

Student Perceptions of Analytical Grading Rubrics for Academic Writing

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Abstract

As universities strive to become ever more transparent in terms of how they evaluate student work, it has been recognised that grading rubrics have an important role to play. Broadly speaking, the literature suggests that when used in the process of writing, rubrics can enhance teaching and learning. Indeed, there is a growing body of research investigating student perceptions of such rubrics, and this paper builds upon this work. It reports the views of one group of second-year undergraduates about the grading rubrics that they had used throughout their first-year academic writing course at International Christian University (ICU) in Tokyo, Japan. Their responses to a survey clearly indicate that such rubrics provide clarity in terms of what is required of a task and also what needs improving. Rubrics are perceived as being fair and helping students appreciate that learning is a process. Consequently, it is suggested that the template used in this set of rubrics could be transferred to a second-year course to provide greater consistency in terms of assessment.

A fundamental principle of good teaching practice is that students in all disciplines and for all assignment types should be provided with timely and meaningful feedback (Stevens and Levi, 2005). One way in which this can be achieved is through grading rubrics. Much research has been done on the value of using rubrics, but little of that research has focused on second-language users (Becker, 2016). The English for Liberal Arts programme (ELA) at International Christian University (ICU), Tokyo, teaches academic writing to such second language users and has, for the last several years, used common assessment rubrics for its Course Wide Assignments (CWAs) in the largest of its programmes, Academic Reading and Writing Stream 3 (ARW3). The rubrics have thus met the need for consistency, which is an essential element of any programme. However, although they have become an established part of ARW3 teaching materials and have been discussed informally, their effectiveness for students has not been closely examined. Therefore, this paper arose out of a curiosity about student perceptions of course-wide grading rubrics, with the objective of revising the rubrics if necessary and possibly creating a multi-purpose grading template.

Grading Rubrics

As Garcia-Ros et al. (2021) note, the use of grading rubrics has increased in university contexts. The overall significance of using grading rubrics is clear because, as Phakiti and Leung (2024, p. 4) state, "All assessment activities have power and consequences," implying a powerful washback effect. Regardless of the discipline and the assignment type, it is true that

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grading rubrics have the same fundamental purpose and core characteristics. They clarify for students and instructors what is necessary to be successful in assignments with regard to general requirements and specific sub-sets of those requirements (Panadero & Jonsson, 2013). For example, a rubric may, broadly speaking, require students to show evidence of critical thinking and, within this category, explicitly state which element(s) of critical thinking should be demonstrated. Moreover, rubrics comprise criteria that explain how grades will be awarded (numerical or otherwise) with descriptions of different levels of achievement (Zhang et al., 2024).

Beyond the broad commonalities discussed above, grading rubrics can be categorised into two different types: holistic and analytical. A holistic rubric presents a single grade reflecting an impression of the work overall, for example, A, B, C, D or E, with a description of the requirements for each grade (Hima & Saputro, 2017). In contrast, an analytical rubric assigns grades to several elements of the task, meaning that a student can score highly on one criterion, while they may be awarded a low score on another (Hima & Saputro, 2017). For example, in a presentation, a speaker may be awarded 4 out of 5 for their use of evidence, but only 2 out of 5 for their ability to organise ideas clearly and logically. Scores are then added to reach a final grade.

A further important distinction needs to be made here concerning the purpose of grading rubrics and, more specifically, the nature of summative and formative assessment. According to Phakiti and Leung (2024), summative assessment is essentially an appraisal of knowledge at the end of an assignment, such as upon completion of an essay. This may, of course, also coincide with the end of a course. Assignments are not usually revised and resubmitted as a result of summative assessment. Furthermore, Phakiti and Leung (2024) explain that formative assessment, in contrast, is used to monitor student progress to inform future teaching. However, the two types of assessment are not to be viewed as mutually exclusive but can be used to complement each other since formative assessment rubrics help students complete a task that will be evaluated with a summative rubric (Dolin et al., 2018). For example, in the process of writing an essay, students may need to submit a list of sources, an outline, and a draft. All of these are types of formative assessment leading to the final paper, for which the grade will be summative for that assignment. Given the different purposes for formative and summative rubrics, they may be designed differently. However, this discussion lies beyond the scope of this paper. More interestingly, perhaps, summative assessment may inform a student when they undertake a subsequent assignment and could, in this sense, be considered to have a formative aspect. Thus, it seems that all rubrics have the potential to be formative, and indeed, Panadero and Jonsson (2013) argue that rubrics are especially important in terms of their formative function. Not only do they help teachers identify areas of weakness to address when teaching, but they also inform students how successfully they have performed on different elements of the task and where they need to focus their attention as they work towards the final or subsequent product. However, Wang (2016) makes the point that for rubrics to be fully effective, they need to be shared with students before they submit work. In fact, for students to be able to demonstrate to the best of their ability their current state of knowledge and skills, they should understand the teacher's expectations as expressed in the grading rubric before they embark on a task. This is an obvious but nonetheless important point if teachers view the rubrics as having a formative function.

Several writers have made claims regarding the benefits of grading rubrics. At a macro level, Panadero and Jonsson (2013) assert that rubrics can be important in the constructive alignment of the syllabus, teaching, and assessment. Further, Becker (2016) states that they lead to greater grading consistency both within and across classes. Focussing more specifically on

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students, Panadero and Jonsson (2013) argue that rubrics lead to greater transparency regarding the expectations of an assignment and thus reduce anxiety for students. Rubrics also provide clearer feedback and, therefore, can promote autonomy in terms of students knowing what to focus on in future assignments. In addition, Mphahlele (2022) suggests that students who pay careful attention to rubrics are engaged in deep learning and are thus able to apply what they have learned to different contexts. Perhaps the most important point here is that students need to engage with and apply the rubrics to fully understand them and to maximise their formative value (Zhang et al., 2024). Interestingly, little of the research into the pedagogical value of rubrics has taken place in second-language contexts (Becker, 2016; Wang, 2016).

One area that has received attention is students' perceptions of grading rubrics in higher education. On the positive side, students report that rubrics help them to focus on the task's key requirements, particularly when rubrics are introduced early in the task process (Atkinson & Lim, 2013; Leader & Clinton, 2018; Pang et al., 2024). In addition, students perceive rubrics as fairer (Garcia-Ros et al., 2021; Leader & Clinton, 2018). Students also report that rubrics help them identify points for improvement (Atkinson & Lim, 2013; Taylor et al., 2024). Finally, applying 'formative' rubrics can help students better understand that learning is a process and that there are stages to be gone through before completing a task (Garcia-Ros et al., 2021; Pang et al., 2024). On the other hand, Taylor et al. (2024) report that student perceptions of rubrics varied depending on how and whether teachers introduced the rubrics. Additionally, some students reported that they found the language of rubrics unclear.

What emerges from the above discussion is that grading rubrics are becoming common in higher education and can be an important pedagogical tool. Readers should note, however, that some educators express resistance to using rubrics (see Panadero & Johnson, 2020). Moreover, despite our own convictions regarding the value of rubrics, we realised we were unsure of our students' perceptions. Consequently, we decided to survey a group of students about their experience of and attitudes towards grading rubrics so that we would be able to improve both their design and their use and possibly create a general template.

Background to the Survey

In the ELA programme, first-year students take foundation courses to prepare for their university careers. Academic Reading and Writing (ARW) and Reading and Content Analysis (RCA) are two core courses that students must complete before they can take their final Research Writing (RW) course. In this way, ARW and RCA are considered preparatory academic reading and writing courses that ready students to tackle a 2,000-word research paper on a topic of their choice in RW. However, although ARW3 and RCA3 use course-wide grading rubrics for assignments, RW does not. The rationale for this is unclear, but currently, each RW instructor creates grading rubrics for their assignments. One anticipated outcome of our research was that the data about students' reactions to ARW3 rubrics might inform us how to improve the design and use of not only ARW3 but also rubrics for RW. This information could then be shared with other RW instructors to design a common rubric, should this be thought desirable.

Most ELA students take RW for one term in their second year, and we decided to survey a group of sophomore students taking RW in the Spring Term. The 17 students were in Stream 3, the largest of the ELA's four streams, with a language ability equivalent to an IELTS score of between 5 and 6.5 when they entered ICU. All students had completed three terms of ARW3

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and RCA3, which meant that they were able to answer questions about their recent shared experience of grading rubrics in the first year. More specifically, we asked the students about the grading rubrics used for their ARW3 essay assignments since RW also develops and assesses academic writing skills.

We created a survey comprising questions that asked whether students looked at grading rubrics and, if so, whether they understood the rubrics and how they used them (see Appendix 1). The survey was delivered in week six of a ten-week RW course before they submitted an outline of their research paper. Because we specifically wanted to know about the students' perceptions of ARW3 rubrics, the RW rubrics had not yet been shared, thus avoiding confusion in responses. To further ensure that students would comment on their ARW3 grading rubrics, before they took the survey they were asked to look at the rubric for the final essay they had submitted in ARW3 and were also shown a slide of the ARW3 final grading rubric. They then discussed the survey questions in small groups and finally answered the survey individually. The students were animated during their discussions and seemed to enjoy the opportunity to reflect on their behaviours.

Results and Discussion

Overall, responses to the survey provide extremely positive feedback in terms of how and when rubrics are being used in ARW. In what follows, we have organised the responses around the aforementioned findings in the literature regarding the perceptions of students in higher education: rubrics help focus students on task requirements, help students see what they need to improve, are perceived as being fair, and help develop student understanding that learning is a process.

One important potential function of a rubric is that it can help students identify task requirements. This was evident in a number of the student responses, with sample answers (unedited) including: "I read them to clarify the goal of the assignment." and "To deepen my understanding of the goal of my task, I always read." Several students noted that when first receiving the assignment brief (a document outlining the task requirements, word count, due dates, and the grading rubric), they were less focussed on the grading rubric. As one noted, "I read the assignment brief, not the rubric." Another stated that "I read grading rubric before writing my essays but not before reading or researching." This strategic attention to information reveals that students prioritise the information that is needed at particular stages in the task. This is an important transferable skill for subsequent courses and professional contexts beyond university. The role of the teacher in clarifying the task and rubric was also noted. For example: "My teacher had time for checking and explaining grading rubric." Moreover, the issue of distributing grading rubrics in a timely manner is apparent.

In addition to paying attention to the grading rubrics, it is essential that students understand them so as to be able to apply them effectively. Again, students' responses indicated that the role of the teacher here is important. This may be even more the case since the rubrics are written in English, a second language for the majority of our students. By devoting class time to reviewing the rubrics, it is more likely that students will check their understanding and ask questions to clarify meaning, as evidenced by one response: "Usually teacher gave us time to read the rubrics in the classtime, so if I have any question I would ask them." That fourteen respondents reported that they could understand the rubrics suggests that ARW3 teachers give students time to discuss them. It also underlines the importance of rubric consistency across the three first-year terms in ARW3. That is, students' familiarity with and understanding of the

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rubrics is enhanced because the rubric language and formatting remain broadly similar as students are scaffolded in the academic writing process.

In fact, as part of the process approach to writing, ARW3 requires students to submit an outline and at least one draft before the final draft. All submissions are graded with rubrics, and it is expected that students will incorporate feedback into subsequent stages of their work. Given that the rubrics are intended to be used in a formative manner, we were also interested to know whether rubrics help students to identify points for improvement, as reported in some of the literature. Question 7 in the survey asked students about this. Responses were more equivocal than in previous questions, with 11 students responding that they were somewhat but not completely helpful in this regard. As one student wrote: “Not exactly “clear” because usually there’s no comment about why the teacher scored this score. (ex. if it’s 4/5 → what was the -1)”. Another student wrote that “grading rubric そのものにはここをこう直したらいい等のくわしい個人用の説明はどうしても書くことができないため” (Since it is impossible to write a detailed personalized explanation in the grading rubric itself, such as how to fix this part, etc., it is not possible to write a personalized explanation in the grading rubric itself.). Thus, the grading rubric alone cannot necessarily perform its function as a formative assessment tool, and additional comments from the teacher are necessary, as discussed below.

One very significant point emerging from responses to Question 7 is the essential role of teachers’ comments to complement the grading rubric. For example, one student reported that “most teacher puts comments on the document and suggests where should I improve so that I can match the comment with grading rubric.” Another commented that, “Not only the score but also the comments made by the teacher are important for me to understand what to improve.” Question 9 required students to explore this idea further and asked whether teachers had made such additional comments. Only one student responded ‘no’. One typical response was that, “Usually teacher gave me the comments on the google documents and that make me easy to find where I need to fix, so it is very useful.” Therefore, teachers’ comments that explain the grades given in the rubric are extremely important for students to be able to identify what needs improving.

In addition to the above, we were interested to know how students perceived the rubrics in terms of how accurately they evaluated their work which in turn has implications in terms of perceptions of ‘fairness’. Question 8 asked specifically about the accuracy of the scoring based on the rubric. All but one student perceived the rubrics as accurate, with one typical comment being: “Usually when the score is low, I did not cover the point.” Another offered an important perspective about objectivity rather than subjectivity in grading: “I can tell that the grading is not only by teachers own discretion.” Overall, the students expressed high levels of trust in their teachers and their use of the grading rubrics. Again, having shared rubrics can only help to increase the sense of fairness in the grading process.

Conclusion

Our students’ perceptions of grading rubrics are generally in line with those reported in the literature. That is, they help clarify for students what is required for the task; there is a sense that they are fair, and they are formative in nature in that they indicate to students what needs improving, and they help reinforce the message that learning, and in particular writing, is a process. For this to be effective, rubrics must be made available to students in a timely manner.

One important point to emerge from the students’ responses is that additional teacher comments are an important complement to the rubrics, particularly in a second language context.

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No grading rubric can be exhaustive, given the creative and subjective nature of writing. It is impossible for a rubric to predict all aspects of student writing and all the aspects which they may need to improve. (Of course, teachers have discretion in terms of how they address elements that fall outside the rubric.) Therefore, additional comments about the writing are important so that students have a clearer understanding of a particular problem or weakness, and also of successful aspects of the writing. As well as teachers' comments helping students interpret the feedback from the grading rubrics, tutorials provide an opportunity for further clarification. Thus, the rubric, comments, and tutorial discussion together are effective opportunities for revising and improving their writing.

A more general point that we began to consider while writing this paper is the formative-summative assessment dichotomy. The more we considered this issue, the more we began to view the terms as two endpoints on a spectrum rather than a dichotomy. More specifically, it is not necessarily the assessment rubric that determines whether feedback is formative or summative, or to what extent. Rather, it is how teachers provide feedback, and how the students act on that feedback. For example, if a student chooses not to respond to feedback, regardless of its intended purpose, the feedback is summative, representing an endpoint in the learning process. Furthermore, a grading rubric can have different degrees of formative impact depending on how the teacher uses it. The ARW3 rubrics are designed to align with the learning outcomes and to scaffold student learning across the first year. In theory, they can be used as stand-alone feedback with no additional comments or tutorials. In such a case, it could be said that the rubric has the potential to be formative, provided the student acts on the feedback. However, such an approach is far less formative than one where teachers make additional comments and hold tutorials to deepen students' understanding of the grading. How they are used pedagogically is the most important way of ascertaining whether a grading rubric is formative or summative.

Overall, we were surprised by the positivity of the student responses about what was potentially an uninspiring academic subject. Their comments suggest they appreciate the standardised nature of the rubrics since the grading is perceived as fair and objective. Based on their reactions, we feel that we could now create an RW template that builds on the ARW3 rubrics. Judging from the current survey, we predict that students would be satisfied with that. However, thus far, we have only looked at analytical grading rubrics for writing assignments. It may also be helpful to run a trial to explore the potential benefits of using holistic grading rubrics, and whether analytical and holistic rubrics could complement each other in the feedback process. Again, students could be surveyed about their perceptions. Finally, an investigation of ARW teachers' perceptions and understanding of the issues discussed in this paper is an important area of future research.

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Appendix 1

ELA Grading Rubrics Survey Questions

1. Do you read the grading rubric before you do any researching, reading and writing?
2. Do you usually understand the ELA writing assignment grading rubrics?
3. Do you ask your teacher if you do not understand the grading rubric?
4. Do you check your writing using the grading rubric before you submit it?
5. When you read the grading rubric, do you understand what you need to do for the assignment?
6. When the draft has been returned to you, do you look at the score the teacher has given you for each part of the grading rubric?
7. Does the score on the rubric give you clear information about what you need to improve?
8. Do you think the scores given on the grading rubrics by your teachers are usually accurate?
9. In the past, have your teachers made additional comments on the rubric about your score (e.g. using the comment function on Google Docs)?
10. If you answered Yes to Q9, do you generally read the comments?
11. If you answered Yes to Q9, do you generally understand the comments?
12. If you answered Yes to Q9, what, if anything, do you do after you've read the comments?
13. Overall, do grading rubrics help you develop as an academic writer?