Writing Rubrics Right:

Avoiding Common Mistakes in Rubric Assessment

Rubrics are increasingly popular tools for assessing information literacy. However, the power of rubric assessment can be diminished by errors in rubric creation. By learning about common rubric mistakes, librarians can avoid these errors & produce powerful information literacy assessment tools.

Use the following list of mistakes as a checklist for examining rubrics before use.

Common Mistakes – General

- Failing to match the assessment need with the "right" type of rubric: checklist, Likert scale, or full-model rubric.

CHECKLIST

CRITERIA ONLY

	Observed	Not Observed
Eye Contact	√	
Gestures		√

LIKERT SCALE

CRITERIA

&

PERFORMANCE LEVELS

(numbers or descriptive terms)

	0	1	2
Eye Contact	√		
Gestures		√	

	Novice	Proficient	Professional
Eye Contact	√		
Gestures		√	

Numbers may be replaced with performance level terms such as: mastery, progressing, emerging, satisfactory, marginal, proficient, high, middle, beginning, advanced, novice, intermediate, sophisticated, competent, professional, exemplary, needs work, adequate, developing, accomplished, distinguished.

	Beginning	Developing	Exemplary
Eye Contact	Does not make eye contact with the audience.	Makes intermittent eye contact with the audience.	Maintains sustained eye contact with the audience.
Gestures	Gestures are not used.	Gestures are used, but do not emphasize talking points.	Gestures are used to emphasize talking points.

FULL-MODEL RUBRIC

CRITERIA,

PERFORMANCE LEVELS,

&

PERFORMANCE DESCRIPTIONS

Common Mistakes – General (continued)

- Failing to match a rubric's scope (holistic vs. analytic) to the assessment need.

  Holistic rubrics are used to assess an artifact of student learning as a whole and provide a single, overall judgment of quality. They are faster to use, less burdensome for large-scale assessments, and usually sufficient for evaluating simple artifacts of learning.

  Analytic rubrics are used to assess the component parts of an artifact of student learning and provide separate judgments of each component (criterion), as well as a summed total judgment. They provide more detailed assessment data, give more specific feedback to learners, and are better for evaluating complex artifacts of learning.

- Failing to match a rubric's level of specificity (task vs. general) to the assessment need.
  - Create a task-specific rubric for one-time, non-programmatic assessments.
  - Create a general rubric for assessments used over multiple assignments, time, programs, or student groups.

Common Mistakes – Wording

- Including library jargon or other technical language that is unfamiliar to stakeholders including students, faculty, librarians, and administrators.

Common Mistakes – Criteria

- Omitting criteria that represent significant aspects of the learning you want to measure.
- Including criteria that do *not* represent significant aspects of the learning you want to measure.

Common Mistakes – Performance Levels

- Using an arbitrary number of performance levels. Instead, choose the number of performance levels purposefully.
  - If you want to force evaluative decisions, choose an even number of levels (usually 4). If you want to have a middle ground, choose an odd number of levels (usually 3 or 5).
  - Choose a number that you can justify based on developmental stages and typical levels of learning for your student population.
- Emphasizing the negative at lower performance levels. Performance level labels should be descriptive, not discouraging.

Common Mistakes – Performance Descriptions

- Including too much detail in performance descriptions…or too little.

  If you include too much detail, no one read your descriptions thoroughly.

  If you include too little, the descriptions won't enough convey significant, descriptive content to guide an assessment.

- Failing to maintain content consistency over the performance descriptions for one criterion.

  Use parallel sentence construction to describe the same content across different performance descriptions for each criterion. See "eye contact" example in full-model rubric on page 1 of this handout.

- Lacking differentiation over different levels of performance descriptions for each criterion.

  - For each criterion, are the performance descriptions distinct from one another? Or do they overlap? Can you imagine a student falling into more than one performance description? If so, revise.
  - For each criterion, are there "holes"? Can you imagine a student that doesn't fit into any of the performance descriptions? If so, revise.
  - For each criterion, do all performance descriptions actually cover that criterion rather than another criterion (either included in or omitted from the rubric)?

- Using vague terms to distinguish among performance descriptions.

  "Student uses some eye contact." *What is **some**?*

  "Student uses eye contact effectively?" *What does **effectively** mean?*

- Emphasizing performance quantity (how many times) over performance quality (how well).

  If a student can achieve an outcome, is important how many times they do it?

  Or is it more important how *well* they do it?

- Emphasizing the negative in lower performance descriptions. Performance descriptions at the lower levels should be informative, but not unduly negative.

Examining Sample Rubrics

What common mistakes exist in these rubrics?

How might you improve them?

How can you use this knowledge at your institution?

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