Maria Rost Rublee, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor, Government & World Affairs
University of Tampa

Teaching Analytical Writing Through Rubrics

The Impetus

All political science professors want to see their students write better, and more importantly, write more analytically. We want to see our students rise above mere description and speculation, and learn how to analyze material and create their own insights. My professional background created a particular impetus for teaching analytical writing. Before getting my Ph.D., I was a journalist and editor – and thus I learned to place a premium on direct and concise writing. During my Ph.D. program, I dabbled in government work – and realized that analytical writing was both highly valued and infrequently found.

Therefore, one of my goals as a tenure-track professor is to teach students to write clearly and analytically. Not only does this force them to grapple with the course material – as opposed to simply memorizing it – it also pushes them to hone skills that will make them more competitive in the job market. However, I quickly realized that while I expected my students to write analytically, I was not really teaching them how to do so – at least not clearly and systematically. Instead, students who were both naturally good writers and analytical were rewarded with As. Those who weren't, weren't. While I gave students extensive help with writing mechanics, I didn't provide clear, direct guidance as to how a student could improve their analytical skills. So instead of teaching analysis, I was selecting for it – which disappointed me.

The Inspiration

However, not until the 2005 APSA Teaching & Learning Conference did I realize how I could make my expectations more clear: through a rubric. A presentation on rubrics in debates made me realize that such a tool could help me clarify what I expected from my students. In searching for an appropriate rubric, I was able to find writing rubrics, but most were for middle school and none were for college-level analytical writing. So I decided to create my own.

I sat down and thought about what I expected in an analytical paper; specifically, I asked myself what components of a paper created good analysis? Then I outlined these expectations in an analytical writing rubric, to clarify for my students and myself what constituted good analysis: clear organization that led the reader through the author's arguments, clear and distinct arguments that went beyond summary, thorough support for analytical arguments, and hopefully, original or creative insights that took the reader beyond what the text said. In addition, I included elements of good writing (precise diction, high level of discourse, etc.) because writing should showcase, not detract from, good analysis.

[Insert analytical writing rubric.]

Assessment of Rubric's Utility
To assess the impact of the rubric, I compared paper scores between two semesters of classes: three classes in Spring 2005 and three classes in Fall 2005. The paper assignments for students were the same: they read a set of related newspaper articles and create their own analytical points. (So that I could compare more easily, even most of the newspaper articles were the same.) For each class, students wrote 3 analysis papers throughout the semester. To encourage learning, the first was worth 5% of their grade, the second 8%, and the third 12%.

The main difference between classes in Spring 2005 and Fall 2005 was my use of the rubric. Other differences did exist, of course. In Spring 2005, two of my three classes were not introductory level; in Fall 2005, two of the three classes were introductory level. If anything, this would mean that student grades might be higher in Spring 2005. In Fall 2005, I gave students a more detailed guidance sheet on analytical papers; it included the same material I communicated orally to students in Spring 2005. To the extent having the material in printed format would help students, that would indicate higher grades in Fall 2005.

Key Findings
I had hoped that the rubric would help students understand what I was looking for in an analytical paper. The results were inspiring and surprising.

My most surprising finding was that with the rubric, I graded much harder. Prior to using the rubric, I knew that I was not really communicating my expectations. Therefore, I was more likely to reward any analysis – even if it was not thoroughly developed or supported. But with the rubric, I knew I had clearly outlined the key components of good analysis, and thus I expected students to use that knowledge to create thorough, developed analytical points. For me, grading with the rubric was a relief: I didn't have to give Bs to work that I knew was not B quality. The quantitative analysis bore out my belief that I was grading harder with the rubric. In Spring 2005, the average grade for the first paper was an 87. In Fall 2005, the average grade for the first paper was an 84.

My second finding was that students did learn better analytical skills due to the rubric. During Fall 2005, a number of students commented that the rubric helped them focus their papers better. One student summed up the sentiment; he said, "I went through the rubric, wrote the paper, looked at the rubric again, and then made a lot of changes." In addition, I found it easier to explain to students what they did wrong on their papers. If they had an interesting analytical point but failed to develop it with supporting facts and logic, I could easily point that out since an entire rubric category is devoted to "support for arguments." Again, the numbers showed what I believed was happening. In Spring 2005, the average grade for the last paper was an 89. In Fall 2005, the average grade for the last paper was a 90.

So due to the rubric, student grades went from 87 on the first paper and 89 on the last paper, to 84 on the first paper to 90 on the last paper. Additionally, the movement from 87 to 89 was not even really that positive; both the 87 and 89 were "soft" because I was not grading as rigorously because I felt I had not been clear about my expectations. Thus, the fact that students were earning an average of a 90 on the last paper with the use of the rubric is quite important. This

was a real 90 – an earned 90 – which showed that students took the goal of writing analytical seriously, and for the most part, succeeded.

[Question to readers: I have done a lit review on the use of rubrics, and my findings confirm the lit review hypotheses: rubrics increase grading rigor and increase student learning. I am not sure where best to fit the lit review.]

Dr. Maria Rost Rublee
Government and World Affairs

Analytical Writing Rubric

Criteria	A	B	C	D/F
Organization	Clear organization that walks the reader through the paper, does not stray off topic	Clear organization but strays slightly	Organization is less than clear, or organization is clear but some digressions	Organization is unclear and/or paper strays substantially from topic
Argumentation	Paper has clear, strong arguments that go beyond description	Paper has discernable arguments but may be somewhat unclear or weak	Paper has arguments but often falls into description	Paper has little to no arguments, spends most time describing
Support	Numerous, varied and relevant details and facts support arguments	Details and facts support arguments, but may not provide enough or may be as relevant as possible	Some details and facts to support arguments, but not enough and some lack relevancy	Little to no relevant details and facts to support arguments
Content Knowledge	Demonstrates excellent understanding of content and is comfortable with nuances in material	Conveys content adequately but fails to elaborate	Gets basic content correct but is otherwise uncomfortable with material	Basic content is wrong, incorrect, or substantially incomplete
Originality	Demonstrates excellent analytical originality, either in creating new arguments or in relating facts in new ways (beyond what is covered in course material)	Demonstrates some, but not a great deal of, analytical originality, either in creating new arguments or in relating facts in new ways	Demonstrates little analytical originality, relies mainly on arguments and evidence already covered in class	Makes no attempt to provide original analysis

Criteria	A	B	C	D/F
Level of Discourse	Variety of sentence structures, good use of cohesive devices	Some variety in sentence structure, adequate use of cohesive devices	Limited variety in sentence structure, little use of cohesive devices	Mostly single-clause sentences, little to no use of cohesive devices
Vocabulary	Precise diction, rich use of appropriate vocabulary	Generally good vocabulary choices with some variety, minor errors in diction	Limited vocabulary, not always precise or accurate	Incorrect use of vocabulary, very limited range
Grammar	No major errors, a few minor errors that do not distract	One major error or several minor errors that do not distract	Two or three major errors combined with minor errors	Numerous major errors