

Using Rubrics and Holistic Scoring of Writing

Jean S. Ketter
Grinnell College

Jean S. Ketter (introduced earlier) served on the NCTE Committee on Alternatives to Grading Student Writing.

Introduction

A number of writers in this collection discuss the use of rubrics or holistic scoring for classroom, schoolwide, or even districtwide assessment. In this workshop, you will examine and test an approach to evaluating student writing that you can use in your classroom as an alternative to placing letter grades on student papers. Although using holistic scoring as “high-stakes,” large-scale assessment is a contested practice, its use at the classroom level holds possibilities as a means of providing quick and informative feedback to students and of training students to evaluate their own and their peers’ writing. You will explore several topics that will help you make an informed decision about when and how to use holistic scoring in your teaching of writing.

Resources

In This Volume

Bauman, Marcy. Chapter 11: “What Grades Do for Us, and How to Do without Them.”

Blumner, Jacob S., and Francis Fritz. Chapter 16: “Students Using Evaluation in Their Writing Process.”

Young, Gail M. Chapter 15: “Using a Multidimensional Scoring Guide: A Win-Win Situation.”

Other Resources

Hourigan, Maureen M. “Poststructural Theory and Writing Assessment: ‘Heady, Esoteric Theory’ Revisited.” *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 18 (1991): 191–95.

- Huot, Brian A. "The Literature of Direct Writing Assessment: Major Concerns and Prevailing Trends." *Review of Educational Research* 60 (1990): 237–63.
- . "Reliability, Validity, and Holistic Scoring: What We Know and What We Need to Know." *College Composition and Communication* 41 (1990): 213.
- McKendy, Thomas. "Locally Developed Writing Tests and the Validity of Holistic Scoring." *Research in the Teaching of English* 26 (1992): 149–65.
- Prater, Doris, and William Padia. "Developing Parallel Holistic and Analytic Scoring Guides for Assessing Elementary Writing Samples." *Journal of Research and Development in Education* 17 (1983): 20–24.
- Purves, Alan. "Reflections on Research and Assessment in Written Composition." *Research in the Teaching of English* 26 (1992): 106–22.
- White, Edward M. *Teaching and Assessing Writing: Recent Advances in Understanding, Evaluating, and Improving Student Performance*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994.
- Williamson, Michael M., and Brian A. Huot. *Validating Holistic Scoring for Writing Assessment*. Cresskill: Hampton, 1993.

Discussion Topics

- On the basis of your reading, what is holistic grading/scoring of writing or scoring using rubrics, and what do you see as the advantages and disadvantages? How does developing a scoring guide or rubric provide assessment information for both students and teachers?
- Many schools and districts collect a writing sample on a common topic or prompt and have faculty members score it with an agreed-upon holistic scale or rubric. Consider the advantages and disadvantages of such a program for your school or district. What could be learned by having students write on common topics and having teachers compare holistic scores? What would be the logistical problems? How much time would be required, and does your faculty think the results would be worth it? How would a discussion of holistic scoring help you think about issues in grading student writing?
- Discover the students' perspectives. In class, talk to students about what they think one of your assignments means. Show them the teacher's scoring guide or rubric. Since we can't assume that the students' interpretation of a prompt/assignment is the same as ours, ask students to discuss what they think the criteria mean. If you don't have time to interview each student, ask students to write a short note about what they think is expected of them with an assignment/prompt.

Have the students describe the criteria they think ought to be employed by a teacher who'll be judging the writing. How closely do their perceptions coincide with yours and those of your fellow faculty members? Honor unexpected but plausible constructions of meaning. Adopt a constructivist approach to assessing writing. Because students are stakeholders in assessment, they should be involved not only in a discussion of the technical aspects of writing assessment, but also in the metadiscussion of how criteria are constructed.

Activities

This activity has you take part in a simulated training session for raters, one in which you can test your assumptions and come to your own conclusions about whether and how to use holistic scoring in your teaching:

- First, *gather some student writing on a common theme*. Here is a prompt that has been used successfully with students from many different age groups¹:

Write about an incident or event when you had a strong feeling. It might have been a time when you were very scared, angry, embarrassed, or excited. Include enough details so that your readers can understand what happened and how you felt. Try to make your readers understand why you felt such a strong emotion at this moment in your life.

- Second, *develop a scoring rubric*. (Sample scoring rubrics are presented at several places in this volume; see pages 95, 227, 230, 237, 260–61, 267, and 303.²)
- Third, *score papers*. Taking into account the grade level of your sample, take about fifteen minutes to score four or five papers.³
- Fourth, *look at the results*. If the scores cluster, discuss why that might be (similar educational backgrounds, experience as teachers, shared discourse community, experience scoring/grading). If the scores do have a wide spread, theorize why this might be true:
 1. Where do our ideas about what good writing is come from?
 2. What qualities of writing tend to either turn us off or impress us personally?
 3. How comfortable are we with asserting that our grading of writing is impartial and objective?

4. What happens in a setting where raters are “trained” to assign reliable (consistent) scores to essays? Does consistency mean validity?
 - *Discuss the assumption that students understand prompts similarly.* Think for a minute and then discuss how this topic might have been misconstrued by your students. What words or phrases might mislead? What range of responses might you get? How might you prevent misunderstandings if this is a class assignment? How might a person from another culture respond differently to this assignment? What circumstances might exist that would cause resistance in students?
 - *Reflect on the assumption that a single writing performance is a valid measure of a person’s writing.* Consider whether you believe that the scores you gave the papers have predictive validity and should therefore be used as part of a portfolio passed on to the next grade or to inform any placement decisions.

Ending Questions

- Why might holistic scoring be preferable to letter grading?
- When could it be used in the writing process?
- How might it be used to communicate with parents?
- How might it be used to “grade” writing portfolios?

Follow-up

Start simple: Implement holistic or rubric assessment for one assignment:

- Make the class assignment, and then ask the students to discuss or write about what they believe is expected. If interpretation of the assignment varies widely, come to a class consensus about the assignment through discussion. You might provide models of appropriate and inappropriate responses and discuss why each model does or does not represent an appropriate response. You could also allow more leeway, encouraging students to interpret the assignment differently, but you will have to account for these differing interpretations in the criteria.
- Have a classroom discussion about criteria for the assignment; then, design a classroom rubric by which to judge this particular assignment.

- Provide students with anchor papers (student papers from past years will work) and have them practice scoring using the class-devised criteria. Then have them meet in groups of three to confer on their scores and clarify their understanding of the criteria.
- Assign writing (to be completed in class).
- Have students share their writing with a partner and instruct them to score each other's paper.
- Have students rewrite papers using peers' suggestions and then have them score their own papers before they submit them to you.
- Ask students to write a reflection on their experience. Did they find the holistic scoring process useful? Ask them to explain what they did and/or did not like about the process and make suggestions for improving it.

Reflect: How did your students perform on this task? Did you learn anything about them as writers, learners, or readers? Do you believe this method of assessment aided your students in providing peer feedback? Do you believe this method of assessment was superior to letter/number grades? In what ways will you adapt this process if you decide to use it again?

Compare: Discuss with students how they perceive grading and its alternatives and ask them to explain their preferences for either approach.

Share: Share your successes and frustrations with other faculty who are concerned about improving their teaching of writing. Discuss the possibility of creating departmental criteria for certain major assignments at each grade level.

Notes

1. If the workshop participants teach in districts that already have a state writing assessment in place, I would suggest that you investigate the prompts already in use in their districts.

2. Again, I would suggest that the workshop participants use rubrics currently in use in their districts or state, but it is also very useful to go through the process of developing your own.

3. If your state or district already uses some type of holistic scoring, it might be useful to bring in sample papers for discussion.