

# Using Rubrics as a Defense Against Grade Appeals

 [www.facultyfocus.com/articles/instructional-design/rubrics-as-a-defense-against-grade-appeals/](http://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/instructional-design/rubrics-as-a-defense-against-grade-appeals/)

Sydney Fulbright, PhD

Faculty dread the grade appeal; anxiety prevails until the whole process is complete. Much has been written about how to avoid such instances, but the potentially subjective assessments of written essays or clinical skills can be especially troublesome. One common cause of grade appeals is grading ambiguity in which the student and faculty member disagree on the interpretation of required content. Another cause is inequity, whereby the student feels others may have gotten more credit for very similar work or content (Hummel 2010). In the health-care field especially, these disagreements over clinical-skills assessments can actually result in student dismissal from the program and may lead to lawsuits.

In a federal court filing (Saltzman 2007), a student at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst complained that a faculty member and the university had violated his civil and contractual rights and intentionally inflicted emotional distress by giving him a C in a course instead of the 92.5 percent he felt he had earned. The teaching assistant told the student that when he began recording grades, they struck him as too high, so he graded everyone on a curve before assigning letter grades. Did the teaching assistant have any sort of scale or rubric for the grades or for randomly changing them because they “struck him as too high”? The court dismissed the case, but with more documentation, a reliable grading scale, and criteria in the form of a rubric for submissions, the months of anxiety waiting for a court ruling might have been avoided.

Rubrics provide the criteria for assessing students’ work. Giving students the rubric along with the assignment can clarify the instructor’s expectations. A rubric allows for much quicker, fairer, and more transparent grading. After an instructor grades 30 essays, fairness can become secondary to exhaustion. Following the rubric takes less time, and doing so allows grading the first essay to look exactly like grading the last essay. Students will be less likely to say, for example, “She got a 3 on this section, and I got a 2 for almost the same content.”

The following is an example of the first section of a rubric that our program’s faculty members use for students’ oral presentations. We expect students to be able to use these criteria and the rest of the rubric to develop good presentations for their classmates.

Category	Scoring Criteria	Total Points	Score
	The presentation is in line with the assigned topic.	2	
<b>Organization</b> (6 points)	Information is presented in sequence No redundant statements or repeating information.	2	
	Presentation appropriately cites the required number of references (3). Submitted before presentation.	2	

In the clinical area, we use a rubric that assesses students’ skills performance as well as their attitudes and dependability, among other things; attitudes and dependability can be especially subjective. Using the rubric, the students understand all components of expected behaviors when caring for patients.

<b>COOPERATION and ATTITUDE</b>	Consistently works well with others.	At times, displays negative attitude toward others	At times, arrogant, passive, disrespectful, and/or surly. Counseled.	Causes problems and is quarrelsome. Has been written up for inability to work with others.
---------------------------------	--------------------------------------	--	--	--

---

If a student wants to discuss reasons for receiving certain scores, the faculty member is able to provide documentation to demonstrate when the behaviors occurred that resulted in the student's receiving a 3 instead of a 4, for example. Faculty must maintain documentation to support grade challenges.

Rubrics add transparency to the grading process. This is important when trying to explain to disgruntled students that they weren't given a certain score because the instructor did not like them but because they omitted one or more components of the listed required criteria of the assignment. Developing markers or levels of achievement within the assignment (i.e., beginning, developing, intermediate, and exemplary) provides your students with a road map to excellence. Stop here and you receive a 1; make it to the next marker and you receive a 2. Putting forth the effort needed to reach each achievement marker is in the hands of the student, and if there is ever a grade challenge, the faculty member has the road map to show where the student ended his or her journey to excellence.

Rubrics not only provide criteria for reaching those learning outcomes that faculty members desire for their students but also can be used to essentially assess any criteria or behavior. Students understand the criteria to achieve, feedback is clearly provided, and rubrics give faculty the needed documentation of objective assessment that is ever so important for grade appeals and potentially in court.

References:

Hummel, P. (2010). A college instructor's guide to avoiding grade appeals. Adjunct Assistance. Retrieved online February 17, 2016, from <http://adjunctassistance.com/instructor-problems/grade-appeals-instructor-problems/dealing-with-college-student-grade-appeals>

Maricopa Community Colleges, Tempe, Office of General Counsel. (2002, September). *Going to court over grades*. Retrieved February 17, 2016, from <https://legal.maricopa.edu/departments-publications/going-to-court-over-grades>

Saltzman, J. (2007, October 4). Student takes his C to federal court. Boston.com. Retrieved February 17, 2016, from [http://www.boston.com/news/education/higher/articles/2007/10/04/student\\_takes\\_his\\_c\\_to\\_federal\\_court/?page=full](http://www.boston.com/news/education/higher/articles/2007/10/04/student_takes_his_c_to_federal_court/?page=full)

*Sydney Fulbright, PhD, MSN, RN, CNOR, is an associate professor and executive director of surgical technology at University of Arkansas Fort Smith.*