Rubrics are becoming increasingly popular in classrooms as a way for students to understand the expectations of assignments and, in turn, for teachers to assess their individual performance. As special education students become more involved in high-stakes assessment, teachers need to be aware of how rubrics can help determine their students’ understanding of a given task.

This article can help you familiarize your students, with and without disabilities, with the terminology and the use of rubrics (see box, “What Are Rubrics?”).

**Why Use Rubrics?**

One positive aspect of using a rubric is that it allows teachers to examine instruction and assessment in a matrix format. The rubric should clearly delineate the teacher’s expectations for performance so that all students, including those with special needs, understand what they need to accomplish.

By using a rubric, students with disabilities can begin to evaluate their work; thus, students become more aware of their potential strengths and weaknesses in completing assignments. The rubric can also serve as a communication tool among teachers, students, and parents when examining specific strengths and weaknesses of students’ performance.

**Designing a Rubric**

The following six steps are helpful in designing a rubric:

- Describe an exemplary response of all attributes that describe a quality performance. This step will encourage students to perform at an expert level. For example, What is the best response? What sets this apart from others?

- Brainstorm the qualities of an exemplary response and all essential components of the desired performance. At this point, you and your students make a checklist of all criteria.

- Categorize the criteria. Here, you will translate the components into descriptors of the task or project. You and the students can then check the descriptors against expected student performance.

- Select the rubric format (i.e., analytic or holistic). In doing this, consider the purpose of the assessment; number of expected outcomes; number of students in the class; and usefulness of the rubric to all, including you as
the teacher and students with and without disabilities.

- Design the rubric by describing the levels, exemplary to poor. Other rubrics have used scales such as novice to expert or a 1-4 numerical scale.
- Select the scale to be used. Few teachers and students can make reliable discriminations in performance across five or more categories. Thorndike (1997) recommends using a 4-point scale to minimize student confusion and enhance student performance.

Thorndike (1997) stated that the best scoring rubrics provide clear criteria for evaluating student performance and proficiency and are somehow related to the student’s educational objectives. In the same way that you write the behavioral component of an objective, you should avoid using analogous words that may confuse the meaning of the performance criteria. Examples of analogous words are good, proper, many, or appropriate. To clarify the terms for students, for example, you could define “good” as “only one spelling error per paragraph.” Gunning (2001) stated,

The foundation of a rubric is the set of evaluative criteria that will be used to assess students’ work. The criteria should function as an instructional guide so that the teacher can use them to plan lessons and activities that will help the students master the skills being taught. (p. 134)

In developing the rubric scale, ensure ease in use for students with and without disabilities. The highest point value should describe a truly exemplar performance. Use precise language that clearly defines the characteristics of the performance to be evaluated. Also, the language should clearly describe the various levels of quality so those students with and without disabilities can easily discriminate between points on the scale.

**A Practice Exercise: Determining the World’s Best Chocolate Chip Cookie**

Here is an effective activity to assist students with disabilities in understanding rubrics. It involves six steps, with heterogeneous groups of five to six students each:

- Each group of students receives a bag of chocolate chip cookies containing at least six different brands of cookies that vary in size, shape, and texture. Ask the groups to discuss and describe what the best chocolate chip cookie would look and taste like.
- Students brainstorm the essential components of the World’s Best Chocolate Chip Cookie.
- Students examine their cookies and according to the rubric they have developed (if any have survived all the taste tests).
- As the facilitator, you should review the process of developing a rubric and stress the importance of using the criteria on the rubric as a guide when completing a project or assignment. Be ready for a lively class discussion as students debate between exemplary and poor examples.

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<th>What Are Rubrics?</th>
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Rubrics, as defined by Venn (2000), are “scoring criteria that describe an array of possible responses and specify the qualities and characteristics that occur at different levels of performance” (p. 641). There are two basic types of rubrics—analytic and holistic:

- An **analytical rubric** assesses a product through consideration of essential features of the product (see Figure 1). The analytical rubric helps teachers diagnose specific strengths and weaknesses in students’ work. An analytical rubric can act as a framework for the teacher and the student. This type of rubric is typically in matrix form and designates a score for each criterion (Marzano, Pickering, & McTighe, 1993).
- A **holistic rubric** assesses a product on the basis of an overall impression. When using a holistic rubric, you can react to the product as a whole, rather than by the individual elements of the product. The product is assessed by its overall effectiveness: Does it work? Am I convinced? You can write a holistic rubric for a specific task or as a generic rubric for tasks that are similar in nature. For example, you may write a rubric that addresses a specific writing assignment comparing two main characters in a story, or you could write a rubric that students can use for most writing assignments.

- Each group shares their list with the class to develop and agree on five descriptive categories (e.g., Texture, Appearance, Taste, Contents, and Smell).
- The students select the format they wish to use for the rubric. For this particular activity, the analytic format was chosen because students are asked to analyze the best cookie.
- Students design the levels of the rubric from poor (1) to exemplary (4). Students examine their cookies and brainstorm characteristics that would be placed under each numeric or descriptive level. Once the levels have been determined, each group of students selects a characteristic and describes it across all four levels.
- They decide the type of scale that will be used, which may include numeric or descriptive values. For this activity, a numeric scale was chosen as an example, but students may choose to use the words outstanding, best, good, and poor (see Figure 1).
- To conclude this activity, each group of students shares their completed rubric for comparison and contrasting purposes. They then sort their cookies according to the rubric they have developed (if any have survived all the taste tests).

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Current Uses of Rubrics

Special education students in inclusive classrooms can more readily participate in assignments and assessments when they understand the expectations and grading process. The use of rubrics in the classroom informs students about the expectations so that they know what an exemplary performance should look like. Popham (2000) noted, “ Appropriately designed rubrics can make an enormous contribution to instructional quality” (p. 292).

In some preservice teacher education classes, instructors provide models of rubric use by providing students rubrics for each assignment. The purpose of the rubric is to guide students in developing and completing their work. By providing students with the expectations ahead of time, students are given the opportunity to ask questions, clarify expectations, and understand the grading procedure that will be utilized. The rubric facilitates a shared understanding of the expected performance between students and teachers. The rubrics also make it easier and less time consuming for the teacher to grade the assignment because of clearly defined...
rubrics is enhanced student performance because students have a better understanding of what is expected of them.

As educators, we can see rubrics not only as an assessment tool but also as an instructional tool. Students with disabilities are just one group that can benefit from knowing what is expected of them in terms of academic performance. Rubrics can be beneficial to all members of the school community—from students to parents and teachers to superintendents. As teachers pursue the use of rubrics in their classroom, they know that the time spent in developing clear expectations for assignments will be a benefit to students and teachers alike.

**References**

- Goals 2000. (1997). Genesee Valley Schools and higher expectations for all: Training the trainers. (Available through the Genesee Valley Board of Cooperative Educational Services, 80 Munson St., LeRoy, NY 14482.)

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**Final Thoughts**

Using the chocolate chip cookie activity as an introduction to the process of developing rubrics allows students to develop necessary self-evaluation skills. Through rubric usage, self-evaluation skills can then be generalized to all subject areas. An added benefit of using