Using the multi-celled rubric

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This rubric is designed primarily to deal with thesis-driven arguments. We know from our meetings with departments that many different kinds of writing are assigned at the College, and the rubric may not work equally well with all of them. For example, creative assignments would most likely not use “evidence” in the sense that we mean it here; a bibliographic essay would most likely not have a thesis. You will decide what parts of the rubric might be useful for your course.

The visual lay-out of this rubric suggests that the four main categories are equally important. Ultimately, in an excellent finished paper, they may be, but in teaching writing, I never teach them all at once. In general, I proceed by category. I might give students in my writing classes the entire rubric, but I designate one category as our primary focus to start with, and then add the subsequent ones as we seem able to handle them.

Thus from the beginning, the students see everything that is expected of them, but they will only gradually receive feedback and instruction in the subcategories.

Purposes of the categories

**Category 1: Content** is the most important place to start. If students don’t have a clear sense of thesis and argument, not much else is going to go well in their papers, and there’s little point in correcting the grammar of an essay that has no point!

Within this category, I emphasize the criteria in the order they occur: first try to determine a thesis, then what argument will support it—an effort that may reveal problems with focus and scope, and for the most successful papers, may generate some truly original ideas. This last criterion is probably achieved only by the very best papers.

**Category 2: Evidence** focuses in general on how writers conduct their arguments, and again the subcategories seem to be in a logical sequence. First a writer must understand that claims need to be supported. If some effort is being made to do that, then the choice of supports can be discussed—a source might be misunderstood or misapplied. The most successful writers will not only use evidence—whether from outside sources or their own experience—appropriately and accurately, but they will also reflect critically on the sources. The student who achieves well in this subcategory is not alarmed when discovering sources that disagree with each other, but rather sees disagreement as opportunity!

**Category 3: Structure** also pertains to how an argument is conducted. It is built from paragraphs that must themselves be coherent. The argument must be introduced and concluded with appropriate content. The body paragraphs must be linked together with strong transitions, ideally content-related rather than merely numerical or chronological. If subcategories 3.1 and 3.2 are attended to, then the final subcategory here, cohesion, should be achieved.
Category 4: Execution deals with many matters that tend to be addressed only once a complete draft of the argument exists. Style can be clarified and mechanics corrected on the draft. Of course, the last subcategory here must in some ways be the very first to be addressed: the student must understand what the assignment requires before attempting to frame a thesis. But checking to see that citation guidelines are followed correctly can be done in a late draft.

Adapting the rubric to your course

It would make sense to add a subcategory or two that dealt specifically with the task you have assigned, or to alter the language in the cells to focus more specifically on what you expect. For example, in a literature course I might add a subcategory under “Evidence” that requires students to support their interpretive arguments with close reading of textual passages.

Coordinating the rubric with feedback

It is a good idea to use the same terminology in assigning writing as in evaluating it. This would mean to try to use the language in the rubric not only to express your expectations, but to explain how they have or have not been met.

You might be able to use the rubric as an evaluation grid, indicating into which cell a student’s work falls for each subcategory. But this should not be the only feedback you give. Students will need comments on their written work that responds specifically to what each student does. But the rubric can save you time in grading papers by allowing you to quickly indicate a number of common problems.

You can also use the rubric in individual meetings with students, or guide them to use it in class in evaluating each other’s work.