



Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education

## Why use a rubric when a checklist will do?

By Karen L. Erickson

If learning is a journey, think of assessment as a means of transporting students from place to place - from basic knowledge to masterful and complex thinking about subjects where they can synthesize and assimilate ideas. In life, we often choose our mode of transportation or vehicle based on where we are and where we want to go. The same is true for choosing the collection tools we use in assessment. Which tool is appropriate for where students are now? Which tool will best move them forward?

There are a variety of collection tools available for conducting student assessment: checklists, rating scales, qualitative rubrics, and holistic rubrics to name a few. Since selecting the right tool has to do with the learner and her journey to understanding concepts and mastering the skills, rubrics are sometimes, but not always, the answer. How, then, do we determine which tool is most beneficial? To answer this, let's consider the differences between these types of assessments and the information they return. Let's begin with a checklist.

Checklists are a simple list of assessment criteria or components that must be present in student work with a space for checking off if the student has accomplished this or not. There is no judgment on the quality of the work. A checklist might look something like this:

Write a Y for Yes; N for No

\_\_\_\_\_ Held the football correctly.

\_\_\_\_\_ Threw a ball 10 yards

\_\_\_\_\_ Kicked the ball over the goal post

Checklists are mostly a yes/no absolute and are best used when introducing basic skills. Some other examples of criteria include whether or not students can define a word; find their own space; put materials away; participate in discussion. Again, it is not about the quality of the work students are doing at this beginning stage. I use a checklist most often in the early grades when I am teaching so many entry level skills and processes. I also use it at any upper grade when I am first introducing a skill or process.



A checklist does not, however, give any indication that the students understand or have mastered the information or skill. When students are beginning to take ownership of the knowledge or skill, I might begin to notice how frequently they use it, get it correct, or choose it for their work. I might also want to communicate a level of judgment about the work. This would be the second stage of moving to mastery and requires a rating scale. Let's look at two types of rating scales: frequency and performance

A frequency rating scale collects information about how often or in what quantity something happens. It might look something like this:

He kicked the ball for 3 points	3 times	2 times	1 time	0 times
He completed his passes	3 times	2 times	1 time	0 times
He completed his tackles	50% of the time	25% of the time	10% of the time	

A performance rating scale might look like this:

You were prepared for the game	5	4	3	2	1
You played with enthusiasm	5	4	3	2	1

Or it might look like this:

You played your position with enthusiasm

Excellent Work



Okay



Needs Work



How many times have you given or been involved in a professional development workshop and seen an assessment tool that evaluates the workshop with the 5-1 scale? But what do all of those numbers mean? Does a 5 from one member of the audience mean the same as a 5 from someone else? Once you know assessment, this becomes frustrating because the responses do little to help you improve for the next professional development program.

How does a student who gets a "Needs Work" know what he has done incorrectly and how to improve it? Yes, there are more scoring choices than a simple checklist and that is a bonus. However, judgments are subjective and your response to a student personally can get in the way of objectivity.

I use rating scales when I see the students moving beyond the simplified application of a skill or process and I want to give them more feedback than a simple yes/no. However, once the



student is ready to move on to demonstrating deeper understanding and is beginning to take charge of their own learning, then I want to move on to a rubric.

A rubric is a tool that has a list of criteria, similar to a checklist, but also contains descriptors in a performance scale which inform the student what different levels of accomplishment look like. A rubric might look like this in our football example. (Did you notice that the examples were all about football? There is a reason for this that you will see shortly.)

Descriptors	Professional	College Sports	Little League
Criteria List	Exceeds	Meets	Not Yet
Passing	Your passes were accurate and hit their target every time. They were smooth and spiraled in the air.	Your passes were accurate and hit their target but they wobbled in the air and caused the receiver to stretch.	The passes did not come anywhere near their target.
Kicking	Your kicks had follow through and you kept your eye on the ball.	Your kicks had follow through but you took your eye off of the ball.	Your kicks missed the mark because your eye was not on the ball and there was no follow through.

We might even combine a bit of frequency with the descriptors

Blocks	You made <b>all</b> clean blocks protecting the quarterback.	You made <b>mostly</b> clean blocks but let the quarterback get sacked.	The quarterback was sacked <b>every</b> time. There were <b>no</b> clean blocks.
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The information in a rubric helps the students understand where they are in their own development. When rubrics were developed, it was not for the purpose of giving a grade but for assisting in student learning by providing descriptive feedback. The advantage of rubrics is that students can attain a level they set for themselves and that students can assist in developing them. The challenge of rubrics is writing with clarity. I want to refer you to “The Art of Words in Crafting Assessments” which can assist you in writing the best possible rubrics.

But what happens when students have mastered the individual criteria and they are beginning to synthesize and assimilate the processes and skills into a unified whole? Then it is time to



move on to a holistic rubric. Holistic rubrics are used when we are no longer looking at individual components but how well and flawlessly components are combined to create a masterful work or performance. These rubrics have a place in the real world and are used quite often when assessing performance of a professional nature. Take a look at this rubric I have been compiling on the Chicago Bears.

**Football Rubric** based on commentary by Dan Pompei in the Chicago Tribune; combined and edited by Karen L. Erickson – 2009 Bears football season. This 1–10 scale has been compressed here to a 1-6 scale for space.

	6	5	4	3	2	1
Quarterback	Makes 3-5 outstanding passes; timing and accuracy impeccable; running when needed; only one interception; manages the game well; takes some risks but does nothing stupid; two long passes - one resulting in a touchdown; one or two stupid plays (e.g. drawing an unsportsmanlike penalty or failing to slide on a short run); moves well; makes nice throws outside of the pocket; makes some poor decisions but ends up with good ones that win the game	Makes the receivers reach for the ball; completes large percentage of passes (77% or more); no running evident; no downfield passes; manages the game well	Nice athleticism and determination; no stupid throws; only one third down conversion; lack of moving the ball into field goal range at half or end of game; failure to achieve touchdowns even when starting a drive on the 30 or 20 yard line of the opposing team; starts out strong and then stops throwing downfield; fumbles one snap at a key moment	Plays it safe; throws the ball away and takes sacks when necessary; conservative play wins the game; makes valuable contributions by running the ball for yardage	Throws three interceptions; fumbles two snaps; underthrown balls to wide open receivers	Red zone interception because of throwing into triple coverage; miscommunications with receivers resulting in interception; sloppy play action fakes; few running plays attempted even though there are good rushers on the team; 3-4 almost interceptions and 3-4 interceptions in the same game

I noticed in 2009 that Dan Pompei, a sportswriter for the Chicago Tribune, was taking each position of the Chicago Bears (quarterback, running back, special teams, etc.) and rating them on a scale of 1-10. Following the rating, he would write his justification. I knew immediately that this was a "rubric" being used in the real world. I wanted to see how consistent he was in rating the team from week to week, so I created a formal rubric grid and captured (and edited) his ideas sans names and repetitions. \* He was amazingly reliable. At the end of the season I shared the rubric with him. I have always considered myself quite knowledgeable about



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football (my father was a referee and I was raised on the game), but the rubric heightened my awareness, and gave me new insights into the qualities needed to excel at the game. That is what a rubric is supposed to do. Even in the arts, we are judged by "invisible" rubrics every time a critic writes a review. Every reviewer has a rubric in his head against which we are assessed.

If we collected those reviews over time, we could formulate a rubric and gain new insights into the mind of the author.

Notice that Dan Pompei did not pull out individual criteria, nor should he have, as these are professional football players and their work is judged as a whole, not in parts. We use a holistic rubric to give a broader picture of an entire performance. Holistic rubrics are used to measure the work of the most advanced people in any field of endeavor. Even young students who have outgrown qualitative rubrics can be presented with holistic rubrics (think of young gifted musicians, actors, painters, etc.).

When you are ready to select and develop your collection tools, don't think you have to use only one at a time. I often have a three criteria rubric on the same page as a four or five criteria checklist or combine a frequency rating scale with a checklist. Fit the assessment to the student and his or her attainment level – sometimes a combination of tools is needed to do the job adequately.

Also keep in mind that all rubrics do not have to have the same number of descriptors. I might be working with two criteria on a rubric that only have three descriptors and two other criteria that have five. Why would they have five? Because the two with five have been studied longer, with more rigor, and the work of the students is more varied.

I have seen people try to write a rubric for a stage in development that only needed a checklist and people writing a checklist when what was needed was a rubric. Remember that learning is a journey. The right vehicle will take the student further down the road to mastery while maintaining a sense of accomplishment by arriving safely and on time at the next stop.

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Karen can be contacted at [kerickson@creativedirections.org](mailto:kerickson@creativedirections.org) or through her website [www.creativedirections.org](http://www.creativedirections.org)

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\* If any of you are football fans and would like a copy of the entire rubric addressing all positions, just send an email to: [kerickson@creativedirections.org](mailto:kerickson@creativedirections.org)



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*Biography:* Karen L. Erickson, a national consultant in arts education, professional artist and Executive Director of Creative Directions, provides training in curriculum, arts integration assessment, whole school change, playwriting, directing, drama education, and language arts nationally and internationally. Erickson is a Workshop Leader and Seminar Presenter for the Kennedy Center's professional development programs. Erickson is a certified teacher of theater, language arts, and speech communications K-12. Author of seven drama education books, she co-authored the *Illinois Learning Standards for Fine Arts*, *Chicago Arts Standards*, and the *Integrated Curriculum Arts Project (ICAP)*. Erickson served as Artistic Director of Trinity Square Ensemble Theater in Evanston and worked at the Goodman Theatre as Assistant to Tennessee Williams. Erickson continues her work as a playwright and stage director having written fifteen plays for youth and adults produced across the United States.

