



Speaking My Mind: In Defense of Rubrics

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In Defense of Rubrics

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Rubrics—particularly writing rubrics—have come under some criticism lately, some of it justified, much of it not. When thoughtfully crafted and used with discretion and understanding, rubrics can be among the most useful instructional tools we have. They give us direction and a basis for conversation. They cause us to go deep inside performance and question our traditional beliefs about what we define as proficient. They keep us honest, for when we put our thinking on paper, there is no longer a place to hide. Best of all, they serve as a guide to revision, giving student writers an insider's view of what makes writing work.

A rubric captures the essence of performance at various levels. Good writing may go beyond the rubric, or reflect qualities a rubric cannot capture in simple terms. No assessment (score, grade, narrative description, or conference) reveals *everything*—but each offers useful insights.

Like any instructional tool or strategy, rubrics can be misused, even wielded as weapons to justify the closing of a door; a *good* rubric, however, shows a writer how to open that door and come inside. And therein lies the key: It has to be good.

Rubrics are not all alike. Some are vaguely written, shrouded in jargon, more accusatory than helpful. Some emphasize a formulaic approach to writing or focus on trivia at the expense of substance, and to the extent they influence instruction, this can have devastating ramifications. The quality of voice, for instance, is omitted from many rubrics because it is thought too difficult to define. Yet Donald M. Murray tells us that “voice is the quality, more than any other, that allows us to recognize excellent writing” (21). Surely a quality

that gives us a reason to read in the first place should be at the center of our writing assessment and instruction. Good rubrics embrace what we value most deeply, always.

Because it demands reflecting on and describing performance with some precision, creating a rubric teaches us to think. For this reason, whenever possible, we should include students in the process, encouraging them to examine writing from a reader's point of view. Writing is, after all, the making of reading. Sketchy, formulaic rubrics are created by critics whose primary concern is the rapid scoring of someone *else's* work; instructionally useful rubrics are created by readers who think reflectively about how to make their own and others' writing better.

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As we become increasingly proficient at reading like writers, our rubrics change to mirror that new thinking. Lucy McCormick Calkins has said that rubrics drafted by others work best as “starting points from which we make our own rubrics” (325). I agree. As anyone who has developed (or revised) a rubric will tell you, the journey is a gradually unfolding revelation, during which we continually discover new ways to express what we think and feel. A fifth-grade student began with one rubric's definition of voice as “passion” and “flavor,” then added her personal touch: “It's when you feel the exclamation point even though it's not there.”

Over time, all reflective readers personalize rubrics. For me, voice is a moment of truth, or what I sometimes call “the chill factor.” Some years ago, an eighth-grade student wrote an alternately poignant and comical story about an orphaned 4-H calf, Ginweed, that he had raised to show in the state fair—where she won three ribbons. On show day, Ginweed wore the expensive leather halter the writer’s parents had bought for his birthday. The night following the show, fate and the story took a turn. Ginweed became entangled in the rope that

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bound her, fell backward, and hanged herself. The writer tells us, “I buried her with the halter and two of the three ribbons she had won. Later that night I went back to her grave. ‘Ginweed,’ I said, ‘we had a heck of a good time together.’ And I walked away from the grassless patch of

earth” (Spandel, *9 Rights* 75). Those simple lines haunt me still. I have kept the paper for twenty-two years, and “a piece I choose to keep” is part of my personal definition for voice.

When students design and use their own rubrics, they read, process text, and view their writing differently. They come to see those rubrics less as rigid requirements and more as *writing guides*. They take charge of their writing process and no longer depend on us to choreograph their revision.

Writing *is* revision, after all. If we cannot teach students to revise, we cannot, in the truest sense, teach them to write. If students think that revision consists of “fixing the spelling” or “making a paper longer,” they may never write a piece that will cause someone to gasp or cry or shout, “You’ve got to hear this.” Without hope of such response, why write at all? Students who learn to think about such issues as clarity and detail, leads and conclusions, voice and audience are in a much better position to revise their writing with purpose and skill. Rubrics that address these issues in clear language show students the *kinds of things* writers do when they revise. Students hunger for and need this information. Donna Flood, director of professional development for ESU#3 in Omaha,

asks, “Would you ever invite someone to dinner and not provide them with directions? That’s what we were doing . . . we were inviting children to the learning buffet and telling them that if they could find their way, they were welcome to join us. But if they didn’t happen to have the skills necessary to find their way, then—too bad for them. They were out of luck.”

It is easy to be dismissive about rubrics if we view them as mere lists of expectations. They are much more than that. In reality, a writing guide has *three* parts: (1) the written criteria we commit to paper, (2) the examples that show our criteria in action and serve as models for students, and (3) the reader who acts as an interpreter. All are critical.

Consider examples. Often I have asked teachers in workshops, “How helpful would it have been to you *as a writer* if your teachers had given you two samples of writing—one showing what they were looking for in, say, a research paper, and one showing problems to avoid?” The room invariably comes alive with nods and verbal assents. When students ask what makes writing successful, we need to not only describe it but also show them—through modeling or written text—how effective writing can *look*. This is an issue of fairness. Further, if we do not put our thinking on paper, let’s not kid ourselves into believing that we are not using rubrics. We’re just keeping them “tucked away in our mind’s eye” (Flood). All of us look for *something* in writing. If we do not make that something known, we say to students, “I can’t describe it,” “I prefer not to reveal what I am looking for,” or “You figure it out.” None is a very satisfying answer to a struggling writer.

Alfie Kohn has said that “[r]ubrics are, above all, a tool to promote standardization, to turn teachers into grading machines or at least allow them to pretend that what they are doing is exact and objective” (12). I could not disagree more. Using a rubric well is an interactive, interpretive process, in which a teacher’s wisdom, insight, experience, and judgment play an important role. Far from becoming robotlike in their response, good readers use criteria as reminders, then look diligently for the tiniest sparks of voice, an unexpected phrase or connection, the trail of the writer’s thinking.

It is ridiculous to imagine that we are somehow ruled by the very rubrics we create. Rubrics cannot inhibit our understanding of writing any more than a precise map can tell us where and when to travel. They record what we know *now*, but they cannot preclude exploration of new territory. True, rubrics help us overcome arbitrariness, inconsistency, and flat-out bias (“I hate dog stories,” “I don’t like this writer’s attitude,” “If he can’t edit better than this, I’m not interested in his ideas”). They do not, however, require teachers to abandon individuality or cease responding on a personal level—as if *anything* could do this. No teacher I know believes that rubrics make us totally objective. The good news is that subjectivity is not wrong or even harmful—unless we use it as an excuse not to make our scores or grades defensible. We *do* need to offer reasons for our reactions to writing and to show that those reasons are based on sound criteria. One of my colleagues received, as a young student, an A on a piece because the teacher said it was “nice to see type-written work.” Another received an F because her otherwise “captivating” story was written in purple ink. Rubrics make us accountable for scores or grades that affect human lives.

Maja Wilson suggests that rubrics “encourage conformity and an overly formal style” (38). This can only happen if we use language in our rubrics that affirms the value of such things. If we describe good writing with phrases such as “[t]houghtful structure guides reader through text” or “[t]akes reader on a journey of understanding,” we encourage writing as thinking, writing that is individual, compelling, and formula-free (Spandel, *Creating* 51). Wilson adds that “a fixed list enforces only the values of which we are conscious, dooming our unconscious values to repressed obscurity” (41). This is a seductive argument since the first part is true; we can hardly put things into a rubric of which we are not yet conscious. Far from “dooming our unconscious values to repressed obscurity,” however, we must seek to make ourselves aware of how we respond to writing and why so that we can share our thinking with students. Shared thinking is the foundation of writing instruction. We must also let students know that a writing guide does not put a ceiling on performance; many student writ-

ers, like the eighth grader with his little 4-H calf, will exceed all expectations.

Wilson also suggests that our job as teachers is “to help students realize what they cannot yet do” (30). I think our job is something much harder—to help students discover what they *can* do, and then to build on it. Many students already recognize their writing faults; too few recognize their strengths. For many teachers and students, a rubric offers a whole new perspective, like a window opening for the first time. “I always responded to this special something in my students’ work,” a sixth-grade teacher told me. “Now I have a name for it—voice.”

The real problem with current writing assessment lies not with rubrics but with what we value. Ultimately, we do not fail to reward risk taking because a rubric tells us we should. We fail to reward risk taking because we do not value it enough—yet. It isn’t rubrics pushing us around

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but our own lack of courage, our unwillingness to let go of tired formulas and embrace the complexity of truly fine writing. Too often, in on-demand writing, we do not honor design or thinking or voice as much as we should because these things can almost never be assessed in a rapid, assessment-at-a-glance fashion. Uncovering such qualities demands astute, perceptive reading—and time. It demands believing at the core that risk taking is just as important as spelling well. Once we believe that fully, our rubrics will echo our beliefs. Until then, we will continue to reward dimensions of writing that are easy to track even when we are pressured or tired—a ponderously obvious organizational structure, formulaic transitions, summary conclusions. Attending to such features makes our assessment task easier.

Easier should not be part of the bargain. What we demand of our students as writers we must demand of ourselves as readers. A rubric is ultimately a two-way commitment, a reader-writer contract that says, “If you write with thought and with heart, I will understand, and I will hear you. I

will follow where you lead and reflect on the connections you make. I will allow you to teach me.”

Let's not abandon rubrics. Let's make them better by ensuring that they honor what good readers think important in writing. Let's also create an assessment approach that allows space for thinking: opportunity for reflection, personal selection of a topic, time for true revision and editing. We have seen what students cannot do, given time restraints and topics to which they have no attachment. Do we not want to see what they *can* do under the best of circumstances? Finally, let's respond to students' writing in a way that mirrors how we would wish someone to respond to us, with consistent attention to what matters coupled

with an unwavering belief that many will soar beyond all current visions of success.

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Vicki Spandel has been a language arts teacher, technical writer, journalist, and educational consultant. She is the author of more than thirty books on writing instruction and assessment, including *The 9 Rights of Every Writer* (Heinemann), *Creating Writers* and *Creating Young Writers* (Pearson), *The Write Traits Classroom Kits* (Great Source), and the upcoming *Ready, Set, Write* (First Choice). She makes her home at the edge of the breathtaking Three Sisters Wilderness in Central Oregon.

English Journal Receives Two National Awards for Editorial Quality



English Journal, the official publication of the Secondary Section of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), has earned two 2006 APEX Awards of Excellence. The Magazine and Journal Writing award recognizes editorial quality, as demonstrated in the May 2005 issue. The second Award of Excellence was received for Regular Departments and Columns, and the winning entry was "Teaching English in the World: The Post-9/11 English Teacher" (March 2005).

The eighteenth annual Awards for Publication Excellence Competition was sponsored by Communication Concepts, Inc. Nearly 5,000 entries were received. Information on the competition and entries from the Grand Award winners are available at <http://www.apexawards.com>.

EJ 40 Years Ago

Why Do *You* Teach Poetry?

We have failed, by and large, to convince our students to be readers of poetry. Surely they don't buy verse, nor do they check out collections of poems for leisure reading. That even our superior students are sadly indifferent to poetry adds pain to our failure.

Nonetheless, we continue teaching it. Reasons for teaching poetry range from our docile acceptance of what is given us (in anthologies and courses of study) to intense personal commitments to poetry for its wisdom and delight. Were each teacher to answer the question, "Why teach poetry?," our teaching of poetry would improve.

Stephen Dunning. "Why Poetry?" *EJ* 55.2 (1966): 158–61.