

# What English Writing Teachers in China can draw from an American writing rubric in perspective of process and assessment?

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**Keywords:** Rubrics, English writing, Process, Assessment, Dimension.

**Abstract.** The well-developed and practiced writing rubrics in the USA benefit both teachers and students. Rubrics, however, are just used to grade assignments by teachers in China and has not drawn enough attention. In order to help construct effective English writing rubrics for teachers and students in China, the author first reviewed theories of process writing approach and rubrics to set up theoretical frames for the research, then conducted a case study of a fifth grade persuasive writing rubric mainly from the aspects of writing process and dimensions for assessment. Finally, features of this rubric were summed up and used to put forward implications for the construction of English writing rubrics in China.

## 1. Introduction

It is the teaching point of English education in China to develop students' integrated English proficiency of using English to express fundamental ideas. To promote the development and improvement of writing ability has become a core content of the new English curriculum reform. Writing, however, is one of the most challenging and demanding skills for EFL learners to master. English teachers and researchers in China are trying the best out of writing approaches and assessment. In terms of approaches, process approach and communicative approach are winning over the traditional product approach. For assessment, an important aspect of teaching writing which has long been neglected, it influences all aspects of students' education [1]. Effective assessment can motivate positive changes in the instruction and learning of writing. Empowering assessment to be a real tool to improve students' writing ability has become an important topic in the reform of teaching English writing. Among the many other assessment means, rubric is a well-developed, researched and practiced means of writing assessment strategy but sounds new in China. Teachers have found that a well-designed rubric can provide such a tool in promoting accurate, reliable writing assessment [2]. Rubric in this paper is analyzed in perspective of writing process and assessment and expected to offer a new perspective to teach English writing in China.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Process approach

In response to product approach that focuses on language forms and the final draft, ESL writing moved from a language-based approach to the process approach in the 1980s. It advocates to study writing from the perspective of writing process with focuses on the processes of effective writing and learning in an interactive and collaborative environment and method of "how to write" and the study of the writers' cognitive thinking and information processing mechanism as well as the writers' behavioral characteristics.

Process approach emphasizes the idea of writing as problem-solving, with a focus on thinking and process [3]. In process writing, students are engaged in writing tasks more through a cycle approach than through a single approach. They are not expected to produce and submit complete and accurate responses in writing tasks without going through the stages of drafting and obtaining feedback on their drafts, either given by their peers or by the teacher, followed by a review of their texts [4]. The process approach emphasizes the importance of developing students' ability to plan, identify issues and analyze and implement possible solutions [5]. Unlike teacher-centered instruction, teachers in

this approach play multiple roles as facilitators of knowledge, counselors, organizers, assistants and partners of students learning instead of monitors or evaluators. The advantages of process writing are apparent in that it engages the development of writing cognitions and strategies.

Currently, the process approach has been generally accepted and widely used around the world in both first language and second language instruction for the advantages that the process approach stresses the stages involved in the whole process of composing texts and allows students the chance to manage their own writing as they think to write.

## **2.2 Rubrics**

The word “rubric” traces back to a Latin word “ruber” meaning "red". Centuries ago, whenever manuscript writers inserted special instructions or explanations into a book, they put them in red ink to set them off from the black used in the main text. Later, Rubric was extended to be a brief and authoritative criterion for teaching. In recent years, rubric has been used by some educators as a term of scoring guide used to evaluate the quality of students' constructed responses.

Educators tend to define the word ‘rubric’ in slightly different ways. A commonly used definition is a document that articulates the expectations for an assignment by listing the criteria or what counts, and describing levels of quality from excellent to poor [6].

Rubrics are often presented in table format containing evaluative criteria, quality definitions for those criteria at particular levels of achievement, and a scoring strategy and can be used by teachers when marking, and by students when planning their work.

Teachers use rubrics to clarify their learning goals, design instruction that addresses those goals, communicate the goals to students, guide their feedback on students’ progress toward the goals and judge final products in terms of the degree to which the goals were met.

When used by students as part of a formative assessment of their works in progress, rubrics can teach as well as evaluate [7]. Rubrics can serve as a check list to make a student-centered and autonomous approach to help them understand the targets and requirements for their learning, as well as make independent judgments about their own work that can lead to revision and improvement.

Rubrics can be classified as holistic or analytic. Holistic rubrics integrate all aspects of the work into a single overall rating of the work. They describe varying degrees of quality, from excellent to poor and explain what makes a good piece of work good and a bad one bad. Holistic rubrics usually express an assessor’s overall rating of a piece of work. In contrast, an analytic rubric specifies various dimensions or components of the product or process that are evaluated separately. The same rating scale labels may be used as the holistic, but it is applied to various key dimensions or aspects separately rather than an integrated judgement. Take writing rubric as an example, teachers incorporate such facets of written language as conventions or mechanics (i.e., spelling, punctuation, and grammar), organization, content or ideas, and style into analytic rubrics to score student writing by separate dimensions. By breaking the whole into significant dimensions or components and rating them separately, it is expected that better information will be obtained by the teacher and the student about what needs to be worked on next." [8].

Kenneth Wolf and Ellen Stevens summarized the benefits of well-designed rubrics mainly in five aspects [9]. First, rubrics make the learning target clearer. Second, rubrics guide instructional design and delivery. Third, rubrics make the assessment process more accurate and fair. Four, rubrics provide students with a tool for self-assessment and peer feedback. Five, rubrics have the potential to advance the learning of students of color, first generation students, and those from non-traditional settings.

## **3. Analysis of an American writing rubric**

In the US, the design of rubrics is based on state-designed course standards. The state department of education is dedicated to providing the highest quality of innovative support to schools, teachers, students, and parents. Take Indiana for example, in April of 2014, the Indiana State Board of Education approved the adoption of new standards for English/Language Arts. The department of

education in Indiana also designed a holistic writing rubric and gives guidelines to Applying the Writing Prompt Rubric

The standards decide that there are five key areas found in the Writing section for grades K-5: Handwriting, Writing Genres, the Writing Process, the Research Process, and Conventions of Standard English. By demonstrating the skills listed in each section, students should be able to meet the Learning Outcome for Writing.

The department of education establish requirements for persuasive writing in a general and abstract way like using an organizational structure to group related ideas that support the purpose and using language appropriate for the identified audience. Teachers design their own rubrics according to the real situations of school and students. Let's analyze a fifth-grade persuasive writing rubric designed by a teacher from an elementary school in Indiana.

Fifth Grade Persuasive Writing Rubric

Name:		Date:		Score:	
5.W.3.1 The student will write persuasive compositions in a variety of forms.					
	Standard	4	3	2	1
Persuasive Writing	<b>Introduction</b> Clearly present a position in an introductory statement to an identified audience.	The introductory paragraph purposefully hooks the reader's attention with a clear position/claim that addresses an identified audience.	The writing begins with an introductory statement that clearly states the position to an identified audience.	The writing includes the position in a simple introductory statement or paragraph.	With help, the student writes a brief introduction that includes the position.
	<b>Organization</b> Use an organizational structure to group related ideas that support the purpose.	There are multiple paragraphs purposefully arranged to develop the position/claim. The reasons are in an order that are most convincing.	The related ideas that support the position are grouped together into organized paragraphs.	Related ideas are grouped together & each part is mostly about one thing.	With help, related ideas are grouped together.
	<b>Facts &amp; Details</b> Support the position with qualitative and quantitative facts and details from various sources, including texts.	The writing includes a variety of text evidence citing multiple trusted sources, explains how the evidence supports the position, & acknowledges counter argument(s) in multiple paragraphs.	There is support for the position with qualitative and quantitative facts & details from various sources, including texts.	The writing includes some facts & details, but does not always reference the source.	With help, the writing includes support from a text or other source.
	<b>Linking Words, Phrases, &amp; Clauses</b> Connect reasons to the position using words, phrases, and clauses.	Reasons are effectively & consistently connected using a strong voice in transitional phrases that help the reader understand how the reasons fit together in support of the argument.	Reasons are connected to the position using a variety of words, phrases & clauses such as <i>another reason, the most important reason</i>	The reasons are sometimes connected using words and/or phrases such as <i>also, another, &amp; for example.</i>	With help, the reasons are connected using words like <i>also, and, &amp; because.</i>
	<b>Vocabulary</b> Use language appropriate for the intended audience.	The writing includes deliberate word choice & skillfully incorporates scholarly voice that demonstrates meaning of the terms, & conveys an appropriate tone for the intended audience.	The writing includes language appropriate for the intended audience.	The writing includes simple domain-specific vocabulary appropriate for the audience.	With help, the student uses simple, domain-specific vocabulary.
	<b>Conclusion</b> Provide a concluding statement or section related to the position presented.	The concluding paragraph restates the position & provides closing thoughts. The ending adds to and strengthens the overall argument.	The writing has a concluding statement/section related to the position presented.	The writing has a short conclusion that restates the position in a simple way.	With help, the writing has a simple concluding statement.
	Standard	4	3	2	1
Writing Process	<b>Draft &amp; Revise 5.W.4</b> Apply the writing process to generate a draft and revise to improve writing.	Students bring all they know about revision into the initial draft. Varied revision strategies make the piece stronger and more succinct.	Develop, select and organize ideas (graphic organizer) relevant to topic, purpose, and genre. Use appropriate reference materials (e.g., quality of ideas, organization, sentence fluency, word choice).	Uses a tool (graphic organizer) to organize ideas and revises writing for basic mistakes (repeated words and organization).	With help, the student is able to draft and to use a tool (e.g., sandwich organizer) to revise a piece of writing for basic mistakes.
	<b>Edit for Grammar &amp; Usage 5.W.6.1</b> Demonstrate command of English grammar and usage. <small>* See standards for specific essential skills for grammar and usage.</small>	The writing contains an appropriate use of varied sentence structures with few to no errors in grammar and usage.	The writing contains both simple and compound sentence structure with correct grammar & usage.	The writing contains both simple and compound sentence structure with noticeable grammar & usage mistakes.	With help, the student can write using simple sentence structure and can correct errors in grammar.
	<b>Capitalization, Punctuation &amp; Spelling 5.W.6.2</b> The student will demonstrate command of capitalization, punctuation, and spelling. <small>* See standard for specific essential skills for capitalization, punctuation and spelling.</small>	There are few to no errors in spelling or punctuation. The punctuation used adds interest to the writing.	There are occasional errors in spelling or punctuation, but they do not distract from the smooth reading of the piece.	There are frequent errors in spelling and punctuation. They piece is still readable, but mistakes are noticeable.	With help, the student can correct errors in capitalization, punctuation or spelling.

**Required Vocabulary:** paragraph, opinion, claim, facts, details, reasons, evidence, audience, domain-specific, sources, linking words/phrases, explanation, introduction, introductory paragraph, conclusion, concluding statement/paragraph/section, tone, voice, phrase, draft, organize, relevant, format, revise, edit, graphic organizer, nouns, pronouns (relative, reflexive), progressive and perfect verb tenses, verb tense, helping verbs (modal auxiliaries), relative adverbs, prepositions, prepositional phrases, sentences (simple, compound, complex and exclamatory) conjunctions (coordinating, subordinating and correlative), capitalization, apostrophes, possessives, contractions, quotation marks, direct speech, comma, homophone, homograph

A successful writing rubric not only reflects the designer's (usually the teacher) expectation of the quality of writing (outcome) but also reveals how he likes the student to fulfill the task (process). In this rubric, we can find the teacher puts writing process in the end and has three categories as draft & revise, edit for grammar & usage, capitalization, punctuation & spelling. This process can work for all writing rubrics. In the classroom, process approach to writing means that students engage in activities such as planning, drafting, revising / editing. In the part of performance description, the teacher describes the ideal process in the column of excellent scale level. Varied revision strategies make the piece stronger and more succinct. Based on her experience with the students, the teacher knows well what strategies students are likely to use in revision. The teacher describes students performance in scale level 3 to 1 and includes typical examples for reference. For edit for specific essential skills, the rubric chooses to focus on those common language points like grammar, usage, punctuation, spelling and so on. With this rubric in hand, students know how they can edit. For example, if a student uses only simple sentence structure, he knows that's the lowest level as is shown in the rubric. A level 3 student can try to use varied sentence structures to improve his writing as is suggested in the standard of level 4. In writing rubrics for any genre, the teacher uses the same writing process description, so students can apply the writing process and let the rubric's criteria guide their revisions

whether it's generating a draft or making better word choices.

The main part of the rubric is about assessment. To be more specific, it's about how and from what dimensions the teacher judges the writing. In this rubric, the teacher includes six dimensions. They are introduction, organization, facts & details, linking words, phrases, & clauses, vocabulary, conclusion. These dimensions like introduction, organization, acts & details and conclusion reveal the standard structure of a persuasive writing. The other dimensions reflect curriculum requirements

and teachers' perception of components for good writing. With the help from the details of the performance description, students can find instructional support to structure their writings within the frame set by the rubric. Take organization for example, criteria on all the four levels focus on grouping of ideas about position/claim. By reading the rubric, students can get the idea that they are required to group the supporting ideas in a purposeful and convincing way. For the teachers, they can refer to the rubric and judge the dimensions accordingly. For example, about the dimension of facts and details, teachers can judge by the variety of sources and how they are presented to support the position.

The rubric also sets up dimensions about language use facets, which is quite like the grading criteria for English writing in China. Use of transitional words, clauses and word choice is considered as reflection of learners' language competence. What's new in this rubric is that it requires students to use transitional devices specific of connecting reasons and words choice appropriate for intended audience. It also includes examples of linking words in performance description for teachers to make judgement and students to refer.

On a whole, the rubric in this case study is well designed and has the following features. Firstly, it's a formative assessment because it considers the writing process and judges the writing not just by the outcome but by the process of how students draft and revise.

Secondly, it's writing style oriented because it attaches importance to the style related writing skill improvement like organization of facts and details and use of linking words to present reasons. Thirdly, it's example imbedded. In the description of different levels, the rubric uses typical examples to support and make it clear and easy to understand. Fourthly, it's instructional for students and practical for teachers. The performance descriptions in each level can serve well as directions and feedback for students to practice and improve. Meanwhile, the rubric communicates teachers' expectations and intentions as clearly as possible so that they can find it easy to analyze and judge the writing by the criteria for each dimension.

#### **4. Implication and Conclusion**

English teaching in China is top-down. Department of education is responsible for the establishment of curriculum and course standard. It's the job of school and teacher to decode the government document and devise a school-based curriculum and standard. As for English writing assessment, guidelines on college English teaching issued by the government gave directive advice on assessment, but the advice can not put into use directly in real teaching. In practice, teachers use the grading criteria of some national English tests as a base to teach writing and assess writing according to their personal experience and perception of English writing. The current writing assessment system is only evaluative but lacks informative value because students have no access to the real grading criteria and have to passively receive the grading. Actually, rubrics can be used as tools for self-learning and assessment [10].

It's high time that Chinese English teacher constructed their own rubrics for English writing. Firstly, styles of writing should be studied to find different organizational, structural and linguistic dimensions for each of them. Secondly, purposes of English writing should be studied to find what language ability is expected to test in it. Thirdly, students writing problems should be thoroughly studied so that the scale levels can be scientifically decided. Fourthly, interviews with students and teachers are necessary to test whether the rubrics can fit them because it's teachers and students are the real users of rubrics. Their opinions count.

#### **Acknowledgement**

This research was financially supported by the Talent Fund of China West Normal University (17YC069); China Language Assessment Fund(ZGWYCPJJ2018001B); China Scholarship Council (201801010001); CWNU Teaching Reform and Research Project(xjjgxh2017099).

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