

CHAPTER 5: EVALUATION OF ESSAYS

INTRODUCTION TO THE FLEXIBLE BLOCK RUBRIC

How is my work graded in First-year Writing?

All English 1101 and 1102 classes use a rubric system called the flexible rubric block system. Rather than a single rubric for all essays, instructors can customize and apply different combinations of assessment criteria for each writing project.

How does the Flexible Block Rubric work?

For each project you write, your instructor will choose between three and six criteria (or “blocks”) that are particularly important for that project’s genre or rhetorical situation. A reflective narrative essay, for example, would likely include the “Reflection” block, since that block assesses how the writer considers, applies, or learns from their own personal experiences. A formal research paper might include the “Argument” block to indicate that the research paper needs a distinctive stance or contribution to an academic conversation. Because First-Year Writing emphasizes that writing is a process, every project will include the “Process” block (though the particular requirements and timings of that writing process will be up to your instructor).

For example, if your first project is a rhetorical analysis essay, your instructor might choose four blocks: process, evidence, significance, and audience awareness. You can find full definitions for those blocks later in this chapter, but here’s a sample breakdown of why an instructor might apply those four blocks to a rhetorical analysis project assigned early in the semester:

1. **Process:** Most FYW students are surprised by the time and drafts required by 1101 and 1102 projects. This block might require that students turn in a thesis statement, an outline, a rough draft, and a final draft over the course of a month. (Though this is just an example; your instructor will be able to tell you more about your actual process block.)
2. **Evidence:** Analytical essays are all about getting in close to the text being studied and talking about how individual parts contribute to the meaning of the whole work. The “evidence” block is all about using details, quotes, statistics, images, summary, etc. from the text you’re studying to make your case, so this block would assess how well you’re using those details, quotes, etc. to make your case.
3. **Significance:** A rhetorical analysis essay isn’t just a heap of loosely related details and interpretations: the author should make an argument for why their interpretation of the text is important. This block considers why your analysis is important or meaningful; it asks the dreaded question “So what?” or “Why is this important or meaningful to the reader?”
4. **Audience Awareness:** All writing has an audience. Your rhetorical analysis has at least one real-world reader (your instructor), likely many more (your peers in class), and potentially even more, depending on the assignment. This block is about how you can make your writing and arguments as accessible to those overlapping readerships as possible: that might include transitions between paragraphs, accessible or interesting diction, an attention-getting introduction, a personable written voice, or even paratextual elements like formatting, images, or page numbers.

As you wrote this hypothetical rhetorical analysis essay, you could return to that list of blocks to determine what you should revise or where you should spend your drafting energy. While other blocks like “Organization” are important, your instructor’s choice of blocks (and so their choice to not include others) is meaningful. Organization might still play a part

in other blocks on the rubric (after all, a logical organization can help audiences follow your argument and highlight its significance), but it's not the star of this particular show. So spend your time instead thinking about your evidence, its importance, and how you can help your audience understand the connections between the two.

This tailored rubric system is a way to help your instructor communicate how your draft is working within the selected rubric blocks. As part of that communication, your instructor will use a scale from one to five to communicate how much revision work is required in each block to make it exceptional. A maximum score of five suggests that, while additional revision might still be possible, your work in that block is already great. A score of one indicates that you would need to revise the full paper in order to address issues with that block. You can find the specific breakdown of these scores below. In general, however, you can identify areas you should prioritize in your revision by looking for the lowest rubric block ratings and starting there.

- **5: No revision necessary.** The document is exemplary as it stands. While further improvement is still (and always) possible, time would be better spent elsewhere.
- **4: Slight revision necessary.** Some adjustments on the sentence or paragraph level would help the document stand out.
- **3: Some revision necessary.** The student may need to rethink or restructure one or more paragraphs or large sections.
- **2: Substantial revision necessary.** The student may need to revise elements in the majority of the document.
- **1: Holistic revision necessary.** The student may need to revise the full document.

Why only three to six rubric blocks per essay? Doesn't good writing involve more than three to six things?

It absolutely does, and that's part of why we created this structure. Rather than trying to focus on everything at once and inevitably focusing less on some things than others, this structure is meant to help you prioritize and determine which parts of your writing are most important for each particular project. Over the course of the semester, you'll probably cover many of the available blocks at different times. The block structure isn't about declaring some parts of writing unimportant; it's about pacing yourself, focusing on a few important things at a time, then building on those discoveries and skills in later projects.

It feels like some of these categories might overlap.

That's because they do! Writing and rhetoric are too complicated to divide cleanly into distinct categories (not that that's stopped millennia of rhetoricians and scholars from trying), and many of these categories have substantial areas of overlap with other categories. "Significance" and "Argument," for example, are both about the author making the paper more than the sum of its paragraphs, but they express different priorities. "Significance" is bigger and more abstract: it asks about the value or importance of the ideas being conveyed, while "Argument" considers the complexity or novelty of the central idea. They're both about the big picture, but they take different perspectives. The "Audience Awareness" block could in theory absorb all the other ones since *everything* in writing is about how your text reaches your audience. But that wouldn't help you write or your instructor comment on your writing, so we need some other blocks besides "Audience Awareness."

These rubric blocks are less like puzzle pieces that combine to form "Good Writing" than they are a set of lenses that let us view the same text in different ways. One set of lenses helps us see fine details, while another set shows us big-picture context. As you write and revise, try clicking these different lenses into place to see how your understanding of your writing changes.

What does "Process" mean? How can I excel in that block?

All First-Year Writing classes teach writing as a process. You might be used to thinking of writing as a thing you produce, and it is. Writing is all about creating a text where none existed before, so in that way, writing is always about creating a product for a purpose. But in your FYW class, you'll also approach writing as a *process*, a series of stages, drafts, or prototypes that gradually shift and improve with multiple rounds of revision.

The "Process" block of the rubric is required for every assignment and indicates that you'll be evaluated not only on what you submit for your final draft but also on how you got to that point. Your instructor will have more specific requirements or suggestions for each paper's process, and if you have questions about how your work on the writing process will be scored, you should reach out to your instructor and ask.

In general, however, instructors prize global or holistic revision more than local revision or proofreading. The writing process gives us a chance to complicate and evolve our ideas at a high level, so as you write, think about how your project's overall idea, argument, or focus might be shifting.

RUBRIC BLOCKS AND PROGRAMMATIC DEFINITIONS

SIGNIFICANCE:

The writer makes clear how, why, or in what way the evidence/detail provided supports the text's central purpose. A significant text moves beyond merely presenting evidence to gesture towards a larger point; answers "so what?" Significance in a research paper might involve discovering a new idea or phenomenon, significance in a personal reflective narrative might involve a personal realization, and significance in a persuasive essay might show the reader the real-world importance of the paper's central issue. In any case, it should provide an immediate answer to the question "Why is this important?"

EVIDENCE:

How the writer supports a claim: outside sources, anecdotes, sensory details, and/or multimodal evidence (e.g. images, sound, video, etc.) could all count as evidence depending on the assignment's genre. Effective use of evidence also assumes the writer has evaluated the sources' credibility, timeliness, and appropriateness for the genre of writing.

ORGANIZATION:

The way a text is structured with the writer's purpose and audience in mind. Organization should be intentional and includes both macro-level organization (i.e., how the text works overall) and micro-level organization (i.e., how the paragraphs are organized and how the sentences within them fit together).

STYLE:

How the writer uses words and sentences to create a tone, character, or moment-to-moment impact on the reader. Effective style varies depending on the genre, audience, and purpose of the text, and no single style will be useful or preferable for all writing.

ARGUMENT:

How the writer convinces the reader of something. An effective argument depends on the genre. In academic writing, arguments tend to be inquiry-based or conversational, as they attempt to build knowledge by questioning existing knowledge and proposing alternatives. In nearly all genres, however, a strong argument is non-obvious and something with which a reasonable person could disagree.

MULTIMODALITY:

How the writer chooses multimodal elements for the text and how they combine different modes in a single text. Different sources define modes differently, so they might include: linguistic, aural, visual, spatial, and gestural modes, or written, oral, visual, electronic, and nonverbal modes. In any case, multimodality involves the intentional use of non-textual elements. Some sample descriptions follow though instructors are free to add descriptions of modes not covered here.

- Visual Design: how the writer uses visual elements like contrast, alignment, framing, color, and other features to deliver or enhance meaning.
- Audio Design: how the writer demonstrates an awareness of sonic rhetorical strategies such as voice, music, silence, sound effects, and sound interaction, with careful attention to crafting the project for *listeners* (as opposed to readers)
- Choice and Interactivity: how the writer makes the reader or player an important part of the text's execution. An effective interactive text should give the user a sense of agency, power, or influence over the text. Navigation of the text's choices should involve non-trivial effort and intentionally designed consequences for the choices offered.

AUDIENCE AWARENESS:

How the writer works to reach the actual or potential audience of the text. This is an intentionally broad, holistic block and could address multiple areas including style, multimodality, organization, etc.

GENRE AWARENESS:

How the writer follows recognizable forms in their writing, with attention to rhetorical situation and audience expectations. Genres are not static, so the writer may choose to challenge or stray from genre conventions, but when the writer does so, such moves are made intentionally. Attention to appropriate citation style and approach to using sources is also part of many genres.

RHETORICAL AWARENESS:

Attention to the rhetorical situation: the particular circumstance of a given instance of communication, including exigence (the need or reason to communicate), context (the circumstances that give rise to exigence), rhetor (the originator of the communication), and audience (the auditor, listener, or reader). Like "Audience Awareness," this is a broad block, but unlike "Audience Awareness," it has more to do with fitting the text to the whole situation than to the audience alone.

PROCESS:

The variety of activities that go into writing/designing which often include planning, drafting, revising, peer-reviewing, proofreading, and publishing.

REFLECTION:

How the writer studies their own experiences, processes, behaviors, and tendencies. Reflection is more than simply recounting previous experiences; it should involve serious thought and commentary on what the writer has *discovered* through their own experiences.

STUDENT GOALS:

A block that students should select from the existing block menu based on what they've been working on/struggling with/etc.

RESEARCH:

The writer finds, incorporates, documents, and contextualizes outside sources. Effective research uses sources appropriate for the rhetorical situation: academic research requires peer-reviewed scholarly sources, for instance, while an op-ed or review might draw from popular, non-peer-reviewed sources. Research might also reference primary research skills like survey design, interview practices, and field research. All student research should be acknowledged through citations appropriate to the assignment or discipline.