

Grading According to a Rubric

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Recently in this journal, Linda Farmer explained her use of a “grading grid” to aid in the grading of argumentative philosophy papers.¹ It is interesting to note that there is actually a growing body of literature on the use of both grading rubrics and grading grids in paper grading of all kinds.²

One place the use of rubrics can be found is in the literature on taxonomies of learning.³ The most famous is Bloom’s taxonomy, created half a century ago and recently revised.⁴ One of the more prominent themes in the revised work is the distinction between *retention* and *transfer*. The idea is that we would like our students not only to remember the content and skills taught in our courses, but also to be able to transfer this knowledge to novel situations. Thus, in having a student write an argumentative paper in a philosophy class, we are interested in assessing whether the student has retained the ideas, issues, and arguments taught in the class, as well as whether the student can transfer this knowledge to the novel situation of creating his or her own argument.

Bloom’s taxonomy has two dimensions: one for types of knowledge, and one for types of cognitive processes. The different types of knowledge represent divisions along a continuum that ranges from concrete to abstract. One of the types of cognitive processes (remembering) indicates the process used for retention of, while the other five (understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating) are increasingly relevant to the transfer of, each of the types of knowledge.

One of the uses of the taxonomy that the authors stress is maintaining an alignment between educational objectives, instructional activities, and assessment. Each objective, activity, and assessment can be classified in the taxonomy, and, when this is done, it is immediately obvious whether these are in agreement. Grading (or scoring) rubrics can be employed in the service of this goal, by ensuring the codifying of the educational objectives into an assessment scheme, then guiding the choice of instructional activities.

In general, a rubric clearly states the criteria on which a grade will be based for any number of parts of a project, activity, or written assignment.

Grids, Rubrics, and Paper Grading

It is true that some of the most common student complaints about paper grading are that it is not clear what we want in a paper, the grading is purely subjective, and/or grading is inconsistent across students and time. In response to these complaints, I have experimented with a few different strategies, my first being a grading grid of the kind Farmer describes.

The grid grew out of the description I gave to the students in the syllabus of the criteria on which I would be grading their papers.⁵ I began using this grid mainly for grading shorter essays in a course on environmental ethics, and then expanded its use to my other courses. I would use it as a guide while I read the papers, and then include the grid with the paper I returned to the students with the points for each section indicated. I found it very useful for grading, but while it was more helpful for the students than merely labeling the categories “excellent,” “good,” etc., its helpfulness was somewhat limited. The students still needed more guidance as to what I meant by a “well-developed argument,” or an “unusually high level of understanding.” Indeed, as I tried to respond to student queries about these criteria, I found myself questioning whether I really did know myself what I meant.

Consequently, I developed a detailed grading rubric that explains as clearly as possible what constitutes each designation for each part of the paper. This rubric has the additional advantage of highlighting the various dimensions along which a paper may be evaluated; in other words, it lets students know that I am looking not just for a good argument, but also for a demonstration of their grasp of the material, clearly presented.

Explanation of Rubric

There are two parts to my rubric, “Content” and “Style.” The former covers the material of the essay: thesis, support, evaluation, etc., while the latter covers the presentation of the material, as well as the mechanics of writing such as organization, spelling, grammar, etc. (see the Appendix).

Under “Content” there are actually two distinct parts, although they are not separated as such in the handout. The second part, beginning with “Understanding” is explicitly arranged roughly according to the cognitive processes in Bloom’s taxonomy concerned with the transfer of

knowledge: understanding, analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and creation. Students are thus evaluated on how well they execute the successively higher-level tasks that are required for writing a good paper (although not all of these tasks are required for every paper; see below). They must demonstrate an *understanding* of the text and/or ideas relevant to the paper; they must successfully *analyze* and then *synthesize* the relevant arguments, ideas, and problems; they must *evaluate* the argument or position in question; and they must *create* a thesis, an argument, and alternatives. The rubric identifies the criteria for “excellent” completion of each task, as well as descriptions of what counts as “good,” “needing improvement,” and “unacceptable.”

At the heart of a philosophical paper, however, is the argument the student constructs, and, as such, this argument deserves special attention. The first part of the rubric, then, labeled “Argument,” concerns the various components important for writing a good and thorough philosophical paper: thesis, premises, support, and counter-arguments. Each aspect is evaluated on the fulfillment of its role in the overall argument, and again, the criteria for “excellent,” “good,” “needing improvement,” and “unacceptable” work is clearly articulated. What may not be readily apparent, however, is that this section is also (implicitly) devoted to the higher cognitive processes in Bloom’s taxonomy: analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and creation. For a particular argument, for example, the student must *create* a thesis, *analyze* his or her reasons for believing the thesis, *synthesize* these reasons into a coherent argument, *evaluate* these reasons as support for the thesis, and *create* possible alternatives to be considered.

Under the “Style” section of the rubric, there are also two distinct parts. The first, labeled “Clarity,” is concerned with both the basic mechanics of writing (grammar, spelling, accuracy), as well as some more advanced mechanics such as definitions, word-choice, and examples. It is in this part of the rubric that the first cognitive process in Bloom’s taxonomy (remembering) is evaluated. The second, labeled “Organization,” is concerned with the physical parts of the essay: introduction, body, and conclusion. This section gives students general guidelines for the appearance of a philosophical paper, and includes the evaluation of cognitive processes such as understanding, analysis, and synthesis of the student’s own work.

Clearly, the type of paper that would satisfy all the criteria above would be an excellent paper, but may be too much to either expect or desire in some classes or for some assignments. Indeed, the sections of this rubric I use vary with the level and subject matter of the course. In many undergraduate courses, for example, the paper topics are in the form of questions. Thus, I do not expect the students to formulate original theses; rather, I expect the theses to be answers to the ques-

tions. In addition, if the assignment is a short paper, I explicitly tell the students to concentrate on their own positive argument, and not consider counter-examples or counter-arguments. Every paper I assign, however, is evaluated according to some combination of the sections above.

Combining the Rubric with a Grading Grid

One advantage of such a rubric is that it lends itself easily to the construction of a grading grid. I have no standard grid because the components I am grading vary with the assignment, but let me give an example. One assignment might be to argue whether Neo (from the movie *The Matrix*) knows anything. Included in this assignment would be general indications as to how the student should proceed: In this case, the thesis need not be created, since it will be an answer to the question, and the student is not being asked to evaluate an argument or position, but all the other categories apply.

I would then assign points to the various sections and levels of proficiency, weighting each section according to how important I think it is. The grading grid for this assignment might then look something like Table 1.

Of course, other grading grids are possible, as it is possible to emphasize a wide variety of combinations of components in any given assignment. The advantage of this rubric is that the possible combinations are very apparent.

Drawbacks of Using a Rubric?

When I first introduced my rubric to the TAs in my department, many were hesitant. They feared that the rubric would make paper writing too mechanical for the students. My response is that for many students, philosophical paper writing may need to be mechanical, at least at first. As in any endeavor, students must master the basics before they can become truly creative.

The TAs in my department also worried that I was giving too much away in being so explicit. This fear, I believe, comes from a long overlooked problem in the humanities—we grade students on their writing, but we do not teach them how to write. As much as we might hope they would, students do not come to college knowing how to write philosophy papers. Usually, however, we cannot take the time in each of our courses (since most are not taught in sequence) to give the students this training. Rather, we must do a little training as we go along. This rubric, I believe, helps students recognize the components of a good paper, understand the criteria by which they will be evaluated, and respond to the specific areas in which they need improvement.

Table 1

	Excellent	Good	Needs Improvement	Unacceptable
CONTENT	85 (total)			
Argument				
Thesis	5	4	3	0
Premises	15	12	9	0
Support	15	12	9	0
Counter-Arguments	10	8	6	0
Understanding				
Text	5	4	3	0
Ideas	5	4	3	0
Analysis	10	8	6	0
Synthesis	10	8	6	0
Creation				
Examples	5	4	3	0
Alternative Positions	5	4	3	0
STYLE	15 (total)			
Clarity	6	5	4	0
Organization				
Introduction	3	2	1	0
Body	3	2	1	0
Conclusion	3	2	1	0

Appendix

	Excellent	Good	Needs Improvement	Unacceptable
CONTENT				
Argument				
Thesis	A clear statement of the main conclusion of the paper.	The thesis is obvious, but there is no single clear statement of it.	The thesis is present, but must be uncovered or reconstructed from the text of the paper.	There is no thesis.
Premises	Each reason for believing the thesis is made clear, and, as much as possible, presented in single statements. It is also clear which premises are to be taken as given, and which will be supported by sub-arguments. The paper provides sub-arguments for controversial premises. If there are sub-arguments, the premises for these are clear, and made in single statements. The premises that are taken as given are at least plausibly true.	The premises are all clear, although each may not be presented in a single statement. It is also pretty clear which premises are to be taken as given, and which will be supported by sub-arguments. The paper provides sub-arguments for controversial premises. If there are sub-arguments, the premises for these are clear. The premises that are taken as given are at least plausibly true.	The premises must be reconstructed from the text of the paper. It is not made clear which premises are to be taken as given, and which will be supported by sub-arguments. There are no sub-arguments, or, if there are sub-arguments, the premises for these are not made clear. The paper does not provide sub-arguments for controversial premises. The plausibility of the premises that are taken as given is questionable.	There are no premises—the paper merely restates the thesis. Or, if there are premises, they are much more likely to be false than true.

Support	The premises clearly support the thesis, and the author is aware of exactly the kind of support they provide. The argument is either valid as it stands, or, if invalid, the thesis, based on the premises, is likely to be or plausibly true.	The premises support the thesis, and the author is aware of the general kind of support they provide. The argument is either valid as it stands, or, if invalid, the thesis, based on the premises, is likely to be or plausibly true.	The premises somewhat support the thesis, but the author is not aware of the kind of support they provide. The argument is invalid, and the thesis, based on the premises, is not likely to be or plausibly true.	The premises do not support the thesis.
Counter-Arguments	The paper considers both obvious and unobvious counter-examples, counter-arguments, and/or opposing positions, and provides original and/or thoughtful responses.	The paper considers obvious counter-examples, counter-arguments, and/or opposing positions, and provides responses.	The paper may consider some obvious counter-examples, counter-arguments, and/or opposing positions, but some obvious ones are missed. Responses are non-existent or mere claims of refutation.	No counter-examples, counter-arguments, or opposing positions are considered.
Understanding				
Text	The paper contains highly accurate and precise summarization, description, and/or paraphrasing of text. The paper uses appropriate textual support for these.	The summarization, description, and/or paraphrasing of text is fairly accurate and precise, and has textual support, but other passages may have been better choices.	The summarization, description, and/or paraphrasing of text is fairly accurate, but not precise, and the textual support is inappropriate.	The summarization, description, and/or paraphrasing of text is inaccurate and/or has no textual support.

Ideas	The paper contains a highly accurate and precise description of the issue or problem, along with a careful consideration of possible alternatives or solutions. The paper contains relevant examples, and indicates the salient issues the examples highlight.	The description of the problem or issue is fairly accurate and precise, and possible alternatives or solutions are considered. Examples are given, but similar examples may have been better.	The description of the problem is fairly accurate but not precise, and possible alternatives or solutions are either not considered or ill-described. Examples are given, but it is not made clear how they are relevant.	The description of the problem or issue is inaccurate and possible alternatives of solutions are not considered, and examples are not provided.
Analysis	The paper successfully breaks the argument, issue, or problem into relevant parts. The connections between the parts are clear and highly accurate.	The paper successfully breaks the argument, issue, or problem into relevant parts. The connections between the parts are fairly accurate.	The paper breaks the argument, issue, or problem into parts, but some parts may be missing or unclear. The connections between the parts are somewhat accurate.	The parts identified are not the correct and/or relevant ones. The connections between the parts are completely inaccurate.
Synthesis	The paper successfully integrates all relevant parts from various places into a coherent whole. The connections between the parts are clear and insightful.	The paper integrates most relevant parts from various places into a mostly coherent whole. The connections between the parts are generally clear.	The paper integrates some parts from various places into a somewhat coherent whole. The connections between the parts are somewhat unclear.	The parts to be integrated are not clear and/or relevant. The connections between the parts are unclear.

Evaluation				
Argument	The paper evaluates the argument in question by checking for adherence to various standards (validity, soundness, etc.), and checking for informal fallacies. The paper suggests how the argument could be made better according to the appropriate standard.	The paper evaluates the argument in question by checking for adherence to various standards (validity, soundness, etc.), and checking for informal fallacies.	The paper evaluates the argument in question by checking only the truth of the premises and/or the conclusion, and does not check for informal fallacies.	The paper evaluates the argument in question by whether the author agrees or disagrees with the conclusion or a premise.
Position	The paper evaluates the position in question by checking for support in an argument and internal consistency, and by exploring unmentioned plausible alternatives.	The paper evaluates the position in question by checking for support in an argument and internal consistency.	The paper evaluates the position in question by considering its plausibility.	The paper evaluates the position in question by whether the author agrees or disagrees with it.
Creation				
Thesis	Thesis is original, interesting, and relevant.	The thesis is interesting and relevant.	The thesis is slightly off-topic, obviously true (or false), or not really worth writing about.	The thesis is totally irrelevant.
Examples	Examples are original, relevant, insightful, and well-used.	Examples are original, relevant, and well-used.	Examples are unoriginal, only somewhat relevant, and/or not well-used.	Examples are missing, irrelevant, and/or misused.
Alternative Positions	Previously unmentioned alternative positions are explored.	Alternative positions are explored.	Alternative positions are mentioned but not explored.	Alternative positions are ignored.

STYLE				
Clarity	All sentences are complete and grammatical. All words are chosen for their precise meanings. All new or unusual terms are well-defined. Key concepts and theories are accurately and completely explained. Good, clear examples are used to illustrate concepts and issues. Information (names, facts, etc.) is accurate. Paper has been spell-checked and proofread, and has no errors, and no rhetorical questions or slang.	All sentences are complete and grammatical. Most words are chosen for their precise meanings. Most new or unusual terms are well-defined. Key concepts and theories are explained. Examples are clear. Information (names, facts, etc.) is accurate. Paper has been spell-checked and proofread, and has very few errors, and no rhetorical questions or slang.	A few sentences are incomplete and/or ungrammatical. Words are not chosen for their precise meanings. New or unusual terms are not well-defined. Key concepts and theories are not explained. Examples are not clear. Information (names, facts, etc.) is mostly accurate. Paper has several spelling errors, rhetorical questions, and/or uses of slang.	Many sentences are incomplete and/or ungrammatical. The author does not acknowledge that key words have precise meanings. Information (names, facts, etc.) is inaccurate. Paper has many spelling errors, rhetorical questions, and/or uses of slang.
Organization				
Introduction	Thesis is clear, and contained in the introduction. The topic is introduced with minimal fanfare. It is made clear how the paper will get to this conclusion, not in a derailed outline of the paper but rather in a concise summary of the steps in argument.	Thesis is contained in the introduction. The topic is introduced with little fanfare. It is generally clear how the paper will get to the this conclusion, not in a detailed outline of the paper, but rather in a description of the steps in argument.	Thesis is not contained in the introduction. The topic is introduced with too much fanfare. The flow of the paper is described as an outline, and not as a description of the steps in argument.	Only the topic is introduced, with no description of the paper. Or, the paper is described inaccurately.

Body	It is very easy to follow the argument. It is made explicit which claims are being used as premises, and how these premises are supposed to support the thesis. New premises are each introduced in new paragraphs or sections. If there are sub-arguments, it is made explicit which argument is the main one and which are the secondary ones.	It is generally easy to follow the argument. It is clear which claims are being used as premises, and how these premises are supposed to support the thesis. Usually, new premises are introduced in new paragraphs or sections. If there are sub-arguments, it is clear which argument is the main one and which are the secondary ones.	It is somewhat difficult to follow the argument. It is somewhat unclear which claims are being used as premises, and/or how these premises are supposed to support the thesis. Separate premises are lumped together in the same paragraphs or sections. If there are sub-arguments, it is not clear which argument is the main one and which are the secondary ones.	It is impossible to follow the argument. It is completely unclear which claims are being used as premises. It is completely unclear how the premises are supposed to support the thesis. Premises are discussed randomly, or not at all. There seem to be many arguments, and it is completely unclear which is the main one.
Conclusion	The paper uses the conclusion to tie up loose ends. For example, the paper considers objections to the argument to which it is acknowledged there is no space or expertise to respond. Or, the paper briefly considers the implications of the acceptance of the conclusion for a larger argument, or for a larger issue or problem. Or the paper explains what further work may need to be done in this area.	The paper uses the conclusion to tie up some loose ends, but combines this with a restatement of the introduction.	The conclusion is merely a restatement of the introduction.	The conclusion is missing.

Notes

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1. Linda L. Farmer, "Grading Argumentative Essays," *Teaching Philosophy* 26 (2003): 125–30.

2. See, for example, J. Arter and J. McTighe, *Scoring Rubrics in the Classroom: Using Performance Criteria for Assessing and Improving Student Performance* (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, Inc., 2001); and *Rubrics: A Handbook for Construction and Use*, ed. G. L. Taggart, S. J. Phifer, J. A. Nixon, and M. Wood (Lancaster, Pa.: Technomic, 1998). While all the sources with which I am familiar, such as these, are explicitly concerned with primary and secondary education, most of the ideas are easily translated into higher education settings.

3. For a comparison of different taxonomies, see chapter 16 of the complete edition of *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing: A Revision of Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives*, ed. L. W. Anderson and D. R. Krathwohl (New York: Longman, 2001).

4. The original publication is M. D. Engelhart, E. J. Furst, W. H. Hill, and D. R. Krathwohl, *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: Handbook I: Cognitive Domain*, ed. B. S. Bloom (New York: David McKay, 1956). The revised publication is Anderson and Krathwohl, *A Taxonomy for Learning, Teaching, and Assessing*.

5. A grade of:

A: Demonstrates an unusually high level of understanding. Thesis is clear, and arguments are developed in a provocative and original manner. Arguments are clear and persuasive, and include original responses to possible counter-arguments. Has highly efficient organization and textual support.

B: Demonstrates good understanding. Thesis is clear. Arguments are persuasive, and include responses to possible counter-arguments. Has clear organization and textual support.

C: Demonstrates adequate understanding. Arguments have few logical errors, and paper has at least a fundamental organization—the thesis is apparent although it may not be precisely stated or fully supported.

D: Unclear writing. Does not advance beyond the very obvious. Lacks organization. No or poor use of textual support.

F: Failure to address the chosen topic and/or no discernable argument. Complete lack of clarity in writing.

The corresponding grading grid was:

Thesis	Clear 10	Apparent 8	Vague 6	Not Apparent 0
Writing	Very Clear 15	Clear 12	Somewhat Clear 9	Unclear 0
Arguments	Well Developed 15	Few Logical Errors 12	Some Logical Errors 9	Not Developed 0
Organization	Highly Efficient 15	Clear 12	Fundamental 9	Lacking 0
Textual Support	Appropriate 10	Some 7	None 0	
Level of Understanding	Unusually High 20	Good 16	Adequate 12	Poor 0
Responses to Possible Counter- Arguments	Included 15	Somewhat Included 10	Not Included 0	

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