

CHAPTER 6

Teaching Performance Criteria to Students

Guiding Question: *How can we use rubrics to improve, as well as judge, student performance?*



It's all well and good to say that assessment and instruction should be integrated, or that students need to know and understand performance criteria. But such pronouncements are pretty useless unless we provide some actual examples of how it looks in the classroom when teachers and students are using rubrics and criteria to improve learning.

This chapter is devoted to the premise that performance criteria and rubrics can be powerful instructional tools for improving the very achievement that is also being assessed. Instruction and learning is the important link—the “so what” of all the rest—the reason why we’re spending all this time on performance criteria and rubrics in the first place. The idea is simple—teach students the criteria for quality and how to apply them to their own work to make it better.

We begin with a discussion of what it takes to “know” criteria and then present seven practical strategies to assist students to “know” and understand criteria as a means of improving their achievement.

Remember the story in Chapter 1 about the conversation with the DMV in Washington State? That example illustrated the importance of knowing the criteria by which we are judged. And now for the rest of the story . . .

So, what does it take to *know* criteria for the driver's examination? Is it enough just to have the criteria handed to you when you climb into the driver's seat to be examined? “Oh, by the way, here are the criteria by which your driving will be judged. Good luck.” Of course not.

So, what does it take to *know* criteria? Take a minute to reflect on this question. Then look at the comments in Box 6.1 to see how your comments overlap with those of other teachers.

BOX 6.1 To “know” criteria requires:

- Being exposed to the criteria from the beginning of instruction. (Having student-friendly versions that are given students during the first week of school.)
- Having terms defined. (Include lots of details to describe the indicators of quality performance.)
- Having examples of strong and weak performance illustrated by teacher modeling, student work samples, videos, etc. (Anonymous, of course.)
- Practicing with feedback using the vocabulary of the criteria to suggest to students how to improve a piece of work.
- Having opportunities for self- and peer assessment using the vocabulary of the criteria. (Letting students practice giving and receiving criterion-based feedback.)
- Practicing articulating the vocabulary for quality and applying it to many situations. (“Dear Mom and Dad—Here’s what I know about how to write well.”)
- Having instruction consciously focused on subparts of the criteria. (For example, in writing, focusing teaching on idea development, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, and conventions.)

How does the vignette in Box 6.2 illustrate these principles? In this example, we see the integration of several principles described in this book.

1. The performance target is clear and doesn’t move, providing an instructional target for the teacher and a learning target for the students.
2. There is no “mystery” regarding the performance expectations and the criteria by which student work will be judged.
3. The student work samples equip students to more accurately self-assess and improve their work before it is turned into the teacher.

The teacher has observed that the “target bulletin board” has sharpened her teaching and led to improvements in the quality of her students’ work. We think that this example illustrates the productive blending of assessment and instruction. After all, isn’t the primary purpose of assessment to promote learning, not simply measure it?

All of these ideas for teaching criteria to students have been consolidated by the staff at Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (NWREL) into seven strategies outlined in Figure 6.2. Since NWREL has worked mostly with writing assessment, these seven strategies, and the accompanying examples in the rest of the chapter, relate to writing. However, the basic strategies presented below are applicable to virtually any performance area. As you look at the strategies applied in writing, think about how they might apply to your

BOX 6.2 Vignette: Making the Target Clear: Linking Assessment and Instruction

A middle-school language arts teacher has a large bulletin board in her classroom to which she has affixed a full-size archery target (obtained from the physical education department). At the start of each major unit of study, she directs the students to the bulletin board and discusses the “target” for the unit—the major goals and the rationale for learning this body of knowledge.

As part of the unit introduction, she discusses the culminating performance task that students will complete during the unit. On the bulletin board, she has mounted a large version of the rubric (or rubrics) that will be used in judging student performance on the final task, and she reviews the criteria with the students.

Now for the really cool part—she places examples of student work products collected from previous years (with student names removed) on the bulletin board. The work samples, which vary in quality, are connected to the different levels of the rubric and target. These provide tangible illustrations of the criteria and performance levels.

example:

a model bulletin board

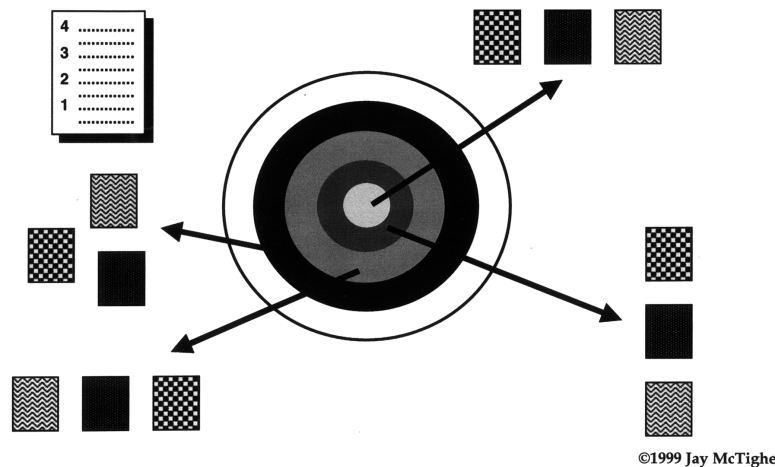


Figure 6.1. Example of a Model Bulletin Board

© 1999, Jay McTighe.

Throughout the unit, the teacher uses the student examples along with the criteria in the rubric to support her teaching. In fact, she uses the good and poor samples to help students understand the nature of quality.




-
1. Teach students the LANGUAGE they need to speak and think like writers.
 2. Read, score, and discuss ANONYMOUS sample papers.
 3. PRACTICE AND REHEARSE focused revision strategies by
 - ◆ Working with a partner or small group.
 - ◆ Working on an ANONYMOUS sample.
 - ◆ Revising for one trait at a time.
 4. Read, Read, READ
Printed material of ALL kinds to illustrate strengths and weaknesses in writing 
 5. WRITE!!
Yes, WRITE—this means **you!** Then, ask students to help you revise your own writing for one of the traits. 
 6. Let students practice what they know.
 7. TEACH FOCUS LESSONS
Link YOUR curriculum to the traits as many ways and as many times as you can! 
-

Figure 6.2. 7 Strategies for Teaching Writing Traits to Students

SOURCE: © 2000, NWREL. Portland, OR; 503-275-9500. Used with permission.

teaching areas—Critical thinking? Problem solving? Oral presentations? Collaborative group work? Other?¹

This chapter just touches the surface of these ideas. Additional resources providing more detailed explanation and examples are given in the Resource section that follows this chapter.

Strategy 1: Teach Students the Language They Need to Think and Speak Like Writers



Have you ever used or observed peer review groups? Have you ever given them up because they seem to be unproductive—student comments to each other are very superficial? For example: “I like this, it’s about dogs.” “Your handwriting is neat.”

-
1. Ask students what they like in the books they read. What draws them to one book or another? Begin making a list of features on the board.
 2. Read a couple of age-appropriate (short) books to the students. After each book ask them if this gives them any additional ideas on what makes writing good. Add these to the list on the board.
 3. Read a couple of anonymous student papers from last year, or use *The Redwoods* and *Fox* in Figure 6.4. Ask students to work in groups to decide which is the better paper. Have them list the reasons why they like one paper better than the other. Add their comments to the list on the board.
 4. Tell the students that they have a pretty good list of features and ask them if they'd like to see what teachers value in writing.
 5. Show students lists of teacher comments (Figure 6.5) and how similar they are to the students'. Students are always amazed at the similarity of the lists. For many of them, this is the first hint that they can also “be in on” the secret of the characteristics of quality.
 6. Tell students that this year you're going to teach them how to look for and use the same criteria for quality writing that teachers use when they grade writing.
-

Figure 6.3. What to Do on Day 1

SOURCE: © 2000, NWREL. Portland, OR; 503-275-9500. Used with permission.

Maybe students don't make more insightful comments because they didn't know what to say to each other. They didn't know what features to look for in work to comment on. And, even if they did notice something, maybe they lacked the vocabulary for talking about it. Teaching students the criteria for quality teaches students what to notice and provides them a vocabulary for talking about it.

Teaching criteria is like teaching a foreign language—you need immersion. Surround students with the language of the criteria. Like the example of the teacher with the target on the bulletin board, provide students with pictures, examples, verbal descriptions, and models.

Figure 6.3 provides a step-by-step procedure for how you can start the immersion process for quality writing criteria.

Give students a copy of one of the “Student Friendly” versions of the rubric. (An elementary version of the Six-Traits + 1 Model is provided in the Resource section.) And you're on your way.

The Redwoods

Last year, we went on a vacation and we had a wonderful time. The weather was sunny and warm and there was lots to do, so we were never bored.

My parents visited friends and took pictures for their friends back home. My brother and I swam and also hiked in the woods. When we got tired of that, we just ate and had a wonderful time.

It was exciting and fun to be together as a family and to do things together. I love my family and this is a time that I will remember for a long time. I hope we will go back again next year for more fun and an even better time than we had this year.

Fox

I don't get along with people too good, and sometimes I am alone for a long time. When I am alone, I like to walk to forests and places where only me and the animals are. My best friend is God, but when I don't believe he's around sometime's, my dog stands in. We do every thing together. Hunt, fish, walk, eat and sleep together. My dog's name is Fox, 'cause he looks like an Arctic Fox. Fox and I used to live in this house with a pond behind. That pond was our property. The only thing allowed on it (that we allowed) was ducks & fish. If another person or dog would even look like going near that place, Fox and I would run them off in a frenzy. There was a lot of rocks around, so I would build forts and traps for any body even daring to come near. The pond had a bridge that was shaded by willows, so on a hot day me and Fox would sit on that bridge & soak our feet, well, I would soak my feet, Fox just kinda jumped in.

At night, the pond was alive with frogs, so I would invite this kid over, (he was a guy like me) and catch frogs. After we had a couple each, we would pick the best looking one out of our group and race them. The winner gets the other guys frog.

In the winter, the pond would freeze over, and I got my iceskates out. The pond was now an ice skating rink. Fox would chase me as I went round & round the pond.

After about a year, I was riding my bike patrolling the area around the pond. With Fox at my side, I raced downhill toward the pond. I tried to stop, but my back tire went into a skid. I went face first into murky, shadowy waters. When I went down, a minute later I felt something pull on my shirt, I grabbed it, not knowing what to think, when I hit the surface, I saw that it was Fox, pulling on my shirt as if he was trying to save me. He was too little to save me if I was really drowning, but it was the thought that counts, I owe him one.

(continued)

Figure 6.4. The Redwoods and Fox

Another year passed. One day my mom got home from the store, and she bought me a rubber raft. It was just a cheap one, but it was mine. I blew it up with a tire pump. It was just the right size for me & Fox. Out of respect for Fox, I named it the USS Fox and christened it right in the pond.

On sunny days, I would take the raft out & lay in the sun with Fox on my legs. One day, when I was asleep in the raft, the wind blew pretty hard and blew my raft right into a bunch of sticks and rocks, the USS Fox was given a sad salute, and then was no more.

Another year passed, and this would be our last year by the pond. I admired and respected that pond more than I ever did that year. But, at long last, all good things must come to an end, we moved to another town. Fox & I still visit the pond, but it'll never be like them 3 years when she was mine.

Figure 6.4 Continued

SOURCE: © 2000, NWREL. Portland, OR; 503-275-9500. Used with permission.

Note: Both students' work are presented here without corrections for any grammar, spelling, punctuation, or other errors.



Strategy 2: Read and Score Anonymous Student Papers

Strategy 2 helps students practice what to look for in writing that makes it work. Focus on the traits one by one. Students feel overwhelmed when they have to attend to all the features of good writing at once—remember the golf example in Chapter 2.

Teachers usually begin with the trait of Ideas. After all, a paper without good ideas is not worth reorganizing, improving word choice, and so on. Then, continue on to Organization, or perhaps Voice. Some teachers, however, prefer to begin with an easier trait to conceptualize, like Word Choice, in order to familiarize students with the use of criteria before moving on to more complex features of writing.

Spend as much time on each trait as students need—there's always next year. Our experience shows that by Grade 6, students can internalize all six traits in a single school year (a couple of hours a week). High school students can do it in a single term (again, a couple of hours a week). Adults take about 18 hours.

In any case, Figure 6.6 shows the steps in reading and scoring anonymous papers in order to internalize each component of quality.

Strategy 3: Practice-Focused Revision

While Strategies 1 and 2 assist students in practicing what to notice about quality, Strategy 3 helps them understand



IDEAS . . .

- ▣▣▣ Makes sense.
- ▣▣▣ Gets and holds my attention.
- ▣▣▣ Has a main idea, thesis, center, sense of purpose.
- ▣▣▣ Writer draws on experience.
- ▣▣▣ Says something new, or says it in a fresh way.
- ▣▣▣ Full of details that add.
- ▣▣▣ Important information.
- ▣▣▣ Interesting.



ORGANIZATION . . .

- ▣▣▣ The opening makes me want to keep reading.
- ▣▣▣ Has a logical order or pattern.
- ▣▣▣ I can follow the story or main points.
- ▣▣▣ Ends well. Ties up loose ends. Doesn't stop abruptly.
- ▣▣▣ Doesn't repeat what I just read: "Now you know the three reasons we should fight pollution."
- ▣▣▣ Pacing is good.

VOICE . . .

- ▣▣▣ Sounds like a person wrote it.
- ▣▣▣ Sounds like this *particular* writer.
- ▣▣▣ Writing has style, flavor.
- ▣▣▣ Reaches out to me, the reader. Brings me "inside."
- ▣▣▣ Makes me respond. Makes me *feel*.



WORD CHOICE . . .

- ▣▣▣ Makes me say, "Yes, that's just the right word or phrase!"
- ▣▣▣ Long after reading, some words still tug at my memory.
- ▣▣▣ Words are used correctly.
- ▣▣▣ The writer chooses wisely but isn't afraid to stretch.
- ▣▣▣ This writer knows the language of the topic—but doesn't try to impress me with phony, bloated phrases.
- ▣▣▣ Simple language is used when it gets the job done.

SENTENCE FLUENCY . . .

- ▣▣▣ It's smooth going—easy on the ear.
- ▣▣▣ I could *easily* read this aloud.
- ▣▣▣ Sentences begin differently. OR . . .
- ▣▣▣ Repetition is stylistic, not annoying.
- ▣▣▣ Some sentences are long. Some aren't.
- ▣▣▣ Sentences aren't choppy.
- ▣▣▣ Sentences don't meander.



CONVENTIONS . . .

- ▣▣▣ The writing is clean and polished. It looks proofread.
- ▣▣▣ *Most* things are done correctly.
- ▣▣▣ Careful, controlled use of conventions makes meaning clear and reading easy.
- ▣▣▣ No BIG erers sHoutt at me frm the pg: Hey!" Fergt IDEAS and VIOCE! Think ? abowt, the mystakes!, A lot!!"
- ▣▣▣ Spelling, punctuation, grammar, capital letters, and paragraph indenting: This writer has thoughtfully attended to ALL conventional details.

Figure 6.5. What Teachers Look for in Writing

SOURCE: © 2000, NWREL. Portland, OR; 503-275-9500. Used with permission.

This procedure should sound pretty familiar to anyone who has scored performance assessments. The procedure for teaching students to score papers is exactly the same as that for teaching adult raters.

1. Make overheads of sample *anonymous* student papers. Use papers from another teacher, from last year's students, or contact NWREL.
2. Read each paper out loud. Writing plays differently to the ear than it looks to the eye.
3. Focus on a single trait. Ask students to read their rubric for the focus trait and determine a score. Poll the students on their scores. Remember, there is no such thing as a "right" score, only a justifiable score. Scores should be justified by statements in the rubric. Have students articulate the statements that justify their score. If students disagree, ask them to try to convince each other that they are right, using the language of the rubric.
4. Students, as well as adult raters, might want to focus on "following directions." This might be important in some contexts, but not here. Keep emphasizing that it is the quality of the writing that counts, not whether students followed directions.
5. Read and score 6 to 8 papers for a single trait. Keep going until students are getting pretty good agreement rates on their scores. This might occur over several days, depending on the grade level.

Figure 6.6. Strategy 2: Teaching Traits by Scoring Anonymous Sample Papers
SOURCE: © 2000, NWREL. Portland, OR; 503-275-9500. Used with permission.

what to fix and how to fix it once a weakness has been noticed. Again, focus only on a single trait at a time (at least at first) because it is difficult for students to attend to everything that needs to be revised at once. Figure 6.7 describes how to have students practice focused revision.



Strategy 4: Read, Read, READ!

Use picture books and other literature to illustrate the traits—both strong and weak examples. Teachers have always read to students. But here's the difference when using Strategy 4: Purposely tie the selections back to one of the traits. Be explicit, using the language of the rubric. For example,

- For Voice, you might choose two versions of the same fairy tale written by different authors and ask students to notice differences between the voices. What is the voice? Frivolous, sad, excited, mocking, . . . ?

Again, use anonymous papers. Choose papers that really need revision on a particular trait. Don't do this just once. Do this 8 or 9 times on a single trait before moving on to the next trait.

1. Ask the students to score the paper on the target trait using their rubric (as in Strategy 2). Once again, ask students to justify their scores.
2. Have students brainstorm the things the author could do to make the paper better on this trait. For example, for the trait of ideas, students will often say: narrow the focus; add more details on the important points; take out details on unimportant points; choose one really interesting thing and expand on it; show, don't tell; and so on.
3. Have students work in groups to rewrite the piece using their own advice.
4. Ask groups to read their new versions aloud and justify why the new paper should get a higher score.
5. It often happens that revision on one trait—say, ideas—will also improve the other traits as well. Point this out to students.
6. After students have practiced revision on anonymous papers, ask them to revise one of their own pieces of writing for the trait being emphasized.

Figure 6.7. Strategy 3: Practice Focused Revision

SOURCE: © 2000, NWREL. Portland, OR; 503-275-9500. Used with permission.

- For Organization, you might ask students to compile a notebook of effective beginnings and endings, with descriptions of what makes them effective.
- For Sentence Fluency, choose books that are flowing, choppy, or have other types of sentence fluency. Ask students to describe the various styles and why the author chose the style he or she used. What purpose did it serve? What feel did it give to the writing?

Strategy 5: Model the Writing Process Yourself

Ask students to be a peer review group for your own writing. Don't pick a piece of writing that you've already revised. Pick a rough draft. Students often don't get to see that we, as teachers, don't have



1. Tell the students a story about something exciting that happened to you. Did your brakes go out on a hill? Were you charged by a lion in Africa? Make it interesting to capture their attention. Then tell them that you're going to share a written version of the story with them tomorrow.
2. Spend about 15 minutes writing up your story. Don't spend longer than that or it will be too good. You want to show the students a piece of writing that needs revision.
3. Read your story to the students, have them tell you what trait you need to work on first, and ask them to give you suggestions on how to make your paper better on that trait. They usually have a lot to say—they love to critique the teacher.
4. Use their suggestions to write a revision. Don't make it too good. Ask students to score the revision on the trait of interest and ask for additional suggestions. You need to model the fact that writing sometimes needs more than a single revision.

Keep going until students are satisfied with your paper. Point out that revising a paper for a single trait frequently also improves the other traits as well.

Figure 6.8. Model Revision

SOURCE: © 2000, NWREL. Portland, OR; 503-275-9500. Used with permission.

perfect writing springing from our pens on the first try. We also have to revise. Model it. In fact, the worse the first draft, the better. That will give students more to notice. Figure 6.8 describes a procedure that seems to work pretty well.



Strategy 6: Give Students Many Opportunities to Show What They Know

Here are a few examples to get you started. What else could you ask students to do to show what they know?

- Ask students to write letters to their favorite authors explaining, using the language of the traits, why they like the authors' work.
- Have students write to younger students about what it takes to write well. They need to explain the traits in language the younger students can understand.
- Have students work in teams to develop a poster that explains one of the traits. Use pictures, metaphors, and definitions.

- Ask students to analyze one of their own pieces of writing, using the language of the traits.
- Ask students to describe to their parents what they've learned this year in writing, using the language of the traits.

Strategy 7: Teach Lessons Focused on the Traits



This one is easy. You probably already have a file cabinet full of lessons and activities that teach one or more of the traits. The difference now is that you can organize them purposefully by trait, so that for every lesson you and the students will know the feature of good-quality writing that is being practiced. These can include the following:

1. Short “touch-up” activities to reinforce the traits. For example, teach different ways to organize expository writing and tie it to the trait of organization. Teach spelling, grammar, and other conventions.
2. Teach longer, more extensive lessons centered on the traits. For example, students usually need assistance in improving on their ideas. You can do a series of activities that help student improve their ideas. For example,
 - a. Share six ways writers add drama to their writing—action, dialogue, description of setting, physical description of character, internal thinking of one of the characters, and internal physical sensations of one of the characters. Find examples. Practice.
 - b. Describe and show the difference between showing and telling in writing. Find examples from literature. Have students practice turning telling into showing and showing into telling. Have discussions on when and how each could/should be used.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter we explored seven strategies for inviting students into the secrets of quality by teaching them criteria (see Box 6.3). The extended example was in writing, but we invited you to think about other subject areas.

BOX 6.3 Seven Strategies for Teaching Criteria to Students—In a Nutshell

The seven strategies can be summarized in one phrase: Surround students with the language they need to think and speak like writers (or problem solvers, critical thinkers, collaborators, etc.).

Final Thoughts

You've seen it all—from soup to nuts about rubrics: what they are, the types, when to use various types, what constitutes good ones, how to develop them, how to grade using them, and how to make quality real to students by teaching *them* the criteria for quality. What you have to remember is that even though all this information has come from many years of research and practice, it's still a continuous process of learning about rubrics—a process in which *we all* are still engaged! **These aren't the final answers—they're temporary answers until we all learn more.**

But it's also true that the ideas in this book—making learning targets clear to students and improving student achievement by inviting them into the assessment process—are not a flash in the pan. This is the future of assessment in education. Rubrics are a powerful means to this end.

Note

1. For example, we used some of these same strategies in Chapter 4 to teach you, the reader, criteria for good-quality rubrics. Which strategies did we use?