WRITE FREE OR DIE

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"Regarding Rubrics: Are They Right for You?"

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Director, University Writing Programs

Rubrics are handy little tools for some, and bothersome burdens for others. They seem straightforward – a quick and easy way to assess whether students are meeting specific expectations and developing certain skills. But the trouble with rubrics is that we are trying to quantify a fundamentally qualitative act. Round hole; square peg.

They are also usually constructed on a deficit model of assessment and don't often offer positive feedback. Many instructors quickly abandon them, concluding that the holistic view of a student's work is not equivalent to the sum of its parts, usually because a rubric cannot take all factors into account (progress made in drafting, for instance). Thus, as Anne Leahy asserts, "a rubric is an overly simple way to ignore that an essay is a complicated whole; it is impossible to tease its characteristics completely apart, because they are interdependent" (259).

Rubrics can also limit what writers feel permitted to try. As Leahy points out, they "work to maintain the status quo and prevent experimentation, deviation from the norm, and innovation. If you do x and y and z, the rubric says, your writing is good. But what if you do x and y and b—and discover something you'd not known before and isn't on the rubric?" (260). Not all good writing follows the "rules," and not all writing that follows the rules is good writing. In Composition studies, we often talk about 'writing to discover'—the understanding that writing isn't just the recording of thoughts but a means of inventing. Yet, as Leahy notes, rubrics impose a set of "preconceived parameters—designed before seeing the products of the task at hand— that applies across the board" (260). When the path is mapped in advance, students may be less inclined to take risks or pursue an insight that doesn't fit the "grid." So, whether for major assignments or smaller ones, leaving space for the unexpected—through flexible criteria or open-ended evaluative language—helps preserve the exploratory, generative nature of writing.

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Future Tense: Upcoming Writing Across the Curriculum Events

To stay up to date, please visit our Events page on our website

- **Connors Writing Center Info Sessions:**
  Held from 1-2pm in the CWC (Dimond 329). Send your students!
  - February 12 **Grammar** session: "Making Sentences Make Sense"
  - March 12 **Citation** session: "Cite it Right"
  - April 16 Writing **Productivity** session: "Write on Time"

- **Writing Intensive Faculty Symposium: Tuesday, June 2 from 8am-4pm in Dimond Library 352.** The annual WI Faculty retreat is now a condensed one-day immersive workshop on campus, open to ***any*** faculty member interested in integrating writing into their courses. Goals are to give faculty a more complete awareness of the principles underlying WI courses, equip them with practices to enhance working with student writing, and promote exchange and forge connections among faculty. **Breakfast and Lunch provided. Up to 25 available spots. REGISTER HERE.** For more information, see our flyer on the last page of this issue, or contact unh.writing.programs@unh.edu.

WAC(ky) People

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Cameron Netland
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Alfie Kohn further argues that rubrics may legitimize grading systems that already direct students' attention away from learning and toward performance. When the goal becomes "earning the 4," students can become less engaged, less curious, and less willing to take risks in their writing. Even detailed rubrics can shift their focus from *what they're saying* to *how they're being scored*—with predictable effects on honesty, depth, and motivation.

And yet, rubrics persist. Understandably. They can support consistency across faculty, save time, and help instructors articulate expectations with more transparency. For some, they become valuable tools for making implicit standards explicit. As Stevens and Levi put it, rubrics can help instructors clarify what matters most and communicate that clearly to students.

So where does that leave us? **Rubrics aren't for everyone.** But if you *want* to use them—or feel that they would genuinely support your pedagogy—there are ways to design rubrics that work with, rather than against, the nature of writing.
Below are some research-informed, experience-tested strategies for developing rubrics that enhance student learning:

1. Start With Reflection, Not Categories
Before drafting rows and columns, begin with reflection:
- What do you value most *for this assignment*?
- What habits or writing practices do you want to encourage?
- What counts as progress or growth?
- How much flexibility do you want students to have in demonstrating learning?

2. Use Fewer Criteria Than You Think You Need
Rubrics often become unwieldy because instructors try to capture every possible feature of good writing. But writing doesn't function as a set of independent variables. The more rows you add, the more you risk obscuring the whole. Many instructors find that **four to six dimensions** are usually enough—any more than that can create false precision or push students toward box-ticking instead of sense-making.

If everything is emphasized, nothing is.

3. Keep the Language Flexible and Human
Rigid or overly technical descriptors can unintentionally steer students toward formulaic writing. Criteria should be:
- observable and measurable (e.g., clarity of argument, effectiveness of evidence),
- distinct from one another,
- written in clear, parallel language,
- open enough to account for a variety of rhetorical choices.

Even holistic rubrics—which provide one overall score—can work well when paired with short narrative feedback.

4. Make Space for Growth and Context
One reason rubrics sometimes "underrate" student writing is they rarely account for progress, revision effort, or contextual challenges. When possible:
- allow categories for **"evidence of revision"** or **"growth since previous drafts,"**
- create room for student reflection alongside rubric score,
- or include a flexible "Instructor Notes" area where qualities outside the rubric can be acknowledged.

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"What is written without effort is in general read without pleasure."
~Samuel Johnson

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5. Consider Co-Constructing Rubrics With Students
Inviting students to help set criteria—even partially—can demystify expectations and strengthen their sense of agency. This can be:

- a class discussion about what makes writing "effective,"
- a revision of an existing rubric,
- or collaborative identification of what matters most in the assignment.
- an invitation to students to score the rubric themselves; your agreement/disagreement becomes the starting point for a holistic response.

Research shows that rubrics can support metacognition when students use them as *planning* tools, not just evaluative ones.

6. Use Rubrics to Teach, Not Just to Grade
Rubrics should accompany instruction, not replace it. You might:

- introduce the rubric during the assignment launch,
- analyze sample papers using the rubric,
- have students use it for peer review,
- or ask them to complete a brief self-assessment before submitting.

When rubrics guide *learning processes* rather than simply justifying final scores, they can promote more intentional writing practices.

7. Avoid Mathematical Precision Where It Doesn't Belong
Faculty across disciplines frequently note that point-based schemes can imply a level of precision that doesn't reflect how writing actually works. If you find yourself manipulating point totals to reach the grade your reading suggests, consider simplifying your scale or using broad performance bands instead of numerical scoring.
As Gottschalk and Hjortshoj point out, instructors often end up overriding the math anyway—a sign that holistic judgment is doing the real evaluative work.

8. Keep Rubrics Short
For both cognitive clarity and grading efficiency, rubrics should ideally fit on a single page (unlike this article). Long rubrics not only take longer to read, but they also dilute emphasis and often confuse students about what truly matters.

Final Thoughts?
Rubrics are not inherently good or bad—but like any tool, they should serve the goals of the course, the needs of the instructor, and the development of the writer. If a rubric restricts experimentation, suppresses honesty, or reduces writing to a performance metric, it works against the values of a Writing Intensive course (or even just a course with writing in it). But when thoughtfully designed, rubrics can clarify expectations, support revision, and help both students and instructors articulate what good writing looks like.

Use one if it helps you teach. Skip it if it doesn't. And if you do use one, make it your own: responsive to your course, flexible enough to honor complexity, and aligned with the belief that writing is a space for thinking—not just scoring.

For a full list of references and resources, or for sample rubrics, please contact UNH.Writing.Programs@unh.edu

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Ask Blue & Green:

A conversation between two parakeets

As Transposed from Peep to Person by Cameron Netland, Assistant Director, University Writing Programs

Dear Blue & Green,

Everyone keeps telling my students to "use their own voice," but when Artificial Intelligence is in the room, I'm not sure I know how to explain what that even means anymore. How do we teach voice without losing our students?

-Sincerely,
Vocally Vexed

Dear Vexed,

Blue: Voice! Finally, something real. Something the machines can't steal. Voice is sincerity, struggle, authenticity! Our songs fly above the trees!

Green: Blue, breathe. You're already shouting.

Blue: But haven't you noticed? Everything sounds the same now. Calm. Balanced. Reasonable...It's horrible!

Green: Well, Blue, standardization is partly to blame for that, but you forget that voice is a range. A spectrum. Writers are constantly choosing where to perch: formal or casual, playful or serious, detached or personal, expert or fellow learner.

Blue: But AI ignores all of dynamism! It defaults to plodding lifelessness.

Green: Exactly. Chatbot outputs flatten voice because it *defaults* to the safest midpoint on every scale. It avoids risk. Voice, on the other wing, is risk. It's deciding, *here I'm earnest*, *here I'm unsure*, *here I care too much*. The greater danger here is not losing voice, it's losing risk.

Blue: So we don't need to ban the computer to teach voice?

Green: No. We need to teach students to hear themselves again. To ask why *this* tone fits *this* moment. GenAI can draft, but only a writer can choose where to land.

Blue: Huh. So voice isn't lost with AI…

Green: No. It just needs tuning. If you must use the machine, prompt it with specific instructions on voice, challenge what it generates. Explore the range of your words and voice. The better questions you ask, the better voice you will receive.

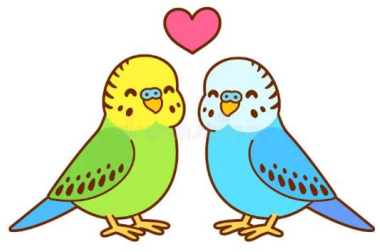
Blue: How about I ask AI to throw itself back into Pandora's Box so we can lock it up forever?

Green: As you prove far too often, some of us might benefit with a little tempering of our voice…

Blue: Now you're just trying to limit me.

Green: I would never, I'm just advising you to explore your range.

Blue: My chirping is always unique!



The Connors Writing Center presents:

Shakespeare's Birthday Celebration!

April 23, 2026
from 1-2pm in the CWC (Dimond 329)

We'll be doing a table reading of excerpts from the Bard's collection of plays and sonnets. Tell your students to come and read or just join and listen!

There will be snacks, of course.

The Grammar Box: The Em Dash

Cameron Netland, Assistant Director, University Writing Programs

The term "dash" comes from Middle English *dashen*, originally meaning to strike or rush violently, reflecting its disruptive role in text as a mark that interrupts or emphatically separates ideas. In its life as punctuation, a horizontal line used to signal breaks in thought began to appear in English printing in the mid-1500s and became more common in the 17th and 18th centuries as printers and writers embraced it for dramatic pauses and shifts. (Etymology Online)

Longer than a comma, less final than a period-- the dash stages hesitation. It marks a mind revising itself. Used well, however, the dash models rhetorical awareness. It interrupts to specify, to narrow, to reframe. It teaches students that syntax can bend without breaking.

Generative AI has accelerated the dash's decline in popular use. An abundance of dashes is the clearest tell that a student has used AI on an assignment. When generating responses to prompts, the mark proliferates because dashes appear frequently in AI's vast training data, offering a concise way to add complex clauses or conversational asides.

Teaching the dash today requires restraint rather than banishment. Writing instructors must emphasize intention: the dash should do visible work. If a colon can define, let it. If a period can end, use it. Don't overuse the dash, but through judgment, when a sentence genuinely needs to pause and look back at itself use the dash. A careful use of the dash shows mastery of punctuation, not reliance on AI.

Past Perfect: *Director's Note*

Meaghan Dittrich, Director, University Writing Programs

You may have noticed this issue of *Write Free* is somewhat thinner than in past semesters. Our usual features—including the *Dangling Modifier* and our faculty and student profile spotlights—are taking a temporary pause. As we work to prioritize core programming with fewer resources this year, we've had to scale back the amount of newsletter content we are able to produce.

We are still in the midst of next year's budget discussions, and the future of *Write Free* will depend in large part on whether we are able to continue relying on our exceptional Graduate Assistants. Their expertise and labor make possible the professional development materials, curated strategies, and pedagogical spotlights that many of you have come to expect from this publication.

Even during these changes, our commitment remains the same: to support faculty in integrating meaningful writing into the curriculum. We plan to continue sharing practical tips, research-informed strategies, and resources, though the format may be more modest in coming semesters.

Thank you, as always, for your partnership in fostering strong writing experiences for our students at UNH. Your engagement with the program sustains this work, and we look forward to collaborating with you in whatever shape our future issues may take.

LAST WORD

"So long as you write what you wish to write, that is all that matters; and whether it matters for ages or only for hours, nobody can say. But to sacrifice a hair on the head of your vision, a shade of its colour, in deference to some Headmaster with a silver pot in his hand or to some professor with a measuring-rod up his sleeve, is the most abject treachery, and the sacrifice of wealth and chastity which used to be said to be the greatest of human disasters, a mere flea-bite in comparison."

~ Virginia Woolf

University Writing Programs

2026 Writing-Intensive Faculty Symposium

Open to *ANY* and *ALL* Faculty

Register by May 15

Tuesday, June 2, 2026
Dimond Library, room 352

Sponsored by the UNH Writing Programs
through the generosity of the Dey Family Fund

Spaces available for up to 25 faculty participants.

INCLUDES

- **Day-long** seminar in Dimond Library
- **Breakfast & lunch**
- **2 follow-up lunch sessions** at UNH (in December and May) to discuss progress of your work and continue the discussion of improving student writing

HIGHLIGHTS

- Learn current, research-based best practices to enhance student writing
- Understand and discuss the multiple roles of writing in the classroom
- Create assignments aligned with the core competencies of your course
- Discuss assessment and revision strategies
- Gain a network of writing-invested faculty colleagues at UNH

CLICK HERE TO REGISTER

Or scan QR code:

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