

# Tips for Designing Grading Rubrics

## WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

A collection of tips for instructors who are developing rubrics for grading their assignments.

## HOW DO I USE IT?

Review the tips before working on a new rubric or adapting an existing rubric. The tips cover common questions that are asked by USC faculty, and should make the rubric design process easier and faster. For assistance, please contact [CET.](http://cet.usc.edu/)

Questions and concerns are common when designing grading rubrics. Below are tips for designing grading rubrics based on the most frequent questions and concerns.

### How many performance levels should I use?

The number of performance levels will depend on the assignment. However, having 3-5 levels is customary. Consider that each performance level needs to differ significantly from the next, and there will be more granularity and less distinction between levels when there is a greater number of levels.

### What should I use for performance level names?

Names for the performance levels across the top of the rubric may depend on a department’s standard. For the lowest performance levels avoid very negative names, such as “poor,” “failing,” or “incompetent” in favor of level names like “does not meet requirements,” “fair,” “unsatisfactory,” or “novice.” Intermediate performance levels are often named “good,” “satisfactory,” “meets most requirements,” “meets expectations,” or “emergent.” Highest performance levels are often named “excellent,” “meets all requirements,” “exceeds expectations,” or “approaching mastery.”

### How do I assign point values to the performance levels?

Deciding point values can depend on your department’s standard of grading with points or percentages. Rubric values can be described using either, but point values are often easier to use than percentages for both students and instructors. To assign points/percentages for each criterion, first determine the total possible for the assignment. Next, decide if any criteria count for more than others and divide up the points/percentages accordingly. It’s helpful to put the points/percentages directly in the box with the performance descriptions.

### How do I add some grading flexibility or subjectivity to my rubric?

Though one benefit of rubrics is reducing grading subjectivity, some “wiggle room” can be built into rubrics if desired. This can be accommodated by having a small range of points possible for each performance level rather than a set point value.

### How do I write performance descriptions?

Describing performance for each level often requires changing only one or two words. Start with describing the highest performance level by using specific values or words like “all,” “completely,” or “thoroughly.” Next, it’s often easiest to describe the lowest performance level by changing the specific values or words in the highest performance level to “none,” “missing,” “does not include,” or “few.” Finally, fill in the descriptions for the intermediate performance levels by changing wording to include “most,” “some but not all,” “several,” etc.

### Should performance descriptions use numbers or words?

Some assignment criteria/requirements lend themselves to being described or quantified numerically, such as the number of required sources or a time limit. Other criteria/requirements are best described in words, such as the definition of a clear thesis statement or presentation skills. It is perfectly acceptable to have both numerical and textual descriptions in the same rubric.

### How do I make sure my rubric works?

When grading student work with a rubric, first compare their work to the highest-level performance description. If the work meets that description, assign the work to that level. If not, move on to the next-highest performance description and so on.

### Can I use online rubrics to grade work submitted online?

Both Blackboard and Turnitin allow for creating or importing rubrics, attaching them to assignments, and grading with them online. The resulting grade is then directly fed into the Blackboard gradebook.

### Where can I find sample rubrics?

A search of the Internet for rubrics in your specific field will likely yield a number of samples. The CET has downloadable sample rubrics for common assignment types on the [CET website](http://cet.usc.edu/).