

## CLINICAL PRACTICE

# Development of a school of nursing rubric

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## ABSTRACT

Rubrics have been used as guides to establish and communicate standards to students when developing a paper or project. The standards set by the rubric assure course objectives are met and nursing standards of practice are integrated. This article will detail the necessary components of the rubric for written nursing assignments, both didactic and clinical. In addition, the importance of using rubrics will be emphasized. The issues associated with developing and utilizing rubrics in nursing education will be described and discussed. The development of a specific school of nursing rubric will be detailed.

**Key Words:** Rubric, Nursing, Writing, Writing assignment

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The information available about Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and Writing to Learn (WTL) offers a perspective about the importance of writing in the nursing curriculum. Students need to write in their respective disciplines to obtain jobs upon graduation, as writing is considered a “threshold skill” for hiring and promoting.<sup>[1]</sup> And by examining the WTL paradigm’s assumptions that writing is learning and writing helps to produce critical thinking, nursing faculty members and administrators identify a need for implementing writing assignments in nursing curricula. Short, in-class writing assignments and portfolios (collections of writing samples from various courses) are examples given in the literature that can be used to implement writing in nursing curricula.<sup>[2]</sup> Increased student support and improved faculty-student relationships have been reported after implementing these strategies.

In nursing education, rubrics can be excellent tools for both clinical and didactic writing assignments. Rubrics create clarity for students when beginning and progressing through a written assignment, and expectations are made concrete and

clear. But rubrics do more than simply provide the student with descriptions of the necessary elements of the assignment. Rubric categories represent goals for students, giving them a realistic destination for their assignment. When writing, many students struggle with tangential writing-veering off the writing path and focusing on ideas that are not essential for the assignment. Rubrics help students to follow the correct route so as to not waste valuable time and effort and so scores can be higher. Faculty members frequently support the use of rubrics, as rubric use assists in timely, just evaluation as well as appropriate feedback. Rubrics help to decrease student protest once grades are returned, and the use of rubrics can assist in creating continuity in scoring between and among instructors.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Rubrics are undeniably beneficial in the academic nursing world; however, research has only just begun to highlight the importance, components, and developmental issues associated with implementing rubrics in nursing school. Faculty from Suffolk County Community College (SCCC)<sup>[3]</sup> defines

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the purpose of rubrics in a clinical setting as analyzing “the application of the nursing process in student nursing care plans” (p. 1). The article describes through example how to integrate a rubric into clinical nursing. Their rubric development clarifies expectations by including performance criteria needing to be met in each category in order to demonstrate critical thinking for each step of the nursing process used in the development of a nursing care plan. There are many benefits of a rubric developed in this way. With a pre-developed scoring rubric, students are able to assess their own performances before submitting work for grading. Rubrics give nursing students the ability to identify their expected score based on how well they meet criteria described in each category. In addition to a final numeric score, the rubric allows grades for each category individually allowing the student to see their grade broken down into strengths and areas for improvement. A comment section labeled “insights” at the end of the rubric enables instructors to easily provide appropriate feedback.<sup>[3]</sup>

According to further research, the possibility for self-assessment and improved feedback are not the only benefits related to using rubrics for grading. According to Truemper<sup>[4]</sup> “it is important that instructors use a tool that can consistently assess and evaluate student work, while providing feedback” (p. 562), even in graduate school. Rubrics are able to do this by focusing students on areas that need improvement, but also giving credit for those items completed well. Rubrics in nursing school have a variety of uses and can “be used for both written and oral assignments and can be individualized to fit the context of the subject matter” (p. 562). Having this tool available to students can improve a student’s performance in both verbal and written tasks. Rubrics can also be used to objectify subjective experiences. Clinical evaluation remains a challenge for faculty due to the potential subjectivity of the evaluation and the hesitancy of new faculty to give low grades. Students and faculty may also interpret clinical course objectives differently. Rubrics facilitate the grading experience increasing both student and faculty satisfaction. “Faculty often find themselves making repetitive written comments to students. These comments can be incorporated into the rubric, thus shortening grading time while increasing the quality and quantity of instructor feedback”<sup>[5]</sup> (p. 134). Rubrics clarify course objectives providing students with a more realistic self-evaluation tool.<sup>[5,6]</sup>

The research on the important benefits of rubrics in academics extends beyond nursing. Silvestri and Oescher<sup>[7]</sup> examined the use of rubrics in scoring a performance-based assessment. Fifth grade students were given a lesson and then an assignment to illustrate and write a booklet demonstrating their knowledge of the topic. Researchers developed sample

papers based on the students’ answers and concluded two people can easily evaluate an assignment differently in the absence of clear, unambiguous criteria. “Scoring rubrics address this concern by identifying specific criteria and scoring scales that objectify this process. Performance can be assessed according to predetermined expectations and criteria that promote learning by offering clear performance targets to students”<sup>[7]</sup> (p. 2). Additionally, according to Goodrich,<sup>[8]</sup> “rubrics reduce the time teachers spend grading work and make it easier for teacher to explain to students why they received the grade they did and what they can do to improve” (p. 1).

Despite the popularity of rubrics and the general consensus of their value, there are still challenges with the developmental aspects. Donaldson and Gray<sup>[9]</sup> recognized the grade inflation phenomenon and based on a literature review, determined many rubrics have not been fully evaluated and require rigorous evaluation. Suggestions for rubric improvement include more open communication about guidelines, methods of evidence collection, and grading systems.<sup>[10]</sup>

### 3. PURPOSE STATEMENT

The purpose of this study is to provide a review of rubric components in order to offer the best evidence for analyzing and evaluating nursing assignments. Suggested evaluation criteria and appropriate scoring are included, as well as issues associated with developing and utilizing rubric.

### 4. COMPONENTS OF A NURSING RUBRIC

In creating a rubric for a nursing writing assignment, whether didactic or clinical, certain components need to be included. Faculty members creating the rubric must ask themselves important questions about their ultimate goals for the assignment and preferred outcomes for students.

#### 4.1 Evaluation criteria

What objectives do you want the student to meet with this writing assignment? For example, are there specific objectives within the course syllabus that this assignment will help the student achieve? Maybe one of your course objectives is for the student to synthesize literature in order to evaluate nursing theory. Perhaps you want students to demonstrate an understanding of the connection between theory and practice through written work. Maybe you hope students will be able to show through writing their ability to analyze concepts used in their practice. In a clinical written assignment, you may want students to create a plan of care using scientific principles, assessment data, and client needs. If so, these need to be included in your evaluation criteria.

Are there broader nursing standards that you believe students

should be demonstrating with this written assignment? What standards are important to you in your course and to the overall faculty in your nursing program? Your nursing program may emphasize the nursing process throughout all courses. If so, you can utilize the steps in the nursing process as your evaluation criteria for clinical written work. Maybe your assignment focuses on the American Nurses Association Code of Ethics. If so, those provisions can be included in your evaluation criteria.

Are there other writing qualities that are important to you or your program of nursing? For example, some faculty like to emphasize the use of APA format in written assignments. If this is important to you or your program, it should be included as a criterion. Regardless if APA format is of particular interest to you, for most assignments some emphasis must be placed on organization, clarity, accuracy, logic, and the mechanics of the written work.

#### 4.2 Appropriate scoring

Do you want to use a certain number scale, letter scale, or something else? You must put some thought into how you would like to score the assignment. You can grade the assignment on a 100-point scale, which is the most common method. You must determine a minimum and maximum number of points for each evaluation criterion. For example, if you have five evaluation criteria, you can assign the same number of potential points, 20, for each. If the student gets the maximum number of points for each, he/she will score a 100. But, if the student does not meet the maximum potential, you must decide how to determine number of points to be deducted. Many rubric designers use a range. For example, if a student does very well with APA, with only a few errors, you might give him/her an 18/20, which is still in your highest scoring category.

What is important for the faculty members who will be using the rubric? In determining how much emphasis to put on each evaluation criteria, you must decide what outcomes you think are most important. Do you want the student to complete this paper with a greatly increased knowledge of APA format? Do you want the student to demonstrate a thorough synthesis of literature or connection between theory and practice? Determine which outcomes are most important for you.

How do you determine wording for your point assignments? Typically, rubric designers will label columns with determinants such as A, B, C, *etc.* or Excellent, Good, Average, *etc.* Then, they must insert wording into the grid boxes to explain how the student can meet each evaluation criterion at each level. Many times the highest level (A/Excellent) will include

wording such as comprehensive, cohesive, thorough, logical, well-developed, or accurate. The next level, B/Good, may include wording indicating something is missing. Words such as good (instead of excellent), sometimes (instead of always), very few or minor errors (instead of none) are frequently used. Level C/Average might have words such as lacking, superficial, vague, or inconsistent, while the next level, D/Below Average, commonly contains terms like weak, not supported, unclear, or poor communication. Finally, level E/Poor sometimes has terms like numerous errors, inappropriate, poorly developed, or disorganized.

### 5. ISSUES ASSOCIATED WITH DEVELOPING AND UTILIZING RUBRICS

#### 5.1 Specificity?

Are your evaluation criteria specific or vague? One goal of a rubric is to provide clarity in faculty expectations of the student. More specific criteria create less stress for the student, fewer repeated questions directed towards the faculty member, and a simpler, more objective direction for scoring. If there is a topic you want the students to include, let them know. Do not leave them guessing or questioning. Students complain frequently about the stress of writing assignments in general, so you can play a large part in eliminating that by being specific in what you are wanting.

#### 5.2 Individualization?

Does your rubric work for one assignment or can it be used for numerous assignments in a variety of courses taught by any faculty member? Rubrics can be created for each individual assignment, and sometimes this is the best technique. For example, if you are assigning students a paper where they select three American Nurses Association Standards of Nursing Practice to analyze, you might want to include an evaluation criterion specifically stating "Analysis of Three Standards" and describe what constitutes an appropriate analysis for you. However, you might want to create a rubric that can be used for all courses that require written assignments in your nursing program. In this case, the evaluation criteria and scoring still must be specific, but the wording might be different. For example, instead of stating "Analysis of Three Standards", you might say "Analysis of Content" and detail what constitutes an appropriate analysis for all faculty who will be involved.

#### 5.3 Difficulty with criterion interpretation?

Are different faculty members who are scoring using the rubric interpreting the criteria differently? For example, one faculty member may believe that the organization of the assignment is logical, while another does not. If this is the case, you may need to train faculty members on use of the rubric

and what constitutes each criterion, including examples of student papers that exhibit each criterion effectively. You may choose to provide students with those exhibits, although this has the potential to create “cookie-cutter” papers and limit independent critical thinking skills.

**5.4 Continuous review?**

Is the rubric effective or ineffective? In order for a rubric to be effective, it must be reviewed continuously. If a rubric is used one semester and students struggle with the assignment, possibly because of difficulty interpreting evaluation criteria, scoring, or wording from the student perspective, adjustments may need to be made. For example, if you want students to show a thorough synthesis of literature and students continuously fail to do so, you can give students more information about what a thorough synthesis of literature involves. You can then change the wording on your rubric to include the terminology that you presented students with.

You might also find that students need more clarification with scoring. For example, if your rubric box says “few errors in APA,” and students complain that they only made five errors yet didn’t fit into the “few errors” category, you may decide to add a specific number to go along with that, such as “2-4 errors.”

**6. SPECIFIC SCHOOL OF NURSING RUBRIC**

At a mid-size, rural University, four nursing faculty members met on several occasions to develop a rubric that would be used in all courses of the School of Nursing that require writing assignments. The rationale for this was that students would have a better grasp on and less anxiety for written assignments as they progress through the program if the expectations remained basically the same throughout. Faculty members compiled information from existing rubrics that were currently being utilized and incorporated ideas that each had gained from experience with rubrics and writing assignments. The rubric is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.** School of nursing rubric

	Excellent	Good	Average	Below Average	Poor	Points possible	Points received
<b>Organization</b>	Writing is logically organized and topic focus is clear. Uses appropriate transitions from idea to idea. Presents findings that are unique and fulfills the assignment goals.	Good organization. Focus is clear but some mild errors in translating ideas to the reader. Transitions are somewhat clear.	Attempts made to focus but coherence is lacking. More attention needed to drawing conclusions. Transitions are not always evident.	Random focus, weak organization. Does not respond appropriately to assignment. Very few transitions.	Disorganized, thought patterns difficult to follow. Does not complete goals of the assignment. No transitions are used when going from one idea to the next.		
<b>Content</b>	38-40 points Comprehensive review of topic that incorporates entirety of document. Ideas are well developed and arguments well defended.	35-37 points Review is not clear in some sections. Begins to offer support for ideas and arguments.	32-34 points Superficial review of structure with inadequate scholarly discussion. Arguments inconsistent. Ideas vague.	29-31 points Weak awareness of significant structure. Arguments are not supported and ideas are unclear.	28 or less Little awareness of important structure. Ideas poorly developed; arguments poorly defended.	40	
<b>Grammar/ Spelling/ Punctuation</b>	38-40 points Correct spelling, punctuation, capitalization. Use of the standard English which demonstrates good grammar.	35-37 points Only minor errors in mechanics.	32-34 points Several mechanical errors that border on interfering with communication of ideas.	29-31 points Errors in mechanics interfere with communication of ideas.	28 or less Errors in mechanics seriously interfere with communication. Writing inappropriate for audience.	40	
<b>APA/ References</b>	9-10 points APA usage is accurate and used consistently throughout the paper. Provides appropriate references to information presented.	7-8 points Very few lapses in APA format.	5-6 points APA and reference errors border on interfering with communication of ideas.	3-4 points Reference errors interfere with communication of ideas.	2 or less Numerous APA errors which interfere with communication. References are incomplete or absent from text/reference list. Incorrect APA citation.	10	
	9-10 points	7-8 points	5-6 points	3-4 points	2 or less	10	

## 7. CONCLUSION

The rubric featured in this article has been used for two semesters throughout the nursing program. Adjustments have been made as continuous review has occurred, and adjustments will continue to be made. So far, students have only seen this rubric for two semesters' courses, and follow-up will occur as students continue to see and utilize this

rubric throughout the entirety of the program. Anecdotal feedback has been positive, and students have verbalized feeling less anxiety due to having clear guidelines and expectations. Rubrics are useful tools to help alleviate the common issues that students experience with writing assignments.

## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST DISCLOSURE

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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