

An Op-Ed Grading Rubric: Improving Student Output and Professor Happiness

Few things are worse than grading poor student writing. You have brought the papers home, settled in your most comfortable grading chair, arranged your hot, steaming drink just so, and the first paper you read misspells the name of the topic, is littered with spelling errors, and/or answers a completely different writing prompt than the one assigned. This type of disappointment is what leads many teachers to abandon assigning papers at all.

While designing a rubric for an assignment has been employed by instructors for decades, this paper will briefly present a rubric specifically designed for op-ed papers that increases student motivation and professor grading happiness while reducing the time spent grading. This type of rubric has produced higher quality student output while simultaneously enhancing student motivation and empowering students through clear grading guidelines. The rubric has been a significant pedagogical benefit in both my 2- and 4-year courses over the last several years.

The following is an op-ed rubric used in Introductory Economics courses as well as Agricultural and Environmental policy courses. The rubric explains their grade in terms of the outcomes students will achieve by meeting the given work requirements:

Op-Ed Grading Rubric

Assignment: Compose an “Op-Ed essay” that makes an *informed argument* on a topic of your choice.

Students must meet all requirements for each grade category to earn that grade. For example, if you satisfy all the A requirements but fail to mention one major issue either discussed in class or in our readings that would support your argument, you will earn a B for the assignment. This is a necessary requirement to define clear criteria for each grade category and I must hold to those criteria for the grading system to work.

When you submit your assignment, you must attach a document evaluating your work based on the criteria below. If you think your work deserves a B, you must discuss how you satisfied EACH criterion. I will not grade your op-ed if you do not attach this document.

A. You must meet ALL the following criteria to receive an A on the second op-ed:

- >900 words
- Clearly establishes their opinion on the topic in the first three sentences
- Clearly supports their opinion by citing relevant things learned in class, either through discussion, a speaker, or reading our book, and does not leave out a major issue that would support their argument
- Clearly uses and cites one outside source not discussed in class to support their opinion
- Links issue clearly to something happening in the news (news item must be less than one year old and cited and cannot be the same outside source as described in requirement 4)
- Clearly explains why the reader should care about the issue

- Does not make factually incorrect statements
- Acknowledges the other side using concepts learned in class either through readings, discussions, or a speaker
- Has a strong final paragraph that summarizes their opinion in a convincing way
- Writes a catchy headline
- No more than one spelling error
- No more than one incomplete sentence
- Op-ed appropriately relates to given topic area
- Appropriately uses citations
- Clearly reads like an opinion piece and not a book report
- Does not use contractions (e.g. isn't, don't, can't)
- Consistently uses short sentences and paragraphs

B. You must meet ALL the following criteria to receive a B on the second op-ed:

- 800-900 words
- Clearly establishes their opinion on the topic in the first three sentences
- Supports their opinion by citing relevant things learned in class or reading our book, but fails to include one major issue we learned about in class to support their argument
- Links issue clearly to something happening in the news (news item must be less than one year old and cited)
- Clearly explains why the reader should care about the issue
- Does not use an outside source that we did not discuss in class to support their argument
- Consistently uses short sentences and paragraphs
- Acknowledges the other side
- Has a good final paragraph
- Writes a good headline
- Does not make factually incorrect statements
- No more than two spelling errors
- No more than two incomplete sentences
- Op-ed does not relate to given topic area
- Appropriately uses citations
- Clearly reads like an opinion piece and not a book report
- Does not use contractions (e.g. isn't, don't, can't)

C. You must meet ALL the following criteria to receive a C on the second op-ed:

- 700-799 words
- Adequately establishes their opinion on the topic in the first three sentences
- Attempts to support their opinion by citing relevant things learned in class or reading our book, but fails to include two major issues we learned about in class to support their argument

- Links issue to something happening in the news (news item must be less than one year old and cited)
- Adequately explains why the reader should care about the issue
- Makes one factually incorrect statement
- Consistently uses short sentences and paragraphs
- Weakly acknowledges the other side and fails to use relevant concepts learned in class
- Has an adequate final paragraph
- Writes an adequate headline
- No more than three spelling errors
- No more than three incomplete sentences
- Op-ed does not relate to given topic area
- Uses citations inconsistently or fails to cite a given fact
- Not clear whether this is an opinion piece or a book report
- Uses contractions (e.g. isn't, don't, can't)

D. You must meet ALL the following criteria to receive a D on the second op-ed:

- 600-699 words
- Attempts to establish their opinion on the topic in the first three sentences
- Supports their opinion by citing relevant things learned in class or reading our book, but fails to include more than two major issues we learned about in class to support their argument
- Makes more than one factually incorrect statement
- Fails to link issue to something happening in the news
- Adequately explains why the reader should care about the issue
- Fails to acknowledge the other side
- Has an adequate final paragraph
- Writes a headline
- No more than four spelling errors
- No more than four incomplete sentences
- Op-ed does not relate to given topic area
- Uses citations inconsistently or fails to cite a given fact
- Not clear whether this is an opinion piece or a book report
- Uses contractions (e.g. isn't, don't, can't)
- F: <600 words and does not meet all of D criteria
- Evidence of plagiarism

All work must follow the template below:

- 12 pt. Arial font
- 1" margins all sides
- Double-spacing
- Plagiarism guide
- <http://research.ncsu.edu/sparcs/compliance/integrity/plagiarism/>

- APA citation method
- <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/560/01/>

The op-ed rubric has been designed so students can clearly see the work requirements necessary to achieve their desired grade. Each grade category is linked to different levels of learning outcomes. The layout of the rubric makes some learning outcomes essential to certain grades, giving students a choice about the rubric content they will choose to satisfy. It also provides a clear signal to students of the things a professor is looking for when grading their paper.

Prior to implementing the rubric, I was consistently reading papers with poor spelling and grammar as well as output that lacked opinion and read like a book report. One of my objectives in implementing the rubric was to get students to form an opinion and support it with properly cited scholarly material. One classroom activity that also helped in this area was giving them numerous op-ed pieces to read and then asking them where the author stood on the key issue and what part of the op-ed clearly stated that position. In addition to this, requiring that an “A” paper establish the student’s opinion in the first three sentences solved the problem of papers that never took a side on the issue.

A second grading frustration was that papers were written without using any class material to support their position. This issue disappeared when the rubric included a requirement to use class material to support their argument. The quality of the papers also improved with the requirement that papers link the issue to a current event since it forced students to search the headlines for something related to their issue and many students stated that this helped them with the introduction to their paper.

The op-ed rubric also includes spelling and grammar requirements that can be tailored to an instructor’s preferences. In this case, I put a high value on turning in a paper without spelling and grammar errors. This gives students a strong incentive to read though the paper prior to turning it in and therefore increases the likelihood that they catch other mistakes as well. Depending on the instructor’s preferences, requirements could also be made that the professor’s name is spelled correctly or that a certain word count is met.

This rubric has been well-received by students. Anecdotal evidence suggests that students feel empowered with this rubric because they feel like they have a chance to make an A since the requirements are laid out so clearly. After I hand this out, I ask students how many will shoot for an A and almost every hand is raised after they ask me whether this is “all” they must do to get an A.

One of the most powerful pieces of the rubric is in italics at the top. It requires students to complete a document that evaluates their work based on how they satisfied each criterion for their desired grade. This forces students to reflect on their work and helps me when grading if I think they did not address a specific criterion. Students report that this helped them immensely because while they thought they had hit all the key points, they realized that they had missed several content items and were able to edit the paper to include them. This checklist also serves as another incentive to force students to read their papers prior to submitting them.

Another key item of this rubric is that students must meet all requirements for each grade category to earn that grade. For instance, more than one spelling error automatically bumps the paper down to a “B” level. It is important to emphasize this to students so that they

know that they must satisfy every criterion to earn their desired grade. In my experience, this is a key element necessary for this type of grading system to work. Otherwise, grading becomes much more difficult and the clarity of the rubric is undermined.

This type of rubric requires professors to have precise expectations of students. My rubric evolves each semester as my preferences change or student output consistently fails to reach my standards. A professor considering adopting this rubric would benefit by analyzing previous student output and making a list of the outcomes that students failed to address. The benefit of this type of rubric is that the grade is directly related to clear learning outcomes and raises the standards of student writing because they know the work requirements related to obtaining their desired grade. My experience with this is that student output is significantly better, my grading time has decreased because students are submitting better quality materials, student motivation is higher because they feel like they are in control of their grade, and my grading happiness is higher because of the increase in the quality of papers that I am reading. In short, students perform at a higher level, are more motivated, and grading time is reduced with this type of rubric.

Submitted by—
Julianne Treme
North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC