The Writing Rubric

Instructional rubrics can help students become self-regulated writers.

Bruce Saddler and Heidi Andrade

With state-mandated accountability tests and college entrance examinations placing a growing emphasis on writing, teachers face the challenge of ensuring that all their students become proficient writers—even in classrooms that serve students of widely diverse abilities. Consider a 4th grade classroom that includes two young writers, Maren and Katie.

Maren loves to write. She approaches writing tasks assigned by her teacher, Mrs. Smith, with a positive attitude because they give her the chance to tell what she feels or knows. Maren takes time to plan what she wants to write, carefully reading the rubric Mrs. Smith hands out and thinking about the topic. As she composes, she routinely stops to read over what she has written and to check it against the rubric. When she is finished, she rereads her work and revises words or sentences, adding or deleting as she feels necessary to make her composition sound better and to match the rubric's expectations more closely.

Katie, on the other hand, dislikes writing. She does not believe that she is a good writer, and she never knows what to say when prompted to write, even when the teacher assigns a topic. She does not view rubrics as helpful tools, and she promptly loses them when Mrs. Smith hands them out. When given a writing assignment, Katie quickly writes down a few ideas without devoting much time to planning or thinking about how her composition sounds. She rarely bothers with revision.

Although most people find the writing process challenging, skilled writers like Maren navigate this process successfully. As they compose, they attend to the rules and mechanics of language while maintaining a focus on organization, purpose, and audience. In addition to their knowledge of the writing process, such writers also monitor and direct their own composing processes through self-regulation, a skill that Hayes and Flower (1986) identify as essential in writing.

According to Graham and Harris (1996), self-regulation procedures include goal setting, planning, self-monitoring, self-assessment, self-instruction, and self-reinforcement.

In contrast, students like Katie struggle with writing for a variety of...
reasons. First, they may not possess adequate knowledge of the writing process. In addition, they may not understand what makes a finished composition “good.” Finally, they may lack the ability to self-regulate the many complex behaviors included in the composing process (Harris, Graham, Mason, & Saddler, 2002). Without the writer’s mindful involvement, the writing process is like a ship without a rudder—in motion, but out of control.

Instructional Rubrics and Self-Regulated Writing
An important goal in writing instruction is to help students develop the self-regulation skills needed to successfully manage the intricacies of the writing process. Instructional rubrics can provide the scaffolding that students need to become self-regulated writers. A rubric articulates the expectations for an assignment by listing the criteria, or “what counts,” and describing levels of quality from excellent to poor. Teachers commonly use assessment rubrics to score and grade student work, but instructional rubrics also serve another, arguably more important, role: They teach as well as evaluate.

To ensure that students have some ownership of the rubric, instructional rubrics are often created with students and are always written in language that students can understand (Andrade, 2000). Teachers provide instructional rubrics (like the example in Figure 1, p. 50) to students before they begin an assignment to help them understand the goals of the task and to guide them in self-directed planning and goal setting, revising, and editing.

Planning and goal setting. During this stage of writing, students create a visual representation of their thoughts (First & MacMillan, 1995), which should match the objectives of the assignment. These visual representations may take the form of elaborate webs or sequencing charts, or students may simply jot a few ideas on notebook paper.

A rubric can assist students in the planning and goal-setting process by clearly articulating the expectations for an assignment and describing high-quality work. Students can use the rubric’s criteria for “good work” to get a general sense of the undertaking, set goals for their writing, create a plan for a paper, and even complete an outline.

Some students, like Maren, know how to use a rubric for planning without needing to be told how to use it. Others need direct instruction in how to read and interpret a rubric, as well as guided practice with rubric-referenced plan-
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Content</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>My essay includes answers to all the required questions and to at least five questions of my own. My answers are complete and factual. I have a bibliography.</td>
<td>My essay includes answers to all the required questions, including five of my own, but some answers are incomplete. I have a bibliography.</td>
<td>I answered the required questions but made up fewer than five of my own. Some answers are incomplete or incorrect. My bibliography is incomplete.</td>
<td>I have too few questions, or my questions are trivial or irrelevant. The answers I included are mostly incomplete or incorrect.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization</td>
<td>My first paragraph introduces the person interviewed and gives highlights of the interview. The body of my essay answers the questions in a logical order. I have a conclusion that gives a wrap-up.</td>
<td>I have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion, but the introduction (or conclusion) is too brief or incomplete.</td>
<td>The questions and answers are in order, but my paper has no introduction, no conclusion, and no main idea.</td>
<td>The questions and answers are out of logical sequence. My paper has no introduction, no conclusion, and no main idea.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Word Choice</td>
<td>I use a variety of sophisticated words—including new and challenging vocabulary—correctly.</td>
<td>I use a variety of words correctly.</td>
<td>I do not use a variety of words, but I use common words correctly.</td>
<td>I repeat simple words; I use big words incorrectly, or I copied words from my sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice and Tone</td>
<td>My writing is in first and second person (&quot;I&quot; and &quot;you&quot;) and sounds like a conversation.</td>
<td>I use first and second person, but my writing sounds like a list of questions and answers, not a conversation.</td>
<td>My writing sounds more like a list of facts than a conversation.</td>
<td>My writing is a list of facts in the third person (&quot;he&quot; or &quot;she&quot;).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentence Structure</td>
<td>My sentences are clear, begin in different ways, and vary in length.</td>
<td>I have no fragments. My sentences are mostly well constructed, with some minor errors.</td>
<td>My sentences are often awkward. They vary little in length. I have many sentences that begin with the same word.</td>
<td>My paper is hard to read because almost all of my sentences are incomplete, run-ons, or awkward.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conventions</td>
<td>I use correct capitalization, spelling, punctuation, and grammar.</td>
<td>I made a few errors in grammar and punctuation.</td>
<td>My spelling is correct on common words. I made a lot of errors, but the reader could understand what I am trying to say.</td>
<td>There are so many errors that my paper is hard to read and understand.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
use rubrics to assess their own and their classmates' writing. Student assessment has the additional advantage of promoting self-regulation because it gives students some of the responsibility for judging written work instead of placing that responsibility solely on the teacher.

Teachers may avoid using self-assessment and peer assessment because of three misconceptions: (1) Self-assessment is pointless because students will just give themselves As; (2) Peer assessment is pointless because students will just stroke their friends and bash their enemies; and (3) Both self-assessment and peer assessment are pointless because students won't revise anyway.

True? Sort of. If the teacher asks students to grade themselves, students may indeed give themselves and their friends As. But if the teacher creates a culture of critique by fostering an expectation to revise, defines assessment in terms of feedback that will help students write better, and bases assessment on instructional rubrics, then students will learn to assess themselves and their peers effectively (O'Donnell & Topping, 1998; White, 1998).

**Self-Assessment** Perhaps one of the biggest differences between Maren and Katie as writers is the amount of informal self-assessment they conduct while writing. Self-regulated Maren frequently stops to reflect on the quality of her writing; Katie never does. Mrs. Smith can help Katie learn to monitor and regulate her writing by teaching her how to use the rubric to formally assess her own writing.

Teachers can structure the self-assessment process in many ways. Students might use markers to color-code the evidence in their essays that demonstrates that their writing meets each criterion in the rubric. For example, the mock interview rubric in Figure 1 includes an Organization criterion that requires students to introduce the person interviewed. During class, the teacher can ask students to underline "introduces the person interviewed" in blue on their rubrics and then underline the work being reviewed. (For example, "How old was Susan B. Anthony when you 'interviewed' her?") Next, they comment on the work's strengths or on what they value about the work. ("I like how you had her quote from the preamble of the Constitution to make her point about women's rights. It makes her sound smart, which she must have been.") Then, and only then, they finish up by discussing their concerns about the work ("Did Susan B. Anthony get involved with other issues besides women's right to vote?"") and offering suggestions for revision ("Maybe you could have her talk about slavery, too."). Teachers usually need to supervise this process strictly at first; it doesn't always come naturally to students. But with practice, students become more confident providing constructive feedback to their peers.

Peer assessment helps students reflect on their writing, recognize dissonances, and create solutions. Peer assessment can take many forms, but whatever the approach, there are two keys to success: (1) Students must understand that they are not assigning a grade to their fellow student's work but rather providing feedback that can help that student improve the written piece; and (2) Teachers must model and teach students a careful, constructive peer assessment process.

Peer Assessment Self-regulation in writing can also be improved by using rubrics to establish a system of ongoing feedback from others. Peer assessment can take many forms, but whatever the approach, there are two keys to success: (1) Students must understand that they are not assigning a grade to their fellow student's work but rather providing feedback that can help that student improve the written piece; and (2) Teachers must model and teach students a careful, constructive peer assessment process.

The first key to successful peer assessment is relatively easy to address: Teachers explain the difference between grading and feedback and repeat the message as often as necessary. The second key requires teaching students to use a rubric as well as a constructive critique process.

Many such processes have already been developed. For example, Perkins's Ladder of Feedback (2003) contains four "rungs": clarify, value, raise concerns, and suggest. Starting at the bottom rung and climbing up, students begin the process by asking questions to clarify
Score the New SAT Essay

Beginning in March 2005, the SAT will be introducing a new writing section composed of multiple-choice questions and an essay. Experienced teachers are needed to help make the new SAT a success. This is a unique professional development opportunity to develop a valuable perspective on student work extending beyond your classroom, school, or district and collaborate with colleagues from across the country. A user-friendly online scoring system will allow you to accurately and effectively read and score the new SAT essay from your home or office computer. Enjoy flexible hours, comprehensive training, and competitive pay.

New SAT Essay Reader Requirements:
- Hold a bachelor’s degree or higher
- Teach or have taught within the last five years a high school or college-level course that requires writing
- Have taught for at least a three-year period
- Reside in the continental United States, Alaska, or Hawaii
- Be a U.S. citizen, resident alien, or authorized to work in the U.S.

Please visit www.quikscreen.com/collegeboard/satreader to learn more about this opportunity and apply. For more information about the new SAT, please visit www.collegeboard.com/newsat.

Hired readers will be employees of Pearson Educational Measurement.

For more information about Pearson Educational Measurement, visit www.pearsonedmeasurement.com.

Pearson Education is committed to employing a diverse work force.

References


Bruce Saddler (bsaddler@uamail.albany.edu) and Heidi Andrade (handrade@uamail.albany.edu) are Assistant Professors of Educational and Counseling Psychology, University at Albany, Albany, New York.