Using the multi-celled rubric

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The rubric can be used in a number of different ways to help guide student analytical writing. I, for instance, give it to my students at the beginning of the year as a way of framing course-wide expectations. I point them to the rubric again before they begin major writing assignments, reminding them to pay particular attention to areas of perceived weakness. And when I provide comments on their written work, I use the language of the rubric to highlight strengths and limitations.

One perhaps unexpected way that I use the rubric, though, is in structuring writing conferences with students.

After I return major writing assignments to students, I invariably receive a crush of them in office hours—all anxious to talk about their writing, but having little idea about what questions to ask. By and large, they ask me what they should work on, which can be a bit frustrating since I spend so much time providing written feedback about exactly that matter.

One solution for me has been to hand students the multi-celled rubric and to ask them what they believe to be the two greatest strengths and weaknesses in their papers. Sometimes they are far off the mark (which can be quite telling, identifying students who really need additional help). Mostly, however, they understand what they’ve done well and what they’ve struggled with. But they need a chance to process.

Consequently, I have begun to see these writing conferences as a means of stimulating the reflection that I so often, and so foolishly, think will happen when students sit down with their papers and skim my feedback. Even if all they get out of our conferences is the chance to say—out loud—what they did well and what they struggled with, I count the meeting as a success.

Often, however, the identification of those strengths and weaknesses—particularly the weaknesses—allows us to do much that would otherwise be impossible. It focuses our conversation, which helps save time and also helps students walk away with a few ideas about how to improve. It gives us something to track across our further meetings, so that we can plan for future assignments and gauge progress. And it helps me write clearer and more targeted comments when I provide feedback on subsequent work.

Of course, you don’t need the rubric to do this. By using consistent language and maintaining expectations that are stable and transparent, you can accomplish many of the same aims. I like the rubric as a tool in my toolbox, though. And I also like the idea that if other folks are using it, students will get a relatively consistent message across the College with regard to good analytical writing.