

Providing Feedback on Student Writing

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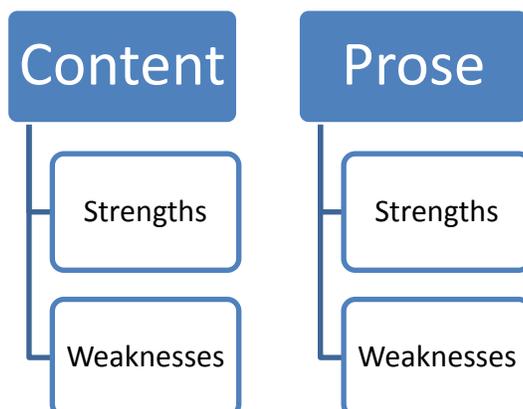
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College students are assigned a lot of writing. Some disciplines require more writing than others, but all GE courses at SJSU have a minimum written word count, and all SJSU instructors are required to assess student writing for grammar, clarity, conciseness and coherence. In other words, writing doesn't just matter in English classes. Creating consistent assessment methods across the curriculum will help students understand this, and will make them better writers.

Grading papers is often one of the toughest jobs instructors have. In many ways, it is a balancing act: instructors must provide enough feedback, but not too much; they must identify weaknesses, but also identify strengths; they must use specific language, but also comment on the larger context. As with any task, the architect must design with the end goal in mind, and grading papers is no different. Instructors must provide feedback with the purpose of the assessment in mind: *to communicate how the student can improve by detailing his/her strengths and weaknesses.*

Regardless of the genre of writing, all feedback should contain criticism on the content, as well as the quality of the writing itself. Students will have strengths and weaknesses in both of these categories.



Also, instructors need to be as specific as possible and give students a concrete strength or weakness to either replicate or repair. *Specificity* and *the goal of student improvement* are the tenets of good feedback, and should always guide the instructor's pen.

The following document details best practices for providing:

1. In-text feedback: Marks (page 3)
2. In-text feedback: Comments (page 13)
3. End comments (page 14)
4. Rubric development (page 18)

These practices can be applied to electronic, auditory, or paper feedback.

In-Text Feedback: Marks for Grammar, Mechanics & Style

Purpose

The purpose of in-text marks and comments is to identify *specific examples* of the strengths and weaknesses in students' papers, thereby educating them on what they need to do to improve. Without this feedback, students are left with criticism that is often too vague for them to learn something from; they need an exact model from their own prose.

Quantity

The quantity of in-text marks matters.

If instructors do not provide any in-text grammatical, mechanical, or stylistic marks, this communicates that either

- The paper presents none of these errors (which is rarely true), or
- They are not part of the assessment (which is false).

If instructors mark every grammatical, mechanical, and stylistic error in the text,

- The volume of pen-marks can (and often does) overwhelm students. This makes it more likely that they will ignore the feedback because there is no way for them to enter the dialogue; it is much easier to call themselves a “bad writer” and simply hope the next paper turns out better.
- Students do not have the chance to identify and correct errors themselves, inhibiting their opportunity to learn from their mistakes.
- The instructor may burn-out, or sacrifice the quality of the remainder of the assessment.

Instructors need to strike a balance between providing enough feedback and not providing too much. The quantity needs to be manageable for both the student and the instructor. And, it needs to be as specific as possible.

Marking patterns

Generally, the best practice for achieving this balance is by marking specific *patterns* of error. Often students repeat the same mistake multiple times in a paper. Identifying these patterns for students can dramatically improve their writing. The following is an excerpt from a student essay on the use of performance enhancing drugs in professional sports:

Of the many athletes that use performance enhancing drugs (PEDs), Lance Armstrong is one of the most familiar to the public. He won seven consecutive Tour de France titles. cs: use ; he has

also been popularized through the foundation he created to support cancer research, the Livestrong Foundation. Throughout Armstrong's career, he repeatedly denied allegations of any kind of doping. Towards the end of his career, he practically laughed at the charges. Then, in 2012, the United States Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) charged Armstrong with using performance enhancing drugs and banned him from competitive cycling for life. He was also stripped of his titles. At this time, Armstrong did not admit to any doping, ^{CS: use ;} he also chose not to appeal the decision in court. Yet, a few months later on the Oprah Winfrey show, Armstrong publically admitted to using PEDs throughout his career. This interview met with much fanfare from the media, ^{CS} however, the coverage mostly focused on the fact that he finally admitted to doping, not that he lied and cheated for over a decade....



Pattern of error: comma splice

Marking patterns allows instructors to assess the prose from a pedagogical stance: they are identifying a specific pattern for the student to learn, but also a weakness that is repeatedly undermining readability.

Prose with many patterns of errors

Some students, particularly second language learners, will have multiple patterns of error in a piece of writing. Instructors should ask themselves, which patterns are causing the most damage to communicating the piece's message? Writing is, after all, communicating. If a reader cannot discern what the writer is trying to communicate, then the purpose is lost. Likewise, instructors need to keep in mind that the goal of the assessment is student improvement, and marking all the patterns of error will likely overwhelm the student's initiative to work on researching and understanding these errors. Again, a balanced approach generally yields the best results: mark 2 or 3 patterns of error. Color-coding them with colored pens or highlighters can be especially helpful to the student, as can providing specific chapters and/or pages in a style manual for the student to review.

Stylistic choices

More advanced prose often does not demonstrate obvious patterns of error, but that does not mean the writing invites no feedback. Instructors still must ask themselves, how can the student improve this prose? Frequently, the answer can be found in the stylistic choices the student has made. Prose can be grammatically correct, yet lack style and strategy. Regardless of the genre of

writing – whether a student is writing a chemistry lab report or an essay on Shakespeare – the meaning and message of the assignment can be enhanced by strategically crafting prose. Here are some examples of stylistic criticism that an instructor can provide a student with¹:

- **Sentence variety:** Adding sentence variety to prose can give it life and rhythm. Too many sentences with the same structure and length can grow monotonous for readers. Varying sentence style and structure can also reduce repetition and add emphasis. Long sentences work well for incorporating a lot of information, and short sentences can often maximize crucial points.
- **Conciseness:** The goal of concise writing is to use the most effective words. Concise writing does not always have the fewest words, but it always uses the strongest ones. Writers often fill sentences with weak or unnecessary words that can be deleted or replaced. Words and phrases should be deliberately chosen for the work they are doing. Like bad employees, words that don't accomplish enough should be fired. When only the most effective words remain, writing will be far more concise and readable.
- **Achieving emphasis:** Emphasis by repetition of key words can be especially effective in a series. Emphasis can also be achieved by establishing a pattern through repetition and then breaking that pattern to emphasize the non-conforming part.

Like grammatical errors, such stylistic choices often occur in patterns as well. Every writer has habits, tendencies in his/her sentence crafting that reveal themselves as patterns of construction. By identifying for students what their tendencies are, they can understand how to break or enhance them in order to create more meaningful and effective prose. The following is an excerpt from a student essay on performance enhancing drug use in professional sports:

wordy: “To spectators, the meaning of sports is the joy of watching, but for athletes the meaning is winning.”

[Sports events are seen as being a fun competition that everyone can enjoy watching.

However, when looking into the mind of an athlete, the meaning of sports is completely different to

wordy: “This is why athletes use PEDs: to be the best in their sport.”

them. To an athlete, the only thing that matters is winning.] [Due to this fact, this is why athletes

use performance enhancing drugs (PEDs). They really want to be the best at whatever sport they

are playing.] While PED use is wrong, understanding what motivates athletes to use them can

help us solve this problem....



Pattern: wordiness

¹ Definitions taken from the Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL): <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>

Identifying the student's wordiness will not only make them aware of this tendency, but help them understand the value of writing concisely, which is clarity. Clarity is paramount when communicating, and too many words can obfuscate meaning.

Impressive prose

While an instructor's job is to identify errors the student needs to remedy, highlighting strengths in the prose is just as important. Students need to understand what they need to *continue doing*, as well as what they need to stop doing. The following is an excerpt from a student essay on performance enhancing drug use in professional sports:

Great opening line: I want to read on!

Fans slosh in kayaks and rowboats outside Pac Bell Park waiting for Barry Bonds to hit a record-breaking home run. The bat cracks, the crowd roars, and an achievement is emblazoned in baseball history. While all baseball fans are familiar with the home run record that San Francisco Giants player Barry Bonds shattered, those same fans are just as familiar with the performance enhancing drug allegations against him. He vehemently denied using PEDs for years, and then was indicted in the BALCO scandal which finally proved what everyone has always known that his achievements were made possible by cheating...

Instructors should be as specific as possible. Identifying something as "good" does not actually communicate to the student what he/she needs to repeat in future writing. These types of vague comments serve more to substantiate the grade the assignment has earned rather than to teach students how to improve. Instructors must indicate what, exactly, is good.

Methods

There are numerous ways to mark in-text errors. An instructor's menu includes

- 1) indicating the error in some way (with a circle, a strikethrough, checkmark in margin, etc.)
- 2) indicating the error and writing the correction
- 3) indicating and naming the error (*without* writing the correction)
- 4) indicating and naming the error, as well as writing the correction

Each of these methods communicates different assumptions on behalf of the instructor, different skills on behalf of the student, and different allocations of responsibility. In order for the marks to lead to student improvement, instructors need to avoid seeing themselves as editors, but rather as mutually engaged with the student in a process that shifts the power from their pen to the student's pen. Examining the assumptions and consequences of each of these marking strategies

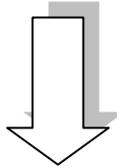
can help instructors best decide how to teach students to fish, rather than catching the fish for them.

Indicating the error:

Forrest walk to the store.



Assumes that the student can identify what is wrong with the circled information, and can correct it him/herself



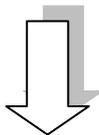
This method can only help a student improve if the instructor knows, without doubt, that the student is *already* familiar with the error *and* how to repair it. This is rarely the case. If the student can identify the error, and repair it, he/she would not make it. The exception to this is *very* obvious proofreading errors, such as a missing period from the end of a sentence or a type-o.

Indicating and correcting the error:

Forrest ^{walks} walk to the store.



Assumes that the student knows what the error is (the name of it), but cannot correct it him/herself



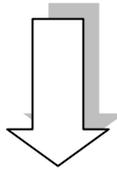
This method can be superficially helpful to the student, but rarely yields student improvement. The benefit is that the student will see the correct usage, provided by the instructor, but if he/she does not know the name of the error, then he/she does not have any recourse to find the error in a handbook and understand the rhetorical concept behind his/her mistake. Without the ability to research the error (through a style manual, the internet, etc.), the student will in all likelihood repeat the error in his/her future work, despite having seen it written correctly in this one example.

Indicating and naming the error:

Forrest ^{S-V}walk to the store.



Assumes that the student cannot identify the error,
but that he/she can correct it him/herself



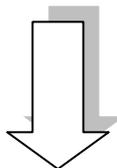
This method provides students with the essential building blocks for improvement. It does not, however, give them a model of what to emulate. The instructor has communicated two things: the information needed to investigate the rhetorical concept behind the error, and, that the student is on his/her own to determine how to fix it.

Indicating, naming, and correcting the error:

Forrest ^{S-V: walks}walk to the store.



Assumes that the student cannot identify,
or correct the error him/herself



This method places all the power with the instructor, and allows the student to participate minimally. Benefits include enabling the student to investigate the error (because the instructor has named it), as well as providing the student with an accurate model. The drawback is that the pen is never in the student's hand – the instructor is doing all the work.

Often instructors feel they need to choose one of these methods and use it consistently throughout a piece of student writing. However, if the goal of the assessment is student improvement, none of these methods is overly effective in achieving that, because none of them involves a transfer of power from the instructor to the student. In order to help students understand that the assessment is something to be done *with* them and not *to* them, instructors need to employ multiple marking methods in a sequence that yields a steady transfer of power, and therefore responsibility, to the student.

The 4-step strategy

The general best practice for in-text marks is a 4-step strategy:

- 1) Begin by indicating, naming, and correcting the first two occurrences of a pattern of error. All the responsibility is with the instructor, but the baton must start here in order to be passed.
- 2) In the next 1 or 2 occurrences of the error, indicate and name it. This shifts some of the responsibility to students: they have to correct it themselves now that it has been identified for them, and they have a previous model of how to correct it.
- 3) In the following 1 or 2 occurrences of the error, only indicate it (with a circle, etc). Students must understand what the error is and how to repair it themselves.
- 4) Leave some errors in the pattern completely unmarked, and indicate where you've done this ("I stopped marking errors beginning here"). Students have been given the information they need from the instructor and are now running with the baton.

By sequencing marking methods as the paper progresses, the instructor is communicating to the student

- that the instructor is not an editor, but a teacher
- how the student can improve
- that he/she needs to now take responsibility

A pitfall to avoid

Despite how time-consuming grading papers can be, instructors need to avoid the pitfall of providing feedback that is too vague, which is usually easier and faster than identifying a specific grammatical or stylistic problem.

Students will often write sentences that are awkward, but very rarely should instructors write “awk” for an in-text mark. This is a vague descriptor of a problem that almost always has a specific root. In order for the student to improve, he/she needs a specific error identified for them rather than a broad (and sometimes subjective) label. The following are examples from student writing.

An “awkward” sentence:

The soccer player returned to the clinic where he had undergone emergency surgery in 2004 in a limousine sent by Adidas.

While this sentence is awkward, marking it as “awk” is only a vague description. The reason it is awkward stems from the bracketed misplaced modifier (mm).

The soccer player returned to the clinic where he had undergone emergency surgery in 2004 [in a limousine sent by Adidas].
mm: move

By identifying a specific error, the instructor is giving the student a chance to learn from his/her mistake.

Using the “wrong word”:

This idea is important to Gladwell’s article because it summarize the thought in our society that the “winners” will always gets the good life.

s-v: summarizes

While the instructor could mark ww here (wrong word), this is only a vague description of the problem. The reason this is the wrong word stems from subject-verb agreement (s-v). The use of “gets” confirms that this is a pattern of error for this student.

General best practices

- ✓ Most instructors have a legend of correction symbols and abbreviations that they distribute to the students at the beginning of the course (example on page 12). These save the instructor time and aid in naming specific errors.
- ✓ Mark patterns of error, rather than all errors.
- ✓ Be as specific as possible.
- ✓ Balance positive and negative feedback.

Further ideas

- ✓ Distribute a statement at the beginning of the term explaining the 4-step marking method.
- ✓ Thoroughly mark-up only one paragraph that demonstrates all of the systemic problems in the text.
- ✓ Thoroughly mark-up the first and last paragraph of the text.
- ✓ Mark each pattern of error in a different color of pen/pencil.
- ✓ After identifying and correcting the first few occurrences in a pattern of error, use a colored highlighter to indicate the error. Or, place a checkmark in the margin of the line of text that contains the error.

Possible follow-up assignments

To help students understand that writing is a process and a skill that needs cultivation, instructors should provide students with the opportunity to follow-up on their errors. This can be accomplished through a variety of assignments. Here are some ideas:

- ✓ Students must correct the indicated and/or unmarked errors in a pattern of error that the instructor has previously identified for them.
- ✓ In a case where the instructor has only marked up one or two paragraphs in the text, students must find and correct the errors in the remainder of the text, either alone, or with a tutor from the Writing Center.
- ✓ Students must submit, with their next writing assignment, a separate sheet naming the patterns of error identified for them in their previous assignment and an explanation of what they did to fix those errors.
- ✓ Students must submit, with their next assignment, a reflective analysis cover sheet that details specifically how this assignment demonstrates improvement from their last assignment.

Correction Symbols for Mechanical and Stylistic Errors

(Refer to a Style Manual for a full discussion of these topics)

^ -	add needed word (to make sentence grammatically or logically complete)
awk or awk const. -	awkward sentence construction
cliché -	cliché (language and phrases that are predictable and overused)
cs -	comma splice (connecting independent clauses with a comma)
diction -	poor word choice
dm -	dangling modifier
frag -	sentence fragment (sentence is missing subject, verb, or other parts)
fused -	fused sentence (two complete sentences fused into one)
mm -	misplaced modifier
nonst -	nonstandard usage (not academic English, slang)
POV	point of view (indicates a shift in point of view, i.e. from 1 st person to second person, etc.)
PR -	Proofreading error
ref -	error in reference (word or phrase either fails to reference or incorrectly references a noun)
run-on -	run-on sentence
sp -	spelling error
s-v -	subject-verb agreement error (make subjects and verbs agree)
tense -	error in verb tense
ww -	wrong word
//	faulty parallelism (balance parallel ideas, words, phrases, clauses)

In-Text Feedback: Comments

Purpose

Instructors typically make comments in the margins of student writing. Often these comments assess the content of the paper – identifying both positive and negative developments of the ideas that the student is presenting – but they can also criticize the quality of the prose. The purpose of these comments is to *engage in a dialogue with students* to help them understand how they can improve.

Method

When crafting in-text comments, generally best practice is to ask the writer questions, rather than make statements. Asking questions opens a dialogue and invites students to reflect on the choices they've made, and why they have made them. Fundamentally, this encourages them to *think*, and to understand that they are part of the assessment process.

Example phrasing

How does this prove [...]?

How does this relate to [...]?

How can you [...] more effectively?

Why is [...] necessary?

Why do you [...]?

Why have you discussed [...] here, rather than [...] where it logically makes more sense?

What are you trying to say?

What exactly do you mean?

What is the main idea in this [paragraph/sentence]?

Where is your [...]?

End Comments

Purpose

At the end of a piece of student writing, instructors often provide a few sentences of feedback. End comments typically span approximately 4-5 sentences, depending on the scope and nature of the assignment. A short, 2-3 page piece of student writing may yield a shorter assessment, whereas a lengthier 20-page graduate essay will yield more. Like the in-text feedback, instructors need to strike the right balance of providing enough feedback while not overwhelming the student with too much feedback.

End comments frequently use the remarks and corrections within the text as a foundation to provide a broader assessment. By referring to specific patterns of error that have been marked within the text, an instructor can articulate in the end comment what the bigger picture is that all of these individual comments and corrections point towards, and help the student see how these two forms of feedback work together. *The purpose of end comments is to communicate how the student can improve by identifying his/her strengths and weaknesses.* The comments also help substantiate the grade the assignment has earned.

Content

An instructor's end comments generally stem from his/her pedagogical philosophy and therefore vary widely in tone and structure. End comments should contain criticism on the content of the assignment, as well as on the quality of the writing itself.

In order for the assessment to lead to student improvement, end comments require specificity and concrete language. For example, telling students they need to work on "grammar" gives them a vague direction, whereas telling them they need to fix their subject-verb agreement errors gives them something specific they can research and repair. In other words, the assessment the student receives can either enable or disable his/her next steps towards becoming a better writer. Whenever possible, the instructor should refer to specific page numbers, or paragraphs, or in-text marks that demonstrate the error/s that the end comments are discussing.

Instructors also want to detail specific errors for the students because this encourages them to understand something they often don't: that these errors are typically not isolated to this particular assignment and will persist in future writing unless the student corrects them. This helps students distinguish writing as a process and a skill that needs cultivation.

Method

There are many ways to organize end comments. Having a formula can be useful, but often each individual essay will dictate the scheme in which the assessment is provided. As always, be as specific as possible. Here are 2 possible methods to organize feedback in the end comments:

Strengths and Weaknesses: Begin the end comments with a sentence relaying the strength/s of the piece, followed by a sentence (or multiple) detailing the weaknesses. Discussing the course content as well as the prose in both of these categories will obviously yield the most feedback for the student, but again, each essay is unique and will often direct the instructor's hand. A concluding sentence can communicate, specifically, what a student needs to work on in his/her future assignments, thereby supporting their understanding that writing is a process.

Assignment: A 5-page argumentative essay, supported by research, about the use of performance enhancing drugs in professional sports.

Example End Comments:

Your essay is clear: the sequencing of your information is logical, and you create direct topic sentences that your paragraphs follow-through on. Keep this up. Also, your analysis of how spectators contribute to the use of PEDs is insightful – good work. My chief criticism here in is a lack of credible sources to support your argument; see page 34 of the course reader for a review of this information (something we covered in class), and my comments on your bibliography for examples. Also, I'd like you to work on employing a more academic and less conversational tone in your writing. Make sure you distinguish between oral and written communication. See my comments and marks within for examples, and let me know if you have any questions.

Content and Prose: If an essay demonstrates an obvious discrepancy between the quality of content and the quality of prose, then an instructor may want to organize his/her end comments following that format. It is not uncommon for some students to have an excellent grasp of the material, but their essay is full of grammatical and/or stylistic errors. The opposite is also true. In these cases, instructors may want to clearly distinguish between these two components in their end comments since the essay itself demonstrates such a discrepancy between them. The end comments can conclude with a short yet specific list of what the student needs to work on in his/her future writing.

Assignment: A 5-page argumentative essay, supported by research, about the use of performance enhancing drugs in professional sports.

Example End Comments:

In the first few pages here you do a good job using concrete info (i.e. specific players) to discuss this topic; however, this info, and your sources, simply proves that competitors use PEDs, not why this practice needs to be stopped (which is what your thesis promises to prove). You need to provide evidence for your argument other than simply saying that PED use is “embarrassing”(pg.3). That said, I see improvement in your sentence crafting here – very few of your sentences are scrambled which is a big improvement from your last essay (see pg.2). In your next essay I'd like you to work on your imprecise and/or poor word choices (see pg. 1), as well as creating a more convincing concluding paragraph (pg. 2,3). See my other comments/corrections throughout and let me know if you have any questions.

Example phrasing

While the content and organization of end comments should be tailored to each individual piece of writing, it can be helpful to have some generic phrasing to draw from. *Whenever possible, refer to specific paragraphs or page numbers that demonstrate the identified strength or weakness.*

This essay demonstrates excellent [...].

I especially like [...].

The primary strength of this paper is [...]; keep doing this.

While you do a good job of [...], your [...] is the chief strength of this paper.

Good work overall: your essay is [...], [...], and [...].

However, you are having trouble with [...].

Unfortunately this paper lacks [...].

[...] is a pattern of error here and needs to be remedied.

Despite these strengths, this essay [...].

In terms of the paper topic, you [...].

In terms of your prose, you [...].

These errors indicate that [...].

Overall, what these problems suggest is [...].

I'd like you to work on [x, y, and z].

In your next assignment, I'd like you to pay particular attention to [...].

Phrasing for particularly poor and/or sloppy work:

This essay reads as a first draft.

This is not up to academic standards.

This is not of passing quality.

Your essay is unpolished and needs much more attention to the details of editing.

Some helpful verbs:

The following verbs can be helpful when identifying a student's strengths and weaknesses in the end comments.

Employ

Indicate

Exemplify

Address

Claim

Contend

Assert

Marshal

Analyze

Acknowledge

Emphasize

Recommend

Prove

Develop

Illustrate

Argue

Report

Urge

Demonstrate

Clarify

Reveal

Support

Suggest

Observe

General best practices

- ✓ Address student by name
- ✓ Start with something positive, a specific strength
- ✓ Balance positive and negative feedback
- ✓ Balance the quantity of feedback: provide enough for the student to learn from, but not so much that he/she is overwhelmed
- ✓ Conclude with a short list of what to work on in the future

Further ideas

- ✓ Use the end comments to diagnose one specific paragraph in the assignment (marked in the text with an asterisk and “see end comments”) that is representative of a quality found throughout the paper.
- ✓ In the margin of the paper, write the chapter of the style manual where the student will find a discussion of the error in that line/lines of text.
- ✓ The Writing Center has a series of handouts (available online) that explain common writing errors. Instructors can include an appropriate handout when returning graded papers.
- ✓ Some instructors sign their name at the conclusion of the comments.

Rubrics

Purpose

A rubric is effective in making writing assessment *concrete and specific*, rather than abstract.

There are many benefits to rubrics:

- They help the instructor know what he/she is looking for.
- They provide clear expectations for the student to work against.
- They help the student understand the connection between his/her product and the instructor's feedback.

Method

While an instructor needs to assess both content *and* the quality of prose, this document will only discuss the latter in detail, as content assessment varies widely by paper topic and discipline.

However, here are some common criteria for assessing the content of a paper:

- Central Argument
- Development
- Support
- Research
- Assignment Fulfillment

When assessing prose, there are many categories of criteria. Rubric development stems from the purpose of the assignment, and the pedagogical philosophy of the instructor. Following is a list of sample criteria and a list of descriptors that instructors may choose from when creating a rubric to evaluate student writing.

Criteria

The following is a comprehensive list of the criteria an instructor can assess in a student paper. It is organized as a zooming lens, moving from global to local criteria.

Organization	•the logical sequencing of information
Focus	•the ability to stay on topic
Tone	•the writer’s attitude toward the subject (and reader)
Paragraph Development	•the crafting of focused and fully-developed paragraphs
Sentence Crafting	•the construction of clear and effective sentences
Grammar	•the structural rules of a language
Mechanics	•the conventions governing the technical aspects of writing, such as punctuation and spelling
Style	• the purposeful crafting of sentences and paragraphs to enhance the communication of ideas
Word Choice	•the effectiveness, and breadth, of word choice
Proofreading	•reading in order to detect errors, particularly easily corrected ones
Integration of Borrowed Material	•how the author incorporates borrowed information into his/her own prose
Documentation	•the citation of borrowed material, guided by a specific set of principles (APA format, MLA format, etc.)

Instructors must keep in mind that they need to balance the feedback between the quality of prose and the content; they also want to avoid overwhelming students with too much feedback. Therefore, instructors are not likely to use all of these criteria in their rubrics. Depending on pedagogical philosophy, some instructors might believe that categories like Proofreading are implicit in the assessment and do not need to be made explicit in a rubric. Categories like Word Choice might be omitted in science writing assessments because the purpose of those assignments doesn’t often necessitate breadth of vocabulary. A common practice is to pair complementary criteria (examples to follow).

Depending on the genre of writing, the basic components of an essay can serve as criteria options for the rubric as well:

- Title
- Thesis Statement
- Introduction
- Body Paragraphs
- Conclusion

Again, these can stand alone in the rubric or be grouped together, depending on the nature of the assignment (example to follow).

Generic Descriptors

Following is a list of descriptive words that instructors can include in their rubrics. These can also be helpful when crafting in-text comments and end comments.

Reflexive descriptors (e.g. “convincing” or “not convincing”):

Convincing	insightful	reasoned	creative	defined	compelling
thoughtful	focused	appropriate	engaging	critical	developed
credible	consistent	effective	intelligent	sophisticated	purposeful
Logical	strategic	clear	controlled	comprehensive	

Descriptors to convey average performance:

Adequate	sufficient	competent	basic	simple	minimum
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Descriptors to convey weaknesses:

Limited	inappropriate	unresponsive	superficial	shallow	minimal
Incomplete	irrelevant	ineffective	redundant	vague	inaccurate
Incoherent	illogical	underdeveloped			

Example Rubrics: Narrative

Example #1²

	Excellent	Good	Satisfactory	Unsatisfactory
Central Argument	Clearly defined central argument consistently insightful, reasoned, and creative	A fresh, compelling and thoughtful argument	Focused idea, generally responsive to and appropriate for prompt; may lack depth	Idea is limited in scope or unresponsive/ Inappropriate to prompt; may be too superficial
Research: Details, Examples, Evidence from sources	Fully researches the subject, employing excellent sources, engages the subject, while providing an abundance of critical detailed examples	Uses research to develop the subject and sufficiently develops examples to illustrate ideas. Sources are all credible, convincing	Adequate research to offer some support with details. Some sources may not be overly credible	Minimal research, incomplete or irrelevant support. Questionable and/or illegitimate sources
Components of Argument	Consistently and skillfully uses all the components of argument to fully develop the writer's meaning and convince the reader	Uses the components of argument in a thoughtful and convincing way	Contains an attempt at refutation, as well as the rhetorical appeals, although not in a fully developed (or overly convincing) manner	Counterargument and/or refutation are absent or ineffective; lacks an effective use of the rhetorical appeals
Logical Sequencing of Ideas	Develops essay and paragraph form to sequence the reader through the material convincingly	Uses essay and paragraph form to develop a sequence of ideas that is logical and purposeful	Uses essay and paragraphs in a logical sequence, though not always controlled	Does not control essay and paragraph forms to produce a clear logical sequence
Grammar and Mechanics	Complete control of grammar and mechanics of writing: nearly error free	Strong command of grammar and mechanics: a few errors, but no patterns of error	Competent in grammar and mechanics. Errors do not obscure meaning or undermine authority	Ungrammatical sentences or errors that may obscure meaning, or undermine authority
Sentence Development	Excellent control of sentence development; fully and effectively varied and developed	Controlled and varied sentence development	Solid sentence-writing skills, some emerging development	Sentences are clear, but without much variation or development
Tone, and vocabulary	Fully developed tone demonstrating the writer's involvement; a broad range of diction that contributes to tone and meaning.	An appropriate, identifiable tone; accurate diction that demonstrate some range	Fulfills minimum academic expectations, some redundant or imprecise diction	Inappropriate tone for the audience; some vague wording; imprecise or inaccurate diction
Integration of Borrowed Material	Skillfully chooses, integrates, and documents material to engage audience in conversation	Appropriately chooses, uses, and documents borrowed material, but may not always integrate effectively	The material chosen is either not overly effective, or there may be some minor errors in integration or documentation	Borrowed material is either absent, unincorporated, or undocumented

² Borrowed from Dr. Cindy Baer, San Jose State University

Example #2³

Criteria	Not Passing	Needs Work	Adequate	Good	Excellent
Assignment Fulfillment Did the writer address the task at hand?					
Central Idea/Thesis Is a clear statement of the main point in the beginning of the essay that gives a general sense of what the essay will be about? It should tell what the paper is going to be about, create the focus for the essay, and predict what will be in the body of the essay.					
Organization/Focus How are the ideas arranged? Does the writer stay on topic within the paragraphs? Does the writer carry the ideas expressed in the thesis consistently through the paper? Are the ideas clear?					
Development/Support Are the body paragraphs PIE paragraphs? Are the body paragraphs fully developed with reasons, illustrations, examples, details, evidence, explanations, analysis, and/or interpretation? Do the body paragraphs support the thesis?					
Sentence Craft Are the sentences combined and developed—not short and choppy? Does the writer combine sentences with coordinators, subordinators, NPAs, verbals, adjective clauses? Do the sentences show instead of just tell?					
Surface Issues/Proofreading Is the paper basically free of grammar, usage, punctuation, and spelling errors?					
MLA Does the paper follow the basic standards of MLA in formatting and citation? All sources should be cited and listed on the Works Cited Page properly. Sources should be credible. The front page should have the proper heading and page numbering.					

³ Borrowed from Sarah Prasad, San Jose State University

Example Rubric: Numeric⁴

- 1. Title, Introduction & Thesis Statement** (out of 10) _____
(Has an engaging title and introduction. Thesis maps out the essay)
- 2. Follows *all* Directions of Assignment** (out of 10) _____
(Essay fulfills all requirements and answers all parts of prompt)
- 3. MLA Formatting & In-Text Citations** (out of 10) _____
(Essay is in MLA format; all quotes are correctly incorporated)
- 4. Paragraph Development** (out of 10) _____
(Each paragraph has logical organization, coherence and contains clear topic sentences and transitions)
- 5. Supporting Textual Examples** (out of 10) _____
(All points are supported by specific examples from the book)
- 6. Length Requirement & Conclusion** (out of 10) _____
(Essay is no less than 3 full pages and contains an effective conclusion)
- 7. Comprehension & Ideas** (out of 10) _____
(Essay reflects comprehension of the topic and expresses original ideas)
- 8. Word Choice & Sentence Crafting** (out of 10) _____
(All sentences are clear and make clear sense; writer uses interesting vocabulary and specific language)
- 9. Grammar & Mechanics** (out of 10) _____
(Essay is free of all grammar and punctuation errors)
- 10. Proofreading & Spelling** (out of 10) _____
(Essay is well proofread and free of all spelling mistakes)

Total Points = _____

Grade = _____

⁴ Borrowed from Catharine Jones, West Valley Community College

Further resources

Books:

- *The Everyday Writer* by Andrea Lunsford
- *The Practical Tutor* by Emily Meyer and Louise Z. Smith
- *Responding to Student Writers* by Nancy Sommers

Online:

- The Writing Center at San Jose State University: <http://www.sjsu.edu/writingcenter/>
- The Online Writing Lab at Purdue University (OWL): <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/>

In person:

- I am available to talk or meet with any instructor that may have questions about this document, or a particular challenge with providing feedback on student writing.

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