

Dual Rubrics and the Process of Writing: Assessment and Best Practices in a Developmental English Course

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Abstract

This article presents strategies for using two types of essay-writing rubrics in a developmental English class of students transitioning into college-level writing. One checklist rubric is student-facing, designed to serve as a guide for students throughout the writing process and as a self-assessment tool. The other checklist rubric is instructor-facing, designed to serve as an assessment tool for instructors to provide enhanced feedback while streamlining the grading process. Additionally, this article includes some student-centered best practices for integrating the assessment process into the before, during, and after stages of the writing process.

Decades ago as a novice high school English teacher, I spent *endless* hours writing comments on my students' papers, thinking that I was providing them with helpful feedback. No matter the quality of the paper, I felt that I owed it to each student to note what was done successfully and what needed more work or could be improved upon for the next assignment. (My approach may have been a reaction to my own graded college papers, typically returned with a paucity of feedback, perhaps a holistic comment and an annotation here and there.) I enjoyed writing praise on my students' papers, but it took time to develop ways to more artfully critique writing problems so as not to discourage students.

In the years that I have been teaching writing at the college level, I have used a variety of rubrics, some of which I devised and some of which came with the course. I have certainly found that using a rubric is better than not, but most had their

limitations, including being too concise or ambiguous to accurately convey clear, cogent, helpful feedback, which meant that I often supplemented those rubrics with extended comments on my students' papers.

In 2012, I read Vicki Spandel's book *Creating Writers Through 6-Trait Writing: Assessment and Instruction (5th Edition)* (2009). In her numerous publications, she provides a variety of writing guides and checklists appropriate for student writers and teachers across grades K through 12. The six traits—organization, ideas, sentence fluency, word choice, voice, and conventions—are the bases for most writing assessment, and are easily adjusted to the appropriate level of instruction. What was new to me, however, was Spandel's paradigm of corresponding writing rubrics: one that is student-facing and another that is instructor-facing. Although Spandel's target audience is neither the college student nor the college instructor, I recognized how the dual rubric approach to assessment would be advantageous for my students who are transitioning into college-level writing.

The purpose of this article has two objectives for teaching and assessing writing in developmental English at the post-secondary level. One is to present the benefits of using corresponding checklist rubrics. These rubrics can enhance the writing process for student writers transitioning into college-level writing, and these same rubrics can enhance and streamline the assessment process for instructors to provide meaningful feedback. The second objective is to present

strategies for synchronizing the process of assessment with the before, during, and after stages in the process of writing.

Part I: Dual rubrics by design

Three design concepts evident in the variety of rubrics in Spandel's book *Creating Writers Through 6-Trait Writing: Assessment and Instruction (5th Ed.)* are particularly strategic to the assessment process: the use of parallel rubrics, one that is student-facing and one that is instructor-facing; the instructional, performance-based language describing each of the six writing traits; and the check-box simplicity for students to assess their own writing and for the instructor to assess according to a high-, medium-, or low-level of accomplishment. With Spandel's design in mind, I created dual rubrics for my developmental English course.

A checklist rubric for writers

What constitutes strong writing often eludes the student in transitional studies. Providing the student with a carefully crafted rubric that is student-facing can assist the student throughout the writing process and provide a number of benefits that promote learning:

- The rubric serves as a writing guide when it is provided at the time the assignment is given.
- The language in the rubric pinpoints expectations for each trait.
- The performance levels for each trait direct the student toward revision.

The self-assessment process encourages student ownership of his or her performance

“Dual Rubrics” continued

- The shared language of both student- and instructor-facing rubrics can facilitate student-instructor dialogue regarding the student’s writing.

If the student is not provided with a rubric at the time an assignment is given and only learns after the paper is returned what was important for the evaluation, it seems the student has not been well served. As reported in *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching* (2010), “Research has shown that clearly specified performance criteria can help direct students’ practice and ultimately their learning. For example, Andrade (2001) found that creating a rubric (a clear description of the characteristics associated with different levels of performance) and sharing it with students when an assignment is distributed leads to better outcomes—both in terms of the quality of work produced and students’ knowledge of the qualities associated with good work” (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, and Norman, p. 130).

Putting the rubric into the student’s hands up front, removes any mystery associated with what constitutes a successful paper and successful evaluation. Precise language in the rubric not only directly describes each component part but also, within each part, describes how the student can determine what is required for each of the three performance levels, such as whether or not his sentences are varied in structure for a high performance or whether his sentences are mostly written in the same type of structure, resulting in a lower evaluation. When students can see the differences on the checklist, they have the opportunity to take action, make revisions, and aim for a higher level of achievement in each component part. “When rubrics are

given to students with the assignment description, they can help students monitor and assess their progress as they work toward clearly indicated goals” (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, and Norman, 2010, p. 232).

As implied, a student-facing rubric is written from the first-person-point-of-view. When the students assess their own writing, they are checking the boxes describing their perceived level of accomplishment for each of the traits. For example, when evaluating the introduction in a paper, a student in my development English class has these choices:

Check one of the following:

- My introduction is interesting and engages the reader in my topic.
- My introduction includes some information related to my topic, but I have not attempted a strategy to engage the reader.
- My introduction identifies my topic, but I need to include information related to my topic to engage the reader.

As students check the appropriate box, they are taking ownership of their writing and have an awareness of how their writing aligns with the expectations. If students rate themselves below the top level, they still know what is required to reach that top level, perhaps the next time. When students place the check marks in the boxes, they have taken the responsibility of assessing their writing, which entails ownership of their own performance.

Finally, the student-facing rubric prepares the student to receive the teacher’s assessment. Discussions that ensue throughout the writing process are easier for both the student and the instructor who can talk the same language about

targeted criteria. When the student has his or her own rubric in hand during the drafting of the essay, the student and the instructor can discuss specifics and point to that component on the rubric, such as, “My ideas are general statements on the topic without providing enough meaningful examples and specific details.” The student and the instructor can have a meaningful discussion regarding what to do and strategies for how to do it. After a paper has been graded and returned, the student can compare the self-assessment with the instructor’s assessment and ask targeted questions where further explanation may be required. Both the student and the teacher are able to use shared terminology, increasing the level of understanding while limiting misunderstandings (e.g., *I didn’t know what we had to do, or I didn’t know what you meant by sentence fluency*).

A checklist rubric for writing assessment: The instructor-facing rubric

Assessing the writing of transitioning students has its challenges in that in order to be helpful, we instructors must first aim to do no harm. Giving constructive feedback that avoids negativity is essential. The parallel alignment of dual rubrics assists in that goal. So what are the advantages of an instructor-facing checklist rubric for assessing student writing?

- Establishment of clear, targeted requirements
- Promotion of clear communication of the writing objectives with the student throughout the writing process
- Provision of the means for clear, neutral feedback
- Improvement in the post-assessment dialogue between the student and the instructor

“Dual Rubrics” continued

- Reduction in the time spent evaluating and grading student writing

The instructor-facing assessment rubric aligns with the components and the criteria in the writer’s rubric and additionally includes a third column for point distribution for each of the six traits. Each line on the student-facing rubric has a comparable line on the instructor-facing rubric. However, the significant difference between the two checklists is the more objective language on the instructor-facing rubric, which assesses the student’s writing, not the writer. So for example, these are the comparable checklist choices on the instructor-facing rubric for evaluating the essay introduction:

- The introduction is interesting and engages the reader in the topic.
- The introduction includes some information related to the topic but needs a strategy to engage the reader.
- The introduction identifies the topic but needs to include information to engage the reader in the topic.

The emphasis of the feedback for this section is on the introduction and the phrasing is neutral. Whereas this section in the student-facing rubric uses the personal pronoun *my*, as in *my introduction* and *my point*, the instructor’s assessment rubric uses objective wording, such as *the introduction* and *the point*. The description of what constitutes high achievement is fairly straight forward; however, phrasing less than top-notch performance requires more finesse. It is far more effective to check a box with a neutral tone to state that “the introduction identifies the topic but needs to include information and to engage the reader in the topic” rather than using the

Check-box rubrics for writers: A survey for the May 2013 session

Please place an *X* next to either “Yes” or “No” for each of the following questions regarding the rubrics that were used for Essay 1 and Essay 2 this session.

1. Were the descriptions next to each check box on the Rubric for Writers clearly worded so that you understood what you were checking for each category, such as for organization, supporting ideas, sentence fluency, etc.

_____ Yes

_____ No

Comments:

2. Did having the assessment categories and descriptions listed as checkboxes on the Rubric for Writers provide a guide for you as you drafted and/or revised your essay to fulfill the assignment?

_____ Yes

_____ No

Comments:

3. Did you already know what to expect regarding how your instructor would evaluate your essay because you had completed the check-box rubric?

_____ Yes

_____ No

Comments:

4. Do you think that having a check-box rubric to guide you before you complete your assignments would be helpful to you in fulfilling writing assignments in the future?

_____ Yes

_____ No

Comments:

second-person: “*Your* introduction does not do enough to introduce *your* topic.”

Further, because the phrasing for medium- or low-quality provides a pathway to improvement, the rubric does serve as a learning tool. When a student reads that “some of *the* sentences are clearly worded while others are not” and “more specific word choices are needed to replace general or vague words,” the message is that some elements can be fixed/revised/worked on for next time and that it is within the student’s power to do so. Because students checked the appropriate boxes on the rubric when they completed their own assessment, they may have a better understanding and acceptance that the grading process is fair. They can note that the instructor assessed the same qualities in the essay.

During the 2013 spring session, I used the check-box rubrics for both essay assignments in the course. At the end of the session, I surveyed the

students to arrive at qualitative results for the effectiveness of using these rubrics as teaching tools. I was pleased, and not surprised, by the answers and feedback. The survey follows, along with the results.

Results

Three students (out of four) completed the course and were present on the last day of class to take the survey:

Question 1: Yes = 3; No = 0

Comments: None

Question 2: Yes = 3; No = 0

Comments: “I enjoyed going over the check box to see if you agree with what I marked.”

Question 3: Yes = 3; No = 0

Comment: “This helped me to organize my papers.”

Question 4: Yes = 3; No = 0

“I plan on looking for these rubrics check boxes when I take English 112 in the fall session (hopefully with you)!”

“Dual Rubrics” continued

The most current iterations of both rubrics appear at the end of this article in the appendices.

Part II: Best practices within the process of assessing

Students are well served when assessing their writing is integrated throughout their writing process. For transitional students in developmental English, such an approach positions the instructor to scaffold the students along the way. I think of the process of assessing as a series of contact points with students as they plan, compose, and revise their writing. The use of rubrics supports that approach. The following section provides tips and strategies.

Assessing in the prewriting stage

While students are in the prewriting stage, this is my typical approach:

- Tell students what I expect—in writing. Crafting clear assignments is the first step, with the inclusion of requirements and expectations.
- Provide students with a Checklist Rubric for Writers so they know from the start precisely how their writing will be evaluated. Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, and Norman (2010) underscore the importance of the rubric as a guide: “Rubrics are a way of explicitly representing performance expectations and thus can direct students’ behaviors toward your intended goals” (p. 87).
- Provide an activity involving model essays for discussion of the traits.
- Provide students with an Idea Map (an outline template) to assist them in organizing their major points and key ideas for support.

During the drafting stage

While students are drafting their papers, this is my typical approach:

- Conduct individual mini-conferences with students during designated workshop time to discuss their plans, initial drafts, and progress. Checking early, such as after the student has composed a couple of paragraphs, can prevent later headaches. Allowing as little as five minutes per student can be productive. For short essays, these conversations allow me to make verbal suggestions and eliminate the need for “grading” the draft, which is by its nature, a work in progress anyway.
- Require students to complete the Checklist Rubric for Writers, checking off the appropriate boxes as they proceed. The Rubric for Writers is stapled to the final draft at the time of submission.

After submission

When grading student papers, this is my typical approach:

- Use a Checklist Rubric for Writing Assessment, which parallels the Checklist Rubric for Writers.
- Include at least one or two additional salient, positive remarks; targeted praise is motivating. For comments on problem spots, posing questions can circumvent criticism, such as, *what is another example that would help to support your point?*
- Limit the editing. I often focus on the first paragraphs or page to note a few areas where the student needs to work on matters of accuracy, especially those that we have already worked on to date. Often, I just underline the problem, such as a matter of diction or the point where a sentence is run-on or place brackets around a sentence fragment. The student can then contemplate the notations for discussion in our post-paper mini-conference. At the point where I discontinue editing

- marks, I write the phrase *my editing ends here* in the margin. Too much editing can overwhelm the student, but by alerting the student where I have stopped editing avoids giving an impression that the successive paragraphs are flawless.
- Avoid using red ink (though the word rubric actually derives from the Latin word *ruber*, meaning red) (Taylor, 2009, para. 2). I use green, blue, or occasionally, purple. Those colors seem to convey that I am making comments, not spilling blood. I even mention to students that research shows that using red ink to grade papers can have damaging psychological results. Some student expressions in response seem to relate to that. According to the *Journal of College Science Teaching*, a research study conducted by psychology professor Andrew Elliot (2007) at the University of Rochester found that there is a specific association between red and mistakes and failures of people. When a teacher uses red ink to mark a student’s paper it can have a negative impact on behavior (p. 8).
 - Use a checklist rubric with the writing traits and levels of performance clearly stated. The rubric eliminates or lessens the need for lengthy comments, thus streamlining the grading process while providing meaningful feedback.
 - Hold post-grading, mini-conferences with students to discuss their graded papers in a conversation geared to answer questions and to frequently serve as a positive segue way into the next paper.

This before-during-and-after process establishes a familiar rhythm in the classroom. Working with students throughout the process fosters a sense of collaboration.

“Dual Rubrics” continued**Conclusion**

Confusing feedback or the lack of feedback can be disappointing for the student and a lost teaching opportunity for the instructor. Consistent and purposeful interaction with our student writers to guide their efforts from the practice stages to printed/published performance paves the path toward reaching the desired outcomes. During a recent session of my developmental English course, I asked my four students at various checkpoints along the writing process how they were using the checklist. The following represents the essence of their responses:

Student 1:

- *I made changes to my introduction to make the reader interested.*
- *I realized that my conclusion did not do enough to give something to think about. I will work on that next time.*
- *I have had rubrics before, but I liked having one for me so I can say what I think about my paper.*

Student 2:

- *It (the checklist) made me work harder.*
- *I went over my essay three times as I thought about the checklist.*
- *I graded myself harder than you (referring to me, the instructor) did.*
- *I would like a blank copy to keep.*

Student 3:

- *I revised a lot, especially to give more specific examples.*

Student 4:

- *I changed two sentences in my conclusion to improve my voice.*

“If you present clear and expansive ideas, I will understand; if you organize information effectively, I will follow; if you write with voice, I will hear you” (Spandel, 2009, p. 29).

This inspirational message ignited my desire to create student-centered assessment instruments for the novice writers in my classes. Checklist assessment enhances the process of guiding students toward expanding, organizing, and voicing their ideas. When their self-assessment becomes metacognitive, then novice writers are better prepared to transition into college-level writing.

References

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Appendix: A Checklist Rubric for Writers

Use this checklist as a guide as you draft, revise, and proofread your paper. Then, when you turn in the final copy, include this rubric with a check mark in the appropriate box for each section to show your assessment of your own writing.

Organization

Check one of the following:

- My introduction is interesting and engages the reader in my topic.
- My introduction includes information related to my topic, but I have not attempted a strategy to engage the reader.
- My introduction identifies my topic, but I need to include

information related to my topic and to engage the reader.

- My thesis is stated in the introduction. It clearly identifies the point that I want to make about my topic.
 - My topic is stated in the introduction, but I do not have a thesis statement that clearly identifies my point for the paper.
 - My main point is missing in my introduction.
-
- Each paragraph in the body of my essay has a focused topic sentence/point that supports my thesis statement.
 - Some of the paragraphs in the body of my essay still need a focused topic sentence/point that supports my thesis statement.
 - The paragraphs in the body of my essay do not have topic sentences/points that support my thesis statement.
-
- My conclusion expresses the significance of my ideas and leaves an impression on the reader.
 - My conclusion repeats some of the same ideas explained in the body of my essay without giving their significance.
 - My conclusion does not give a sense of closure.
-

Supporting ideas

- My ideas on the topic are thoughtful and support my points with specific examples and details.
 - Some of my ideas are thoughtful, though some support is too general or repetitious.
-

“Dual Rubrics” continued

- My ideas are general statements on the topic without providing enough thoughtful examples and specific details.
-

Sentence fluency & word choice

- My sentences are varied, clearly worded, and include many precise nouns and verbs.
 - Some of my sentences are clearly worded while others are not. Some of my nouns and verbs are precise.
 - Many or most of my sentences have the same sentence structure and many of my word choices are general or vague terms.
-
- I have included transitions at the beginning of paragraphs and within paragraphs to effectively connect my ideas.
 - I have included some effective transitions, but additional transitions would improve the connections between my ideas.
 - I have not included enough or effective transitions to smoothly connect my ideas for the reader to follow.
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Voice

- My writing sounds like me as the person engaged with my topic. I have a presence on the page beginning with the introduction, throughout the body of the paper, and in the conclusion.
 - My writing sounds like me in some parts, but in some parts it sounds unnatural or awkward.
 - My paper pertains to the assignment, but the writing does not show my engagement with the topic.
-

Standard English conventions

- My writing has a high level of accuracy, including standard capitalization, spelling, punctuation, verb tense, and pronoun usage.
- My writing is mostly accurate in the areas of standard capitalization, spelling, punctuation, verb tense, and pronoun usage.
- My writing still needs more of my attention to accuracy in order to effectively communicate my ideas to the reader.

Appendix B: A checklist rubric for essay assessment (100 pts.)**Organization (20 pts.)**

- The introduction is interesting and engages the reader in the topic.
 - The introduction includes some information related to the topic but it needs a strategy to engage the reader.
 - The introduction identifies the topic but needs to include information related to the topic and to engage the reader.
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- The thesis is stated in the introduction. It clearly identifies the writer’s point regarding the topic.
 - The topic is stated in the introduction, but the point regarding the topic still needs to be stated clearly.
 - The main point is missing in the introduction.
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- Each paragraph in the body of the essay has a focused topic sentence/point that supports the thesis statement.

- Some paragraphs in the body of the essay still need a focused topic sentence/point that supports the thesis.
 - The paragraphs in the body of the essay need topic sentences/points that support the thesis statement.
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- The conclusion expresses the significance of the writer’s ideas and leaves an impression on the reader.
 - The conclusion repeats some of the same ideas explained in the body of the essay without stating their significance.
 - The conclusion needs to give a sense of closure.

Supporting ideas (40 pts.)

- The ideas on the topic are thoughtful and support the points with specific examples and details.
- Some of the ideas are thoughtful, though some support may be too general or repetitious.
- The ideas are general statements on the topic without providing specific examples and details.

Sentence fluency & word choice (15 pts.)

- The sentences are varied, clearly worded, and include many precise nouns and verbs.
 - Some of the sentences are clearly worded while others are not. Some of the nouns and verbs are precise.
 - Many or most of the sentences have the same sentence structure and more precise nouns and verbs are needed to replace general or vague terms.
-

“Dual Rubrics” continued

- Transitions are included at the beginning of paragraphs and within paragraphs effectively connecting the ideas.
- Some transitions effectively connect ideas, though additional transitions would improve the flow between ideas.
- More effective transitions are needed to smoothly connect the ideas for the reader.

Voice (10 pts.)

- The writing sounds like the writer who is engaged with the topic and has a presence on the page beginning with the introduction, throughout the body of the paper, and in the conclusion.
- The writing sounds like the writer in some parts, but in other parts it sounds unnatural or awkward.
- The paper pertains to the assignment, but the writing needs more of the genuine voice of the writer to show engagement with the topic.

Standard English conventions**(15 pts.)**

- The writing has a high level of accuracy, including standard capitalization, spelling, punctuation, verb tense, and pronoun usage.
- The writing is mostly accurate in the areas of standard capitalization, spelling, punctuation, verb tense, and pronoun usage.
- The writing still needs a higher level of accuracy to effectively communicate the ideas to the reader. Recommendation: work with a campus or online writing tutor.

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