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# Rubrics

## Heuristics for Developing Writing Strategies

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Rubrics are an integral part of many writing programs, and they represent elements of good writing in essays, stories, poems, as well as other genres and forms of text. Although it is possible to use rubrics to teach students about the processes underlying effective writing, a more common practice is to use rubrics as a means of assessment, after students have completed their work. Thus, the premise of this article is to show teachers how to transform rubrics into powerful teaching devices, using foundations from strategy instruction as a means for this endeavor. Two examples are used in the article to explain this process: (a) a close examination of the comparison genre; and (b) a planning strategy for writing expository essays, called PLAN and WRITE, that was previously validated with middle school students with and without learning disabilities.

**Keywords:** *rubrics; writing; strategy instruction; PLAN and WRITE*

A quick Internet search using the term *rubric* brings up a plethora of Web sites and methods for teachers to integrate them into their lesson plans, in just about any academic content area, and for almost any activity. To wit, my son, now a third grader, recently brought home a poster with two depictions of the character Ms. Nelson, from the book *Ms. Nelson is Missing!* (Marshall, 1977; see Figure 1), which he explained by the sentence, “Miss nelson is Sneaky by changing into miss Swamp.” His reading teacher’s corresponding character trait rubric provided three criteria for students to earn full credit, or a score of 4, on this project:

1. One character trait is written to describe the character.
2. There is a colorful, constructed drawing of a character showing this trait.
3. There is a caption that explains how the character shows this trait in the story.

This example highlights how rubrics may be used for specific purposes; in addition, they are commonly linked to standards-based expectations. For example, teachers in Maryland refer to holistic rubrics to judge differences in students’ answers regarding the quality of “brief (and extended) constructed responses,” on tasks ranging from homework to state assessment questions in content areas such as mathematics and the English language arts.

Rubrics are so ensconced today that readers might be surprised to find reviews delimiting their potential benefits for instruction as early as one decade ago (e.g., Popham, 1997). With respect to writing assignments, rubrics provide a systematic way for teachers to assess written products, frequently using a primary trait scoring approach (Tompkins, 2004). In other words, many rubrics are based on specific genres or situation-specific criteria, and teachers typically create a scoring guide with a list of the criteria that children are to include in their writing (e.g., writing has a title, a beginning, middle, and end, characters, as well as the development and resolution of a problem). Other writing rubrics list more general criteria such as ideas, organization, vocabulary, and mechanics, specifying different achievement levels within each category; however, these rubrics are not as common because they do not specify key attributes of the skills being assessed (Popham, 1997). Another problem with general criteria (e.g., organization) is that a low rating does not indicate to the student the source of the difficulty (in this case, how his or her reader’s sense of continuity was broken; Newkirk, 2000).

The best rubrics make teachers’ expectations clear and include both criteria (e.g., reasons against a claim) as well as gradations in quality (e.g., presents reasons against a claim and explains why they may be regarded as valid, as compared to presents reasons against the claim but fails

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**Author’s Note:** I would like to thank Lisa Pericola Case for her helpful comments on earlier versions of the article.

**Figure 1**  
**Sneaky Miss Nelson**



to explain why others may view them as valid, as further compared to fails to acknowledge reasons against a claim; Andrade, 2001). Advocates for the use of rubrics in writing instruction posit that using them consistently can be an effective means for guiding students' revision; this in turn may lead to improvements in overall writing ability (Andrade, 2001; Schirmer & Bailey, 2000).

Conversely, evidence remains limited regarding the efficacy of rubrics by themselves as compared to using them as part of a program that explicate the processes involved in writing. Whereas some teachers use the same rubric for successive assignments, allowing students to figure out what is needed to create a quality product over time (i.e., learning about process), in contrast, other teachers supply task-specific rubrics similar to the one described in the vignette at the beginning of this article, or merely explain how to use a rubric to grade a series of good, fair, and poor student papers (Christenbury, 2005). The problem with the latter approach is that although most students may learn what teachers value in assigned tasks or about the underlying components of good essays, they still may not know how to engage in the underlying processes needed to achieve proficiency.

Thus, the purpose of this article is to extend how teachers use rubrics to include the teaching of processes

underlying effective writing. My goal is to show how rubrics can serve as heuristics for creating writing strategies and to provide an organizational tool for teachers to generate writing strategies similar to ones validated by researchers using the self-regulated strategy development (SRSD) model (e.g., Danoff, Harris, & Graham, 1993; De La Paz, 1999a, 1999b; Graham, Harris, & Mason, 2005; Stoddard & MacArthur, 1993). To further set the context for my suggestions, it may help to briefly review the goals and basic tenets that are central to this form of writing instruction and describe recent evidence of its efficacy.

### **Self-Regulated Strategy Instruction**

In response to the instructional needs of struggling elementary and secondary student writers, several teams of researchers (cf. Don Deshler, Carol Sue Englert, and Bernice Wong) have developed writing strategies over the past 20 years to help students develop more sophisticated approaches to writing and improve the quality of their compositions. One form of strategy instruction, developed by Karen Harris and Steve Graham (1996, 1999) and referred to as SRSD, differs from others in that it emphasizes instructional components that are designed to enhance

students' strategic behaviors, self-regulation skills, and motivational dispositions. In this approach, students learn how to accomplish specific writing tasks, such as planning expository or persuasive essays, along with procedures for regulating the writing process. Students are taught how to use goal setting, self-monitoring, self-instructions, and/or self-reinforcement to regulate their use of the target strategies, the task, and their behaviors, all to advance the important skill of self-regulation. Motivation is boosted by a variety of procedures, including the role of effort in learning and identifying the positive effects of instruction. Teachers scaffold instruction so that responsibility for recruiting and using the writing strategies, accompanying knowledge and skills, and self-regulation procedures gradually shift from the teacher to students.

With the SRSD model, there are six stages of instruction (Harris & Graham, 1996, 1999):

1. Develop background knowledge (students are taught background knowledge, such as different sentence types, needed to use the strategy successfully).
2. Describe it (teachers provide an overview of the purpose of the strategy and its potential benefits; a mnemonic for remembering the steps of the strategy may also be introduced).
3. Model it (the teacher demonstrates how to use the strategy).
4. Memorize it (the student memorizes the mnemonic, its meaning, and all associated steps).
5. Support it (collaborative planning, lists of transition words, cue cards, and so on are scaffolds provided to help students gain mastery of the strategy).
6. Use it independently (students use the strategy with fewer and fewer supports until they have it internalized).

SRSD instruction is characterized by explicit teaching, individualized goal setting, and criterion-based versus time-based learning. Furthermore, students are treated as active collaborators in the learning process (Graham et al., 2005).

Analyses of strategy instruction generally have shown that it is responsible for producing large effects (i.e., a reasonably large degree of improvement) for students who learned individual writing strategies. According to a recent meta-analysis (Graham, 2006) of strategy instruction across 39 studies (including approaches with and without self-regulation), the average effect sizes at posttest for group design investigations ranged from 1.47 for quality to 1.78 for elements (a measure of the structure of essays), and to 2.0 and above for length and story grammar (another structure measure) scores. Likewise, the average

percentage of nonoverlapping data (a measure of the effectiveness of single-subject design studies) for quality, elements, and story grammar were all above 90%, indicating that strategy instruction is an effective treatment in single-participant design studies as well. Of special note is that Graham's (2006) meta-analysis indicated that SRSD produced effect sizes that were twice those in studies that used strategy instruction without self-regulation components, indicating just how important this element is to instruction. I also found support for the inclusion of self-regulation in a review of writing studies that incorporated a component analysis, which researchers conducted to isolate the most effective elements of complex instructional programs. An important finding was that self-regulation is an essential component for helping students with learning disabilities transfer and maintain improved writing performance (De La Paz, 2007).

However, despite such successes in elevating students' writing performance and in changing students' perceptions about themselves as writers and about writing in general, teachers may be hesitant to use writing strategy instruction. There are several potential reasons why this might be the case. First, strategy instruction requires following a specific model for instruction that may appear to hold a stand-alone status (although it has successfully been integrated with holistic approaches to writing; see MacArthur & Graham, 1993; MacArthur, Graham, Schwartz, & Schafer, 1995; MacArthur, Swartz, Graham, Molloy, & Harris, 1996). To see the levels of success reported by its proponents in students, six requisite phases are needed to transfer learning from teacher-directed instruction to student mastery (Danoff et al., 1993).

Second, teachers with whom I have worked provide anecdotal evidence that this form of instruction is demanding, especially in comparison with other writing programs. Other programs call for materials to be organized, pretests administered, model essays composed, and feedback given to students regarding their progress. However, in SRSD, teachers in a sense also become performers when modeling how to apply a target writing strategy by orchestrating (a) explicit representations of the underlying writing processes, (b) guides that are intended to scaffold student performance, and (c) compositions that are at higher than current levels of student performance but also within their reach for mastery. Moreover, they must embed problem-defining and strategy-engaging self-statements when modeling, to make and correct mistakes (such as generating content that is needed and content that is superfluous to the topic) as well as to model rhetorical decision making. Teachers' naturally high meta-cognitive skills must be raised one notch higher to successfully demonstrate all of the thinking intended in most writing strategies.



However, teachers may be able to incorporate several features central to strategy instruction into their teaching without engaging in the full SRSD model, because the suggestions in this article are to create, in essence, mini writing strategies by integrating elements that have led to improvement in student performance in self-regulated strategy instruction. By following these suggestions, teachers may provide a more meaningful use of rubrics for students who struggle with the writing process (i.e., those students who are not able to infer from critiquing sample essays what is good, what is wrong, and more important, how to achieve success).

## Transforming Rubrics into Heuristics for Developing Writing Strategies

In this section, I propose and elaborate on a four-step sequence for teachers to engage in when planning how to transform rubrics into heuristics for developing writing strategies and demonstrate how this process might unfold with the use of a comparison–contrast rubric (see Figure 2). This rubric, a composite generated from several readily available rubrics, proposes that several categories are proposed relating to genre, text structure, and surface features of connected text, and it provides four gradations in quality. Other rubrics for analyzing comparison and contrast essays may be equally appropriate for classroom use; this one was selected for illustration purposes.

To work from this type of rubric and use it as a heuristic for developing a writing strategy, teachers carry out a series of actions related to four key steps (see Figure 3):

1. Examine the rubric.
2. Identify underlying skills to teach.
3. Develop a mnemonic.
4. Add supports.

Furthermore, by completing the first step, teachers will develop content to be used for the remaining steps in the planning process. In addition, although my example highlights the development of a planning strategy for writing comparison essays, it would also be possible to develop a revising strategy that is genre specific.

### Step 1: Examine the Rubric

In this step, teachers consider four questions: What elements are essential to the genre? What is related to text structure? What are realistic goals for the writer regarding the product? How can the writer demonstrate thinking that is of value in the discipline? Step 1 provides

the most important set of actions because answers to these questions will be used for, or embedded in, each subsequent planning step. To illustrate, using the rubric presented in Figure 2, to write a successful comparison paper, a writer must identify points of similarity and difference between each chosen item of a category.

To make these terms clear for later use in this article, and given the subject of social studies, one category might be “The First Ladies of the United States of America.” Within this category, three items for comparison might be as follows: (a) how they supported their husbands’ presidencies, (b) the effect they had on society, and (c) how the time period in which they lived provided constraints or opportunities for them to accomplish their goals. Last, the points of similarity and difference vary, depending on which of the presidents’ wives are chosen; for example, Martha Washington and Eleanor Roosevelt provide an opportunity for a broader comparison (partly because they lived in very different eras) than one between Martha Washington and Abigail Adams.

Although teachers may think of ideas for each step in a recursive manner, I examine hypothetical responses to the remaining questions in this step before moving on. The second question in Step 1 asks teachers to consider text structure because it provides a critical linkage for understanding each genre. Furthermore, by determining the range of text structures (there are at least four text structures for comparison essays; see Figure 4), teachers also decide how to introduce each form to students. One technique is to illustrate text structure by reading stories, such as *George vs. George: The American Revolution as Seen from Both Sides* (Schanzer, 2004), and *John, Paul, George, and Ben* (Smith, 2006). Another approach is to develop visual guides (see Figure 4) for use as procedural facilitators, meaning that students use a chart to remind themselves how text structures are formed, when generating their own essays. A third way to explain text structure is to create sample essays, composed for each text structure, for students to examine and deconstruct. Students use these to identify differences and similarities among various text structures so that they fully understand each and can then use them as sample templates in their own writing. Although all these activities help students build background knowledge of text structure, in particular, I have found visual guides to be a valuable form of support (to be discussed in Step 4).

The third question in Step 1, “What are realistic goals for the writer regarding the product?”, is a reminder for some students, particularly those with disabilities, that they may not achieve competence in all areas of writing. Students with learning disabilities and other high incidence

**Figure 2**  
**Sample Comparison Rubric**

<b>Comparison and Contrast Rubric</b>				
<b>Category</b>	<b>4 - Exemplary</b>	<b>3 - Competent</b>	<b>2 - Emerging</b>	<b>1 - Low</b>
Ideas and Development	The writer selects two topics and creates a complete comparison. Elaboration evenly compares and contrasts specific items within relevant categories.	The writer compares and contrasts two topics. Details and information may be general or only one comparison is supported.	Two topics are compared and contrasted but details are not parallel or supporting information is not relevant.	The paper compares or contrasts but does not include both.
Organization	The chosen organizational structure establishes a point of similarity and a point of difference for each item presented.	Some errors in order or in use of the chosen organizational structure.	Errors in following the chosen organizational structure detract from meaning.	Random organization or extremely difficult to follow.
Sentence Fluency	Sentences clearly connect subjects. There are a variety of sentence structures and appropriate transitions.	Sentences clearly connect ideas. The sentences lack variety or include errors in transitions.	Contains sentences with errors in coherence. Uses simple sentences or minimal transitions.	Sentences are incomplete or incoherent. Transitions are inappropriate or nonexistent.
Mechanics	Correct punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and grammar.	Minor or infrequent errors are noted, but they do not detract from the overall meaning.	Errors are frequent and detract from meaning; however, some aspects of mechanics are adequate.	The writing demonstrates a lack of control; errors interfere substantially with the overall meaning.

**Figure 3**  
**Transforming Rubrics Into Writing Strategies**

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**Step 1.** Examine the rubric. In so doing, answer four questions:

What elements are essential to the genre?

What is related to text structure?

What are realistic goals for the writer regarding the product?

How can the writer demonstrate thinking that is of value to the discipline?

**Step 2.** Identify underlying skills to teach.

Decide how to teach. Text structure may be presented via literature or trade books, visual guides, sample essays and so on.

Task representations matter. Writing in response to literature may be less difficult than writing in response to a prompt.

Good instruction still counts. Modeling, direct instruction, and opportunities to practice all make a difference.

**Step 3.** Develop a mnemonic.

Remind students what is essential about genre and processes underlying effective writing.

The first letter should be a verb and the overall mnemonic should relate to the purpose.

Use known acronyms, if any.

Establish different types of goals (process, product, and domain).

Add redundancy with other elements such as supports (see below).

Limit the number of total steps to a manageable number.

**Step 4.** Add supports.

Lists of transition words, key phrases, or domain-specific markers.

Cue cards, especially those that provide upward or downward extensions.

Forms for recording progress (e.g., to aid in goal setting).

Plan how to systematically remove these scaffolds during instruction.

## Figure 4

### Text Structure for Comparison Essays

#### 1. Whole-to-whole/block pattern:

The writer presents all the features of one topic in the first paragraph, followed by a parallel paragraph about the second topic: Martha Washington in paragraph one and Eleanor Roosevelt in paragraph two. In each paragraph, the writer includes sentences about how they supported their husbands' presidencies, the effect they had on society, and how the time period in which they lived provided constraints or opportunities for them to do these things.

#### 2. Point-by-point comparison:

The writer presents an integrated composition in which first, second, and third paragraphs include relevant content for each topic on the aspects of comparison. The first paragraph describes how Martha Washington and then Eleanor Roosevelt supported their husbands' presidencies. The second paragraph describes the effect each woman had on society. The final paragraph discusses how the different time periods provided constraints or opportunities for each woman.

#### 3. Similarities to differences:

The writer explains all the similarities about the items being compared and then all the differences. For instance, Martha Washington and Eleanor Roosevelt were similar in that both were shy as young people, and both overcame their awkwardness to become strong allies for their husbands, and both were noted as warm hostesses who made their guests feel welcome in the White House. In contrast, while we know more about Roosevelt than Washington, some of their differences were that Roosevelt had a more formal education than Washington, and that after their husbands' presidencies ended, Roosevelt pursued a career of her own as American spokesman in the United Nations.

#### 4. Combination/mixed:

Both whole-to-whole and point-by-point are used. Using the above example, in the first two paragraphs, Martha Washington is described in paragraph one with respect to the first two points. Then Eleanor Roosevelt is described in paragraph two with respect to the same two points. In the final paragraph, both women are discussed with respect to the effect the time period had on women at the times they lived.

disabilities have more errors such as spelling, punctuation, capitalization, grammar, and word usage mistakes than their peers and may benefit less from instruction. Thus, although teachers may legitimately expect students to (attempt to) proof their papers for mechanical errors, it is

also important to focus on ways students can improve other aspects of their writing and hope that their reader gains an overall more favorable impression. Goals such as staying on topic, using vivid or original vocabulary, choosing specific examples to illustrate each comparison, and creating



complete comparisons (by stating a point of similarity and a point of difference for each item presented, for example) may be chosen and monitored for an individual or groups of students.

The last question in Step 1 is to consider how the writer can demonstrate thinking that is of value in the discipline. To some extent, this question may be ignored in early primary contexts. However, because science and social studies teachers increasingly require students to use writing as a key means for demonstrating their understanding (Bangert-Drowns, Hurley, & Wilkinson, 2004), students may benefit from their teachers' explicit instructions on how to engage in this type of thinking. For example, in science, students may compare and contrast classification systems or taxonomies, or be asked to explain why observed effects in an experiment are similar to or different from technical descriptions of a phenomenon (Hand, Prain, & Yore, 2001).

In social studies, again in the context of writing comparison essays, students may be asked to think about similarities and difference in people's attitudes and beliefs concerning different topics (such as immigration) during specific time periods (e.g., the 1900s or the first decade of the new millennium) and what underlying issues in society influenced people's beliefs during each respective time period. Finally, to bring this discussion back to a primary context (albeit not one in which a comparison essay is needed), children in elementary school are routinely asked to explain how they arrived at their solution to mathematics problems, which requires them to be able to translate symbolic representations into pictorial or written accounts and provide some explanation or justification for their solution. In each of these cases, teachers are likely to obtain better writing samples when they first identify and then make explicit what is meant by these and other disciplinary connections.

## Step 2: Identify Underlying Skills to Teach

Using content from the first step, teachers may now consider elements related to genre, text structure, and goals (including those that are related to the writing process, writing products, and those that are discipline specific). All are relevant and may be taught directly or embedded into mnemonics and other forms of support (see Steps 3 and 4). Using information about the comparison genre as the context, I have already claimed that writers must generate points of similarity and difference between each chosen item of a category. In some contexts, such as in writing a response to literature, students read one or more texts (e.g., one source about Martha Washington and one source about Eleanor Roosevelt) to

select ideas that meet each of these criteria. However, in other situations, students retrieve ideas from long-term memory, relying on prior knowledge about one or more topics. Because the latter situation is especially challenging for students with learning disabilities, my focus here is on helping students generate content for a writing prompt.

To elaborate, students need to first brainstorm a range of categories for a given comparison (abolitionists, wives of presidents, suffragettes—if given a broader purpose to compare and contrast famous women), and second, brainstorm specific items within these categories as the basis for their comparison (with respect to the topic of presidents' wives, additional items for comparison might be their personal upbringing, whether they overcame any personal obstacles in dealing with their husband's quest for the presidency, their political skills, whether they accomplished one or more goals in their life time, and so on). Third, students need to identify what the items have in common and how they differ, to select points of similarity and difference for use in their essay. At this stage, students should organize content (this can be done by checking off selected content to be used in the essay and ordering each point, facilitated by using a list or Venn diagram format when first generating content).

So students brainstorm and organize content based on the specific genre under study and follow corresponding forms of text structure. For comparison essays, key words and phrases signal conceptual relationships to the reader. For example, "more" and "–er" words indicate similarity, whereas "on the contrary" and "in contrast" are used to signal differences (see Figure 5 for additional words and phrases). Providing students with lists such as these and spending time in class noting how entire sentences can be used to signal a change in focus of comparison will help ensure that students use them appropriately in their compositions. Finally, for mature writers, the comparison genre, like most genres, is really a multigenre text in that it often combines explanation as well as elements of persuasion. Writers may also include descriptive elements, such as similes, metaphors, and analogies, in their examples, and it naturally follows that showing students these devices will enrich the quality of their comparisons.

## Step 3: Develop a Mnemonic

This device should remind students what is essential about the genre (and accompanying text structure), as well as the processes that they need to engage in when planning to write. In my work with secondary students with and without disabilities, the following principles have led to creating useful mnemonics: (a) start each element of the mnemonic with a verb, to prompt students to

**Figure 5**  
**Transition Words and Phrases for Comparison Essays**

**Direct comparisons:**

likewise, akin, similar, similar to, better, similarly, in a similar manner, both...and, as...as, compared to, compared with, like, likewise, not only...but also, resemble, identical, related

**Direct contrasts:**

more...than, differences, different from, unlike, in contrast, on the contrary, contrary to, conversely, rather than, yet, but, while, however, on the other hand, at the same time, though, nevertheless, dissimilar

**Making distinctions:**

consistent, inconsistent, superior, inferior, distinctive, diverse, appropriate, worthwhile, favorable, unfavorable, advisable, inadvisable, convenient, inconvenient, hindrance, help, detrimental, drawback, obstacle, hamper, annoying, encouraging, disturbing

engage in an action; (b) relate the mnemonic to the purpose of the activity to make it meaningful; (c) capitalize on acronyms known for other purposes, if any exist, to ease their burden in memorizing something new; (d) establish goals that relate to different purposes, process (e.g., brainstorming), product (e.g., using different sentence structures), and domain (e.g., science), either for an entire group or for individuals; (e) add redundancy with other elements of the writing program, such as supports, again to help students internalize the strategy; and finally, (f) limit the total number of steps. If additional complexity is needed, embed a subroutine (e.g., one element of the mnemonic may trigger a series of actions that are to be executed before continuing with the remaining steps).

When thinking of a sample mnemonic for comparison essays, I used the word “COMPARE” as the guiding mnemonic. Each letter corresponds to one action or element needed to plan a comparison essay. The C stands for Consider different categories (“Can you think of three different comparisons that respond to the prompt?”). The O stands for Opt for two (or more, if required) items to be compared (“How many can you write down?”). The M

stands for Match up ideas (list and sequence points that are similar and points that are different). If the student has already generated ideas using a list or some graphic organizer, he or she organizes them by numbering them in the order he or she plans to use them. The P stands for Pick a text structure, given the four previously mentioned options (i.e., the whole-to-whole comparison, block pattern comparison, point-by-point comparison, similarities-to-differences pattern, or a combination or mixed pattern). The A stands for Add supporting facts, details, and examples, to elicit elaboration. The R stands for Remember your goals, which can relate to process, product, and domain, and again be established for an entire class or individualized as needed. The final letter, E stands for Evaluate (“Reread your essay to see if it makes sense”). Thus, although the resulting mnemonic is arguably too long to use in elementary contexts, for older students in particular, it responds to the rubric for comparison essays, informs students how to engage in the skills needed to create effective papers, and provides an opportunity for teachers to embed other skills and strategies found in effective papers (e.g., elaboration and revision).

#### Step 4: Add Supports

The supports will be phased out over time, as students gain mastery in planning, composing, and revising their compositions. Two of these supports have been mentioned already, such as lists of transition words, phrases, or other domain-specific markers (see Figure 5). Students can be taught to use a range of these without memorizing the entire list to become comfortable in their use yet avoid writing formulaic essays. Second, teachers can supply (and later withdraw) text-structure guides as separate graphic organizers to provide organizational cues. With comparison essays, it is important to teach students that the underlying text structure also follows parallel construction. For instance, if using a whole-to-whole or block pattern for construction, the writer might choose to mention Martha Washington before Eleanor Roosevelt for each item (when commenting on how they supported their husbands' presidencies, the effect they had on society, and how the time period in which they lived provided constraints or opportunities for them to do these things). Two more forms of support, which can be used on an as-needed basis for individual learners are (a) cue cards that guide the sequencing of steps or add extensions for more capable learners and (b) forms for recording progress (to aid in self-monitoring and goal setting). In my previous work, each of these forms of support has been helpful to students. This illustration on the use of a comparison rubric to develop a writing strategy has been hypothetical, so my last focus in this article is a report of how I used a state writing assessment rubric as the basis for the development of an expository planning strategy called PLAN and WRITE (De La Paz, 1999a, 1999b; De La Paz & Graham, 2002; De La Paz, Owen, Graham, & Harris, 2000).

#### Meeting the Challenge of a High-Stakes Writing Test

Writing on demand is a common form of writing assessment across the nation at both elementary-grade and secondary-grade levels (Gregg, Coleman, Davis, & Chalk, 2007). In general, teachers know the range of genres that may be posed to students at each grade level. For example, in California, 4th, 7th, and 11th graders are given writing assessments and, of these students, those in middle school are asked to compose fictional or autobiographical narrative writing, response-to-literature writing, persuasive writing, or summary writing. Previously released writing prompts and rubrics help students prepare for these tests, which frequently require students to plan and compose in a single session.

Thus, in the late 1990s, my goal was to develop a planning strategy for local middle school students who faced one of these writing-on-demand assessments. At that time, students in Tennessee were given 35 minutes to plan and compose an expository essay, which contained persuasive and autobiographical elements in addition to requests for informational forms of expository writing (e.g., "Think about a special event you will never forget. Write an essay telling what happened, how you felt, and why it is unforgettable"; De La Paz, 1999a). Armed with this knowledge as well as the state writing assessment rubric (see Figure 6), I began to create a strategy that would address students' needs and the task situation.

Examining the rubric—the first step of the planning process—led to my realization that grade-level competence required both the organization and development of ideas, and although some errors in mechanics, usage, or sentence structure could be tolerated, the writer had to display a fair degree of facility in the use of language. As the rubric did not specify characteristics of expository text per se, I based definitions of this genre on the examination of all of the then-released writing prompts from previous years. In addition, when tackling how to best represent text structure, I agreed to follow a five-paragraph structure that was common in the middle schools where the evaluation of the instruction was conducted. To do this, I decided to allow a formulaic option for beginning and struggling writers (the age-old "tell them what you are going to tell them," "tell them," "tell them," "tell them," and "tell them what you told them"), and a more sophisticated option, at least for writing introductory paragraphs, for more capable writers and students who became comfortable with the first pattern. The alternate introductory paragraph suggested using an "attention getter" to lead up to a thesis statement as the last sentence of the first paragraph by following one of the four options: use a series of questions or statements, use a brief or funny story, use a mean or angry statement, and start with the opposite opinion from what you believe. I used the state rubric to generate a list of 10 goals for students (e.g., show clear organization and address the topic by answering all parts of the prompt).

The second planning step—identify underlying skills to teach—involved deciding on ways that students could demonstrate adequate facility in the use of language. Because the rubric rewarded syntactic variety and clear explanations or illustrations of key ideas at higher levels of competency, it was a natural decision to teach (or activate prior knowledge of) different sentence forms and use of vivid vocabulary. A second focal point was to find some means to prompt students to fully consider the topic, due to their complexity and variety. To make this point clear,

**Figure 6**  
**Tennessee Writing Assessment Rubric**

<p><b>SCORE OF 6</b></p> <p>A 6 paper is OUTSTANDING. It demonstrates a high degree of proficiency in response to the assignment but may have a few minor errors.</p> <p><i>An essay in this category:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* is well organized and coherently developed</li> <li>* clearly explains or illustrates key ideas</li> <li>* demonstrates syntactic variety</li> <li>* clearly displays facility in the use of language</li> <li>* is generally free from errors in mechanics, usage, and sentence structure</li> </ul>	<p><b>SCORE OF 3</b></p> <p>A 3 paper is LIMITED. It demonstrates some degree of proficiency in response to the assignment, but it is clearly flawed.</p> <p><i>An essay in this category reveals one or more of the following weaknesses:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* inadequate organization or development</li> <li>* inadequate explanation or illustration of key ideas</li> <li>* limited or inappropriate word choice</li> <li>* a pattern or accumulation of errors in mechanics, usage, or sentence structure</li> </ul>
<p><b>SCORE OF 5</b></p> <p>A 5 paper is STRONG. It demonstrates clear proficiency in response to the assignment and may have minor errors.</p> <p><i>An essay in this category:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* is generally well organized and coherently developed</li> <li>* explains or illustrates key ideas</li> <li>* demonstrates some syntactic variety</li> <li>* displays facility in the use of language</li> <li>* is generally free from errors in mechanics, usage, and sentence structure</li> </ul>	<p><b>SCORE OF 2</b></p> <p>A 2 paper is FLAWED. It demonstrates limited proficiency in response to the assignment.</p> <p><i>An essay in this category reveals one or more of the following weaknesses:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* weak organization or very little development</li> <li>* little or no relevant detail</li> <li>* serious errors in mechanics, usage, sentence structure, or word choice</li> </ul>
<p><b>SCORE OF 4</b></p> <p>A 4 paper is COMPETENT. It demonstrates proficiency in response to the assignment.</p> <p><i>An essay in this category:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* is adequately organized and developed</li> <li>* explains or illustrates some of the key ideas</li> <li>* demonstrates adequate facility in the use of language</li> <li>* may display some errors in mechanics, usage, or sentence structure</li> </ul>	<p><b>SCORE OF 1</b></p> <p>A 1 paper is DEFICIENT. It demonstrates fundamental deficiencies in writing skills.</p> <p><i>An essay in this category contains serious and persistent writing errors or is incoherent or is undeveloped.</i></p>
	<p><b>SCORE OF 0</b></p> <p>A 0 paper is accompanied by one of the following codes to indicate a paper could not be scored for one of the following reasons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>* 0-A - Blank or Refusal</li> <li>* 0-B - Insufficient to score or Illegible</li> <li>* 0-C - Off Topic</li> <li>* 0-D - Written predominantly in another language</li> </ul>

Source: Tennessee Department of Education (2008).



compare a second prompt with the one presented earlier, "Suppose you could get into a time machine and go into the past or into the future. Write an essay about a specific time that you would like to visit in this time machine. Be sure to explain why you would like to visit this specific time." Whereas the unforgettable event prompt above specified three aspects for its development, the time machine prompt is intended to elicit different reasons for wanting to visit a specific time. (Other prompts were as follows: 1. Many young people want a part-time job. In an essay, state whether you think young people should have a part-time job and give reasons why you think so. 2. Think about a task you can do well. Explain how to perform that task.) Therefore, students had to decide (a) what they were being asked to write about and (b) how to develop their essay. To do this, they were prompted to underline the first element once and the second element twice.

The third planning step—to develop a mnemonic—led to my creation of PLAN and WRITE, with the first step of the strategy corresponding to the cue to "Pay attention to the prompt," as explained. The second step, "List main ideas," prompted students to first decide on one topic (such as which age or which event to write about) and then to brainstorm at least three main ideas for the development of the essay (three reasons why this age was of interest). To encourage reflection in this step, teachers asked students to brainstorm three responses to the prompt before deciding on one to write about. In the third step, "Add supporting ideas," students noted at least three details, examples, or elaborations that supported each main idea. As part of this step, they were encouraged to revise their chosen topic whenever they could not brainstorm enough supporting ideas. The fourth step, "Number your ideas," asked students to arrange their main ideas in the order they planned to use them. This step also encouraged students to be purposeful in the development of their topics. Whereas for some topics the order of mention was arbitrary, for other topics, this sequence could signal literary tension or topic development.

The second part of the strategy, WRITE, reminded students to use their plan, continue the planning process while writing, and address writing goals or plans set at an earlier time. Step 5, "Work from your plan to develop your thesis statement," reminded students to incorporate ideas from their plan into a thesis statement. With this step, students chose either the basic or advanced introductory paragraph format mentioned above, primarily by varying the placement of the thesis statement. Step 6, "Remember your goals," was yet another reminder to work toward individual writing goals set with the teacher or based on a self-assessment of progress. Additional goals included use of mature vocabulary and use of varied (error-free) sentence types. As students neared mastery of the target

strategy, teachers helped students focus on one or two areas of need for each student, based on the quality of compositions written during independent practice.

Steps 7 through 9 of the strategy gave students specific suggestions on how to continue planning while writing as well as how to attempt online revisions. These three steps were to do as follows: "Include transition words for each paragraph," "Try to use different kinds of sentences," and use "Exciting, interesting, \$1,000,000 words" in their compositions. These suggestions were prompts that were intended to be redundant with the state's criteria for proficient essays. Students also learned that once they finished their essays, they should keep these criteria or steps in mind as they reread them. Students were asked to check that they used transition words appropriately, to make minor changes (e.g., creating a compound sentence from adjacent simple sentences), to add variety to their paper, and to substitute synonyms for words that were used more than once in a given paragraph.

The final planning step, to add supports, led to my creation of cue cards, planning forms, list of goals, and worksheets designed for practice in determining the focus of the state writing prompts (see De La Paz, 1999b, and De La Paz et al., 2000, for sample materials). Teachers gave students each of these supports to help manage the writing strategy, as they were learning how to implement it. As students became increasingly competent, internalizing the steps in PLAN and WRITE, each support was withdrawn, and teachers systematically reduced the number of times they assisted students on each subsequent attempt at using the planning and writing strategy. It is also important to note that when evaluated in my research studies, each student needed about 5 days of independent practice (planning and writing four essays) to become capable of responding to the timed state writing test.

## Summary and Conclusion

The main purpose of this article has been to show teachers how to approach rubrics with a new appreciation for their potential as instructional tools. The suggestions presented here provide a series of planning activities that transform rubrics into heuristics for developing writing strategies. This was demonstrated with a hypothetical example, in writing comparison essays, as well as an example from my prior work using strategy instruction. However, space limitations preclude other discussions, such as the delicate subject of how to use rubrics to provide meaningful feedback to writers, a process which has sometimes been called into question as too standardized and not specific enough to meet the needs of individual students (Wilson, 2007). Moreover,



based on the parallels herein with the use of rubrics as heuristics for developing writing strategies, the savvy reader might ask, what is the essential difference between this approach and the more general strategy instruction (e.g., SRSD model)? I give two answers. First, the six stages of instruction in SRSD, which call for a phased transformation from teacher-led to student-independent writing performance has been omitted from this discussion. Second and perhaps more important, the role of self-regulation, found to be essential for learners with disabilities and responsible for especially powerful effects as compared to strategy instruction without its emphasis, is again neglected in this overview.

To conclude, the SRSD model provides a coherent structure, incorporating modeling, self-regulation, criterion-based mastery, and a gradual transfer of knowledge and skills from teachers to students (which teachers may wish to add to their writing program, after following suggestions presented here). Transforming rubrics into mini writing strategies can be a first step. However, because the full SRSD model has consistently led to positive, noticeable effects with students who have varying initial capabilities at multiple grade levels, my hope is that teachers and their students will use rubrics to develop mini strategies, then expand their writing programs even further by incorporating a more comprehensive model of instruction.

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