

# The Writing Rubric

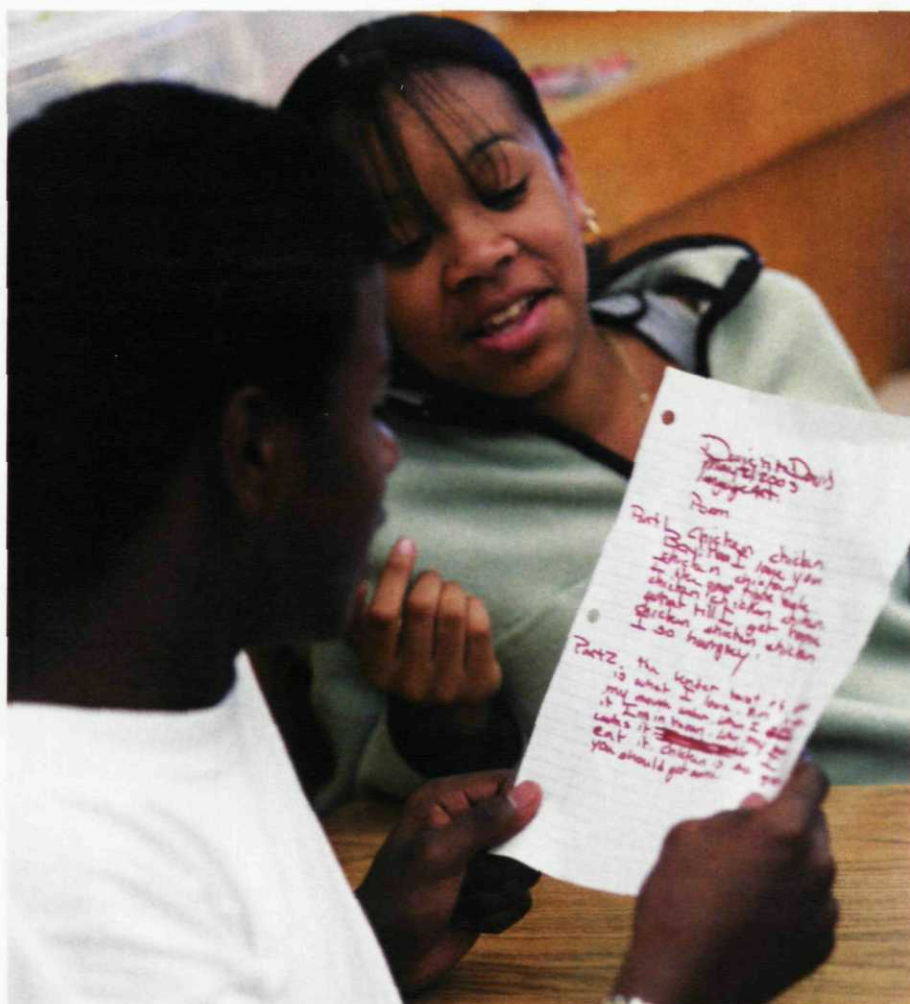
*Instructional rubrics can help students become self-regulated writers.*

Bruce Saddler and Heidi Andrade

**W**ith 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.



© Susie Fitzhugh

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-

pointers for improvement. The *Sentence Structure* criterion in the mock interview rubric, for example, specifies that high-quality sentences should “begin in different ways.” If self-assessment or peer assessment reveals that the quality of Katie’s sentences is only on level 2 because most or all of them “begin with the same word,” the rubric tells Katie what she has to do to improve—start her sentences in different ways. By identifying problems and their possible solu-

**Without the writer’s mindful involvement,  
the writing process is like a ship without a rudder—  
in motion, but out of control.**

ning, before they can use the rubric independently.

For example, Mrs. Smith might ask Katie to make a to-do list for her essay. After pointing out that the title of the rubric—“4th Grade Rubric for a Mock Interview of a Person from History”—indicates the first step of choosing a historical figure, Mrs. Smith would note that the *Content* criterion suggests that the next two steps should be “read the required questions” and “make up questions of my own.” Mrs. Smith and Katie could repeatedly refer to the rubric to build on the to-do list, adding such steps as “read books about my historical figure” and “keep a bibliography of what I have read.” By checking tasks off the list as she completes them, Katie could take charge of her research and of her writing process.

**Revising.** Good writers spend much more time rewriting their work than drafting it. In fact, the more skilled the writer, the more time he or she spends in revision (Hayes & Flower, 1986). Students who are still developing writing skills or who have writing difficulties may not understand that revision is an integral part of the writing process (Saddler, 2003).

Instructional rubrics can guide students by identifying strengths and weaknesses in a text and providing

tions, rubrics provide important information for students to use in revision.

**Editing.** Editing is polishing the finished product—correcting spelling, changing punctuation, and resolving grammar issues (Saddler, 2003). Rubrics can guide this process by prompting students to sift through their work to detect all varieties of problems or errors, not just the kinds students typically notice. When pressed, weak writers will scan their papers with an eye for neatness or periods at the ends of sentences but will notice little else. At this point in the process, the teacher can ask Katie to use the *Conventions* criterion of her rubric like a checklist: Correct capitals? Check. Spelling? Check. Punctuation? Check. And so on.

### Instructional Rubrics and Feedback

The quantity and quality of feedback that a writer receives throughout the writing process can contribute to a well-crafted piece of writing. Recognizing this, many teachers attempt to provide feedback through conferences. Teachers cannot provide all the feedback that students need, however; sheer numbers prevail against their best intentions.

Help is at hand, though. Teachers can develop reflective critics within their classrooms by teaching students how to



**FIGURE 1 4th Grade Rubric for a Mock Interview of a Person from History**

	<b>4</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>Content</b>	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.	My essay includes answers to all the required questions, including five of my own, but some answers are incomplete. I have a bibliography.	I answered the required questions but made up fewer than five of my own. Some answers are incomplete or incorrect. My bibliography is incomplete.	I have too few questions, or my questions are trivial or irrelevant. The answers I included are mostly incomplete or incorrect.
<b>Organization</b>	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.	I have an introduction, a body, and a conclusion, but the introduction (or conclusion) is too brief or incomplete.	The questions and answers are in order, but my paper has no introduction, no conclusion, and no main idea.	The questions and answers are out of logical sequence. My paper has no introduction, no conclusion, and no main idea.
<b>Word Choice</b>	I use a variety of sophisticated words—including new and challenging vocabulary—correctly.	I use a variety of words correctly.	I do not use a variety of words, but I use common words correctly.	I repeat simple words, I use big words incorrectly, or I copied words from my sources.
<b>Voice and Tone</b>	My writing is in first and second person ("I" and "you") and sounds like a conversation.	I use first and second person, but my writing sounds like a list of questions and answers, not a conversation.	My writing sounds more like a list of facts than a conversation.	My writing is a list of facts in the third person ("he" or "she").
<b>Sentence Structure</b>	My sentences are clear, begin in different ways, and vary in length.	I have no fragments. My sentences are mostly well constructed, with some minor errors.	My sentences are often awkward. They vary little in length. I have many sentences that begin with the same word.	My paper is hard to read because almost all of my sentences are incomplete, run-ons, or awkward.
<b>Conventions</b>	I use correct capitalization, spelling, punctuation, and grammar.	I made a few errors in grammar and punctuation.	My spelling is correct on common words. I made a lot of errors, but the reader could understand what I am trying to say.	There are so many errors that my paper is hard to read and understand.



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 under-

**Peer assessment helps students reflect on their writing, recognize dissonances, and create solutions.**

line in blue on their essay the information they provided to introduce their interviewee. If students cannot find the information in their essay—and they often cannot—then they can write themselves a reminder to add it to their second draft. Students can use the same process to self-check each criterion on the rubric. With practice, Katie will not only internalize the standards of quality as defined by the rubric but also develop the habit of self-assessment—a hallmark of self-regulated writers (Andrade, 2001; Andrade & Boulay, 2003).

### 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 to 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

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. In addition, exposure to feedback helps students learn to consider another person's perspective on the content and quality of their writing (Wong, Butler, Ficzer, & Kuperis, 1997). Finally, peer assessment may provide valuable insight into the role that an audience and critic can have in revising and improving a writer's piece (Marchisan & Alber, 2001). Perhaps surprisingly, research indicates that peer assessments correlate highly with teacher assessments (O'Donnell & Topping, 1998) and that students often create better pieces of work for their peers than for their teachers (White, 1998).

### Navigating the Writing Process

Writing is smooth sailing for Maren because she has a firm hand on the tiller and can steer through the rough waters of the composition process. Katie, like many other students, needs help in recognizing the existence and purpose of the tiller and training in how to use it.

Clear, accessible instructional rubrics can give students repeated practice with planning, revising, and editing. Using rubrics for self-assessment and peer assessment will help Katie navigate the writing process and become a better



# AT ARGOSY UNIVERSITY THE BEST TEACHERS NEVER STOP LEARNING.



## Graduate Degree Programs in Education

Expand your horizons in education at Argosy University. We're here to help you continue along the path to higher knowledge. We offer master's, specialist, and doctoral degree programs in a range of educational concentrations.

Day, evening, weekend, and online instruction is available for your convenience. Contact us today and see how we can help you raise your level of professional education.

**1.888.488.7537**  
**www.argosyu.edu/el**

Program names vary by location. Not all programs are available at every location.

Argosy University is accredited by the Higher Learning Commission and is a member of the North Central Association (NCA) (30 North LaSalle Street, Suite 2400, Chicago, IL 60602 www.ncahlc.org 1.312.263.0456).

\*\*Argosy University/Nashville is a branch location of Argosy University/Atlanta.

© 2004 by Argosy University® 1161-7/04

**ARGOSY UNIVERSITY/ATLANTA** —

Atlanta, GA

**ARGOSY UNIVERSITY/CHICAGO** —

Chicago, IL

**ARGOSY UNIVERSITY/DALLAS** —

Dallas, TX

**ARGOSY UNIVERSITY/HONOLULU** —

Honolulu, HI

**ARGOSY UNIVERSITY/NASHVILLE\*\*** —

Brentwood, TN

**ARGOSY UNIVERSITY/ORANGE COUNTY** —

Santa Ana, CA

**ARGOSY UNIVERSITY/PHOENIX** —

Phoenix, AZ

**ARGOSY UNIVERSITY**

**SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA** —

Point Richmond, CA

**ARGOSY UNIVERSITY/SARASOTA** —

Sarasota, FL

**ARGOSY UNIVERSITY/SCHAUMBURG** —

(Chicago Northwest) — Rolling Meadows, IL

**ARGOSY UNIVERSITY/SEATTLE** —

Seattle, WA

**ARGOSY UNIVERSITY/TAMPA** —

Tampa, FL

**ARGOSY UNIVERSITY/TWIN CITIES** —

Eagan, MN

**ARGOSY UNIVERSITY/WASHINGTON DC** —

Arlington, VA



**ARGOSY UNIVERSITY**  
**College of Education and**  
**Human Development**

Two First National Plaza  
20 South Clark St., 28th Floor  
Chicago, IL 60603

writer. She will learn to become a self-regulated learner—a habit that will serve her well in reaching any academic destination for which she sets sail. **EL**

## References

- Andrade, H. G. (2000). Using rubrics to promote thinking and learning. *Educational Leadership*, 57, 13-18.
- Andrade, H. G. (2001). The effects of instructional rubrics on learning to write. *Current Issues in Education*, 4(4).
- Andrade, H., & Boulay, B. (2003). The role of self-assessment in learning to write. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 97(1), 21-34.
- First, C. G., & MacMillan, B. (1995). Writing process versatility. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 31, 21-28.
- Graham, S., & Harris, K. (1996). Self-regulation and strategy instruction for students who find writing and learning challenging. In M. Levy & S. Ransdell (Eds.), *The science of writing* (pp. 347-360). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Harris, K., Graham, S., Mason, L., & Saddler, B. (2002). Developing self-regulated writers. *Theory Into Practice*, 41, 110-115.
- Hayes, J. R., & Flower, L. S. (1986). Writing research and the writer. *American Psychologist*, 41, 106-113.
- Marchisan, M. L., & Alber, S. R. (2001). The write way: Tips for teaching the writing process to resistant writers. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 36(3), 154-162.
- O'Donnell, A., & Topping, K. (1998). Peers assessing peers: Possibilities and problems. In K. Topping & S. Ehly (Eds.), *Peer-assisted learning*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Perkins, D. (2003). *King Arthur's round table: How collaborative conversations create smart organizations*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.
- Saddler, B. (2003). "But teacher, I added a period!" Middle schoolers learn to revise. *Voices from the Middle*, 11(2), 20-26.
- White, E. (1998). *Teaching and assessing writing* (2nd ed.). Portland, ME: Calendar Islands Publishers.
- Wong, B. Y. L., Butler, D. L., Ficzere, S. A., & Kuperis, S. (1997). Teaching adolescents with learning disabilities and low achievers to plan, write, and revise compare and contrast essays. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 12, 2-15.

## 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/collegeboardsatreader](http://www.quikscreen.com/collegeboardsatreader) to learn more about this opportunity and apply. For more information about the new SAT, please visit [www.collegeboard.com/newsat](http://www.collegeboard.com/newsat).

Hired readers will be employees of Pearson Educational Measurement.



For more information about Pearson Educational Measurement visit [www.pearsonedmeasurement.com](http://www.pearsonedmeasurement.com). Pearson Education is committed to employing a diverse work force. We are an Equal Opportunity Employer.



**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.

Copyright of Educational Leadership is the property of Association for Supervision & Curriculum Development and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.