

³ W. James Popham, "What's Wrong – And What's Right – With Rubrics," *Educational Leadership*, Volume 55 Number 2: October 1997. Online: www.ascd.org/safeschools/e19710/pophamrubric.html.

⁴ "In Case You Missed It: Insights from Internet E-mail," *MiddleWeb Online*: www.middleweb.com/INCASEloverubr.html.