

# Designing Rubrics

Use with caution!



by Chris Lott

## THE PROBLEM WITH RUBRICS

You're probably familiar with the old joke in which a man's wife notices him cutting the ends off the ham before baking it. He tells her that's the way his dad does it and it's a key secret to the wonderful taste. When the man's wife finally asks her father-in-law about it he laughs and replies, "That's not it! If I don't cut the ends, the ham won't fit in my pan."

Similarly, when I ask any group of teachers about their use of rubrics, nearly every hand will be raised. But when I ask about the origin of rubrics or how they came to be used so often, I hear mostly crickets.

Many educators, steeped in received wisdom, don't know that rubrics evolved to support consistency in assessing the essay portion of standardized tests and that their use in other fields—and even when evaluating writing without significant training of those using the rubrics—is questionable. And promoting consistent evaluation wasn't the only force behind the rubric revolution...they also support efficiency when dealing with a high volume of assignments.

There are more forces behind the proliferation of rubrics that aren't about teaching and learning:

- Rubrics anatomize and extend the (already questionable) concept of letter grades.
- Rubrics focus on objectivity over the (sometimes necessarily) subjective elements of assessment.
- Rubrics compensate for a lack of trust in teachers by institutions and accrediting bodies.

Which isn't to say that rubrics are categorically bad or that the non-pedagogical reasons for them should be ignored. Instead, I suggest our use of rubrics be approached with a healthy amount of skepticism!

## TIPS FOR BETTER RUBRICS

- *Sometimes the best rubric is the one no one else sees.* Devising a rubric can be a great assistance when building curriculum and activities even if you never show it to the students.
- *Use rubrics to support process and revision.* Even with a well-composed rubric it's possible to receive work that meets all the criteria but is, taken as a whole, terrible. Rubrics make the most sense during the formative stages.
- *Leave room for surprise!* Assignments sophisticated and creative enough to demand a rubric lend themselves to unpredictable high-level performances. The top-end of the scale might well be unknown.
- *Avoid overly complex rating scales.* The difference between a 7 and an 8 on a 10-point scale is often meaningless. 2-4 values is usually enough.
- *Blanks spots in the rubric are OK.* Some criteria are simply done properly or not; you don't need to create artificial levels.
- *Lose most of the rubrics.* Use rubrics like a strong spice, where it supports but doesn't overwhelm or become the focus of the dish. Usually this is in the more "objective," task-based activities.
- *Performance is not the same thing as learning.* Rubrics focus on the former; sometimes a little cognitive friction and dissonance is a good thing.
- *Saving time can be good for teachers without being good for teaching.* There's nothing wrong with using rubrics to save time...but in that case let's not pretend it's about the pedagogy.

## RESOURCES

- <http://elearning.uaf.edu/go/wp-rubrics>
- <http://elearning.uaf.edu/go/rubric-debate>
- <http://elearning.uaf.edu/go/rubric-examples>

