

Maja Wilson

Why I Won't Be Using Rubrics to Respond to Students' Writing

Maja Wilson believes that efforts to standardize language through rubrics and generalized comments provide a disservice to students and undermine the power of the reading and writing experience. She advocates making use of our subjectivity as readers, conceding that her values cannot be standardized and often shift in response to interactions with students and their writing.

To book a flight, press 3. To confirm a reservation, press 4. To repeat this menu, press 5. To speak with a real person, no button you press can help you now . . .” I’d already heard these options at least a dozen times, but I pressed 5 to hear them all again. I was in search of lost luggage, and not a single phone number listed on the baggage claim ticket connected me to a human being. I began to yell at the computer voice, which remained calm. I admired its grace under pressure.

Instead of doing something productive, such as washing my socks in the hotel sink or stomping around the room, I kept the receiver pressed to my ear in a stupor. While my bags were still in bondage, my mind roamed freely. I thought of Ray Bradbury’s fully automated house in “There Will Come Soft Rains” burning to the ground as its computer chip heart eerily repeats the date into a world decimated by nuclear war. I thought of “The Broken Record,” a behavioral management technique I’d been taught at an inservice during which you quietly and calmly repeat your directions until the difficult student complies—stupefied, no doubt, as I was by the airline’s automated repetition. And then, I thought about rubrics.

It may have been a huge leap, I know: lost luggage to Bradbury to behavioral techniques to rubrics. But I’d just read a Scholastic catalog advertising the latest installment by 6+1 Trait giant Ruth Culham, promising “more than 100 just-right comments at

your fingertips . . . tabbed for easy access.” On one hand, oh happy day! I do love a gorgeously organized tab system. On the other hand, I wondered if an important lesson about using generic feedback lurked in my airline-induced agony: Just as the options on the airline’s recording were not responsive to my situation and therefore unhelpful, the comments on rubrics are not responsive to students’ writing and often don’t reflect what I think about their work. This is most obviously true of rubrics created by people who have never met my students; rubrics created by my state’s testing apparatus, photocopied from a professional book, or developed by consultants for my district are unable to anticipate the ways my students will grapple with words in their work. But even the rubrics I create for specific assignments and revise on a regular basis aren’t responsive enough. Student writing never fails to surprise me, and nothing I write before reading a paper is able to capture my responses to it or help the student to revise.

I had come to the conclusion that rubrics weren’t for me after eight years of teaching writing classes to adults, alternative education students, and college-prep seniors. In my first few years of teaching, I often “fudged” the scores to make sure I didn’t award high scores to vacuous writing or low scores to writing that showed great promise. In addition, I’d come to think that the categories of the rubric represented only a sliver of my values about writing: voice, wording, sentence fluency, conventions, con-

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tent, organization, and presentation didn't begin to articulate the things I valued such as promise, thinking through writing, or risk-taking (Broad).

Writing rubrics to include risk-taking or promise didn't help matters much since not every paper needed to meet *all* of my values about writing: while Krystal's writing forged new ground, Felicity was a more traditional thinker and I didn't think it fitting to hold her writing to the same set of values demonstrated by Krystal's writing. The standardized criteria didn't capture the nuances of students' writing. More importantly, I found that my values shifted as students approached writing in new ways and we talked about their work and purposes. I didn't like how using rubrics prematurely narrowed and cemented my vision of good writing (Wilson 2–9).

But my frustration on the phone with the airline finally gave me words for another concern I had with rubrics: No matter how elaborate or eloquent the phrases I was invited to circle, the feedback they offered to students was still generic because they weren't uttered in reaction to the students' actual work. Instead of emerging from what Louise M. Rosenblatt would call the transaction between an individual reader and text, the feedback offered by a rubric made bypassing that interaction all too easy. In comparison to the responses I had gotten to my papers from my friend Sarah in high school or from participants at writers' conferences I had attended as an adult, the feedback on a rubric was prepackaged and processed. Granted, the feedback offered by the rubric might be better than a single letter grade at the top of a paper (Tchudi). But a rubric wasn't so different from the voice that was still intoning politely into my ear; it pretended to have something real to say, but it was ultimately incapable of genuine, specific, ultimately helpful responses.

The Need for Specific Feedback

I had come to see specific feedback as one of the most important ways I could help students to become better writers. After all, the purpose of writing is to create a response in the reader's mind. After I set up meaningful writing opportunities for students, I owed them the chance to see what happened in my mind as I read their words.

The way that rubrics attempt to facilitate my responses to students—by asking me to choose from a menu of responses—troubles me, no matter how

eloquent or seemingly comprehensive or conveniently tabbed that menu might be. The idea that we can standardize our responses to students' papers deserves serious examination, because language itself resists all but the most basic attempts at standardization. While numbers work pretty well for communicating certain kinds of precise information, we have kept words around for their evocative, emotive, associative power. Increased pressure to standardize our reactions to words violates their nature.

If you don't believe me, sit down with a group of friends and write down all the images and ideas and feelings that come to mind when you hear the word *grandmother*. I think of gingerbread cookies and gold-speckled aquamarine countertops and moth balls and soft, wrinkled hands. Share these images with your friends and revel in the richness of how this word interacts differently in your minds.

Now, try boiling down the meaning of the word *grandmother* until you have a list of images and ideas and feelings that everyone can agree on. The results will be singularly uninspiring: something to do with the mother of one's parents, although one of your friends will surely beg to differ since the woman he called grandmother was never technically related. You will likely agree that the first exercise was a much more meaningful way to spend an evening.

While a small amount of standardization is necessary for communication, readers and writers depend on the evocative, associative qualities of language to make reading an intensely meaningful, personal experience. I sometimes wonder if dictionaries have done us a grave disservice; they perpetuate the delusion that words can be defined rather than described, imagined, experienced, and conveyed. Rubrics, and their "menu" of generic comments, are clumsy in practice and in theory; they tear at the foundations of the rhetorical heart of writing, reducing student essays and our responses to an exercise in purposelessness.

Alternative Approaches to Assessment

Without a rubric telling us how to respond to writing, how shall we assess? I suggest that we make ourselves transparent as we read—that we pay attention to what goes on in our minds and try to put our reactions and questions and wonderings and musings and connections and images into words—that we give students the gift of a human

response. We are, after all, their audiences, while a piece of paper is not. Do we want them writing for the rubric, or do we want them to write for themselves and for us and for all those who hunger for the human experience melded with language?

The development of Maria's revision and the assessment process that led to it illustrate the power of a metacognitive response untainted by the rubric. Maria read aloud to me a piece she was working on titled "Uniquely Me":

Through your eyes, I see my wide hips. You see my obscene arms with my dark hair and my dark eyebrows. But I think of my *abuela* who gives me the power of never-ending acceptance, love, and pride. Through my reflection I see my dark roots, I see my light split-ends in which I dyed. I see that my dark hair is coming back darker than before. It refuses to hide and I don't want it to anymore. Through my footsteps I feel my extra weight, but in return it gives me warmth, and that is something I won't trade for the imagination picture of a portrait. When I take my picture, I want it to be me. I don't want it to be the products you see on T.V., because I am uniquely Cuban, uniquely me. (Wilson 72)

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As I listened to Maria read, I was delighted to hear her make the connection between her acceptance of herself and her grandmother's acceptance of her. But I realized that as I was listening to her words, I was layering the richness of another piece she had written earlier in the year about the first day she met her grandmother and how she and her grandmother talk on the phone every week even though they don't speak the same language; my initial response was taking into account words and images that weren't there yet (72).

When I described my reaction to Maria, she got to work immediately on revisions. At first, she tried simply cutting and pasting her earlier writing about her grandmother into her most recent work, and the result was predictably clumsy. Maria and I read through the new version, talking through images and descriptions I was tempted to skim because I'd already encountered them in her writing. She kept

the most powerful descriptions, cut the rest, and brought me the following version of "Uniquely Me":

Through your eyes, I see my wide hips. You see my obscene arms with my dark hair and dark eyebrows. But I think of my grandmother—my *abuela*—and the first day I met her. I remember how she came and hugged me tightly. I could see the love in her eyes. I had never met her, but somehow, I knew that this woman was something special to me. I could see that she had been waiting a long time for me.

My grandmother's hair was sprayed in place—immovable. She sat me on her lap in the living room chair close enough so I could feel her breath crash against my body. My grandmother gently brushed my hair. With each brush stroke she took, my head gently slid back. She sat there for at least forty minutes brushing and drying my hair, and it felt like an eternity of belonging.

My grandmother and I do not speak the same language. Even so, she still tells me she loves me in Spanish—*yo tateatomucho Maria*—and the most magnificent smile comes over her face every time she sees me. I wonder what we would talk about if she could speak English. I wonder what it was like coming to America from Cuba. I wonder if she remembers the day she brushed my hair as vividly as I do.

My *abuela* gives me my pride and strength. Through my grandmother's eyes, I see my dark hair coming back darker than before. It refuses to hide. Through my footsteps I feel my extra weight, but in return it gives me warmth, and that is something I will not trade. When you take my picture, I want it to be me. Because I am uniquely Cuban, uniquely me. (Wilson 74)

When Maria read me this version, we looked at each other with a mutual recognition that she had done it. I didn't need to write a single word of feedback on this final draft; she and I both knew how powerful it was (74).

When we give up rubrics, we're looking at students' work through our eyes, not those of the rubric. Unmediated by the rubric, our response gives students the power to think through what effect they want their words to have rather than how their words measure up to the categories on a rubric. This approach not only helps struggling writers to improve but also allows writers who usually receive A's to develop their writing.

Miranda had always gotten A's on her papers when she joined my eleventh-grade required writing

class. She handed in a beautiful draft about watching her father build a basketball hoop with her younger brother and remembering when she had done the same with her father. The paper ended with the memory of a tense moment between her and her father about whether or not she would play college ball; she wasn't so sure, while her father, thinking of his own lost opportunity to play ball, wanted to push her on. I was thrilled with Miranda's draft; it was creative, solidly written, and insightful. She would have scored high on any rubric.

But when I asked students to reflect on their drafts before handing them in, Miranda wrote that she was uncomfortable with her essay; she felt like she made out her father to be a "bad guy" in a way she really didn't mean to convey. In my response, I wrote,

You mention your discomfort with the ending. . . . Let's think about it this way: right now, your paper starts with a wonderfully positive memory (building the hoop with your father) and then ends with a more conflicted memory. In other words, the last thing left in the reader's mouth is a "bad taste"—though that is overstating. What if you switch it around so that you start with the conflicted memory, and use the positive memory to help you understand where all this is coming from? That way, the "taste" left in your reader's mouth is a good one, and you've used the positive memory to help you understand a phenomenon that just about every father and daughter go through. . . . think this idea through, and try it if it seems like it would accomplish what you want.

Miranda tried this suggestion and was so pleased that she wrote in her revision reflection, "I was a lot happier with the new ending and how our relationship was depicted." Later, in her course evaluation, she wrote that the paper she was most pleased with was the personal narrative because "it really grasped my relationship with my dad and made me realize some things in the process. . . . I finally am looking for ways to better the actual content . . . your feedback helped me because you didn't force your opinion on me, and helped bring out my discontent with [my writing] and fix it." While my comments addressed the organization of the memories, the insight came because I focused on what Miranda wanted to accomplish and what effect her writing had on me, not on how Miranda's writing measured up to the categories or comments on a rubric.

Valuing Subjectivity

Comments on a rubric don't help good writers become better, since even the most carefully chosen complimentary comments don't create conversation about the author's intent and the words' effect. The rubric couldn't ask Miranda specific questions about what she was trying to do, or tell her that a certain phrase she wrote resonated perfectly with my experience of separating from my parents, or point out an interesting connection or thought that might be worth pursuing. Miranda would never have needed to revise if we had relied on the rubric, since she would have fulfilled the "requirements" for voice, word choice, conventions, organization, and all the other categories on which rubrics rely. Paying attention to the communicative and expressive purpose of writing rather than the rubric helped Miranda articulate her hopes for her writing and helped me to help her meet those goals.

This approach—making our subjectivity (our response) transparent and useful—opens the door to subjectivity and disagreement. But we needn't fear disagreement. Disagreement leads to its own insight, and we should teach students to look for the meaning and purpose behind different readers' differing perspectives. In this process, they develop their perceptions and invest in their work.

Craig's revision of his paper, "Hero Killer," was a perfect example. Craig had crafted an account of his changing relationship with his father. It began with a memory of his father's tossing a baseball into the clouds and snatching it back with super-strong hero hands. Three people gave Craig written responses to his work: Caitlyn, Aleece, and me. Caitlyn suggested that some of the words he used sounded too "elementary" for an eleventh grader. After Craig revised his paper, I asked him to reflect on the advice he'd received and to talk through why he'd either accepted or rejected that advice. He wrote, "At first, I said, 'No! I won't make changes! It's my style!' But then, I thought about it and I said, 'O.k.' The only feedback I rejected was the suggestion to change the words 'especially' and 'super-strong' in the first paragraph.

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I didn't change them because I felt they conveyed childhood innocence."

Caitlyn had a perfectly legitimate reason for her suggestions. But in disagreeing with Caitlyn, Craig articulated a major theme in his paper, an insight that led him to write a new and more powerful conclusion. Once we discard rubrics and decide that disagreement in writing assessment can be useful—an idea that violates every tenet of standardization—we can teach students to disagree productively.

Is it possible that discarding the rubric will open the door for some teachers to respond badly or insensitively to student writing? Sure—just as rubrics in the hand of an unthinking, insensitive teacher have predictably unimpressive and harmful results. But I would argue that setting aside rubrics and learning to pay attention to our responses not only improves students' writing but also makes our experience of reading student papers more interesting and rewarding. When Terra Lange, a teacher from Illinois, put aside the rubric, she was shocked to see the difference in her focus. She describes her determination to replace rubrics with an unending revision process—an assessment process with the goal of improvement rather than ranking and sorting.

I am not going to think about the rubric when grading [the final version of] these essays; I am just going to respond to the writing. . . . It is almost embarrassing to say that I have never done this before. Before, I just thought about how this writing fits into the rubric; sometimes, my own, and sometimes, a rubric created by the state. As I read these [first drafts,] I didn't think about grades; I just kept thinking about my response to the writing and how could this writer improve. It seemed that I had much more to say when I wasn't using the rubric as a guide to my response. In some

cases, it was a struggle for me to have good and insightful comments when I was focusing on the rubric.

It is startling that focusing on our response to the writing and thinking about how we can help the writer improve is, in fact, going against the grain. But writing itself has always presented a problem for positivist testing specialists; it has always been too messy and subjective to satisfy their need for factory-style assessment (Lynne). Rubrics are writing assessment's current sacred cow because they provide the appearance of objectivity and standardization that allows direct writing assessment a place in standardized testing programs (Broad). By accepting the standardized responses inherent in rubrics, we undermine the power of the experiences of reading and writing. In the end, assessment must be a conversation—just as writing exists for the purpose of conversation. I'm not willing to let rubrics script that conversation for me.

Oh, and did I mention what happened with my luggage? After listening to the airline's recorded message for approximately eight and a half minutes with a goofy, distant look on my face while thinking about rubrics, a real, live person picked up the line. We had a good conversation. She found my bags for me.

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READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

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Wilson emphasizes the importance of personal, real, and authentic feedback. The lesson plan "Draft Letters: Improving Student Writing through Critical Thinking" asks students to think critically about their writing on a specific assignment before submitting their work to a reader. Students write reflective letters to the teacher, identifying their thoughts on the piece that the teacher is about to read. This strategy helps guide the feedback that the writer receives.

http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=902