I Like It, But Is It Good? Identifying Quality Writing

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I like it, but is it good?

Identifying Quality Writing

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Department of Writing & Linguistics
Materials do you provide when you give student assignments?

- Oral announcement in class
- A short written description of the requirements
- An assignment sheet that contains detailed description of the requirements
- An assignment sheet and a grading rubric
How much do you think the students understand expectations and the assessment criteria?
“The only input [our professor] gave us was, ‘You should know what to do. You’re in college now. I will not explain what you need to do.’”

“Everyone was always unsure of what to do because the assignment was only described as a ‘reflection.’”

My professor’s requirements were very strict, but he was also very transparent on how to fulfill these requirements.”
“For them [professors], the discourses of their disciplines are second nature; for us, they are almost a foreign language.”
The Initial Problem

How can we reduce variation between student and teacher application of rubrics?
# Finding a solution: rubrics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits for students</th>
<th>Problems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Students gain clarity in understanding teacher expectations</td>
<td>• Students fail to completely understand assessment criteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Students have a guide for checking their work and revising</td>
<td>• Students interpret the definition of quality differently from the teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“For them [professors], the discourses of their disciplines are second nature; for us, they are almost a foreign language.”

For us [professors], the discourses of evaluating writing in our disciplines are second nature; for them [students], they are almost a foreign language.”
The Problem

How can we reduce variation between student and teacher evaluations of written texts?
Methods

• Participants
  – Invited 312 students
  – 296 agreed to participate
  – Response rate: 95%

• Instruments
  – Questionnaire: 15 items (background + ratings and explanation of 2 writing samples)
  – Keyword rubrics

• Analysis
  – Change of agreement in essay ratings
  – Analysis of student explanation of ratings
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>37.33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>53.42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>9.25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>292</td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Student Ratings of an Adequate Sample Essay

**FALL 2016**
- Strong: 37%
- Adequate: 58%
- Weak: 5%

**SPRING 2017**
- Strong: 37.3%
- Adequate: 53.4%
- Weak: 9.3%
Personal Opinions vs. Text-Based Explanation

- “The examples are well chosen and good explained. The assumptions seem reasonable to the chosen ads” (TB, #8)
- “I was never questioning the ideas of the writer and seemed to agree with most of what they were saying.” (PO, #77)
- “This paper was really good” (RG, #99)
Personal Opinions vs. Text-Based Explanation

- “It was a good convincing piece of writing towards the argument. It never offered any opposing points of view though.” (TB, #19)

- “very well written, i dont necessarily agree with the message they are trying to sell to the reader.” (PO, #59)

- “i rated the essay adequate because it wasn't poorly written but the style was a little boring.” (PO, #116)

Types of Reasons for "Adequate" Ratings

- Text-based explanation: 49%
- Personal opinion: 32%
- Repetition of general evaluative words: 19%
Personal Opinions vs. Text-Based Explanation

- “The author is reading too much into these ads. If a man appears to be more dominant than a woman it's because he is. It's called biology.” (PO, #12)

- “I believe it was uninteresting” (PO, #23)

- “The analysis was insightful and thorough, but there was a clear lack of editing. Many words were misplaced in sentences and some punctuation was missing.” (RG & TB, #19)
Using *developed* to describe writing

In composition, **development** is the process of adding informative and illustrative details to support the main idea in a paragraph or essay. Also known as elaboration.

Paragraphs and essays can be developed in many different ways. In conventional composition courses (see current-traditional rhetoric), the following patterns of exposition (or models of composition) are often presented as the standard methods of development in expository writing:

- Analogy
- Example
- Cause and Effect
- Classification and Division
- Comparison and Contrast
- Process Analysis
- Extended Definition

(Nordquist 2015)
Analysis of *developed* to describe writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overall Rating</th>
<th># who chose developed</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>48.51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>46.53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall Rating</td>
<td>Develop-related comments</td>
<td>Positive comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------</td>
<td>--------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strong</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>37 (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adequate</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>8 (25.8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2 (50%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>72 (71%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Conclusions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>STRONG</strong></td>
<td>100% of these 37 raters know how to talk about development in writing, but they fail to accurately identify and assess it in their reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ADEQUATE</strong></td>
<td>55% of these 31 raters fail to accurately connect the keyword to their comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>WEAK</strong></td>
<td>50% of readers fail to accurately connect the keyword to their comments</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Only 6 students (8%) out of 72 offered a complete discussion of how developed the essay was.
What we’ve learned

- Students are parroting rubric language, not applying it – they can sound like they’re stating a legitimate evaluation of a text, but cannot accurately evaluate a text
- Keyword rubrics force students to articulate what they actually mean which highlights what language translations students need
- Instructors need to help students see what they think they understand, but don’t
- By focusing on key words, instructors can slow down the process to let students have time to not only learn the language of evaluation, but also the application of it.
Thank you!

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