Common Rubric Mistakes to Watch Out For (and some ways you might fix them)

Overall

Selecting the wrong grading/evaluation tool
- For many assignments and assessments, a simple scoring key, checklist, or grading scale may be more appropriate than a rubric.

Creating a rubric with the wrong level of overall detail
- Holistic rubrics are great for evaluating some things; they are faster to create and use, and they allow more room for judgment. The end result is one rating, which is not useful for formative feedback.
- Analytic rubrics are more appropriate for most things; they are more detailed and can provide more specific feedback to students. The end result is a collection of ratings related to specific aspects of the assignment/assessment, and these can be combined to create a single grade or score, if needed.

Writing a rubric that is too long
- You may slightly reduce the size of text in a rubric, but anything smaller than a 10-point font is more difficult to read on printed pages, and shrinking text doesn’t address other length-related problems.
- The gold standard is 1 page or less because longer rubrics tend to look a lot like “blah blah blah” to students, and the length also contributes to rater fatigue when grading. Ask yourself these questions:
  - Is there anything repetitive in the rubric that should be combined or eliminated?
  - Is there anything I’m evaluating that is not as important for this assignment/assessment?
  - Have I included too much explanation? Can I make descriptions briefer but still accurate?
  - Should anything be moved out of the rubric and into the instructions?

Criteria

Including expectations that were not made clear in the instructions
- Students and other stakeholders should never be surprised by what is evaluated in the rubric.
- After you have written your rubric, go back and compare to the instructions. Revise the instructions and/or rubric as needed.
- Share the rubric with students in advance whenever possible.

Building overlapping criteria
- Each criterion in the rubric should be unique.
- The rating of each criterion should stand on its own, regardless of other ratings.

Omitting criteria related to the critical objectives of the course or unit
AND/OR Including criteria unrelated to objectives of the course or unit
- Rubrics should be used to help you and your students focus on the most important aspects of the work done in or for the course. Use a rubric to evaluate what really matters.
- As you write a rubric, refer to the learning objectives for the course and make sure you’re addressing those in evaluation and feedback. What are students supposed to be learning and doing?
Levels

Using too many performance levels
- In most situations 3-5 levels are plenty. Four levels is most common.
- Only use as many levels as you can distinguish between in a meaningful way for at least 80% of your criteria. (You may occasionally need to use “not applicable,” but if you find yourself using it a lot, you have too many levels.)
- If possible and applicable, align your rubric levels to the format for the final score or grade.

Descriptions

Describing in too much or too little detail
- Finding that “sweet spot” can be difficult. You’re looking for something succinct enough that stakeholders won’t get bored reading it but detailed enough so they can understand the differences between criteria and from level to level.
- Enlist the help of your students, a TA, or another teacher. Ask them to identify things that are too wordy or not fleshed out enough, and then revise.

Focusing on negative performance
- Instead of saying what the assignment did NOT do, each description should say what it DID do if comes to that level for that criterion.

Using language that isn’t clear to students and other stakeholders
- Avoid jargon and other words or phrases that would not be understandable to the audience. Consider the level and previous learning of your students.
- Clarify terms that might be considered vague. For example:
  - What’s the difference between “some” and “most” if used in different levels?
  - What are you looking for in an “appropriate” or “adequate” response?
  - How might a part of the assignment be “effective” or “ineffective”?
- If needed, include a separate definition of terms with your rubric(s) to help “level the playing field” among students, teachers, and other stakeholders.
- For younger students, determine whether a rubric or another grading tool (e.g., smiley and frowny faces) would be more understandable and helpful.

Writing the continuum of performance inconsistently
- Ensure that each criterion focuses on the same critical element(s) across the continuum
- As much as possible, use similar “jumps” from one performance level to the next in each criteria continuum.

Counting instead of giving feedback on quality
- Ask yourself what’s really important in evaluating and giving feedback in this situation: Is it the number of things, or is it the manner in which the task is completed?
- If the difference between levels is a number (e.g., “Excellent: Includes 4 of more resources” and “Acceptable: Includes 2-3 resources”), consider switching to a checklist or grading scale, at least for that criterion. It’s ok to use a rubric to evaluate part of an assignment or assessment and another method to evaluate another part!