

## CHAPTER 6.

# FOLLOWING THE “BREADCRUMBS” FROM COMMITTEE TO CLASSROOM

The 2016 Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) showed that 76 percent of faculty across the curriculum used rubrics to evaluate assignments. Of those, only 29 percent created their own rubrics (Zilvinskis, Nelson Laird, & Graham, 2016). Turley and Gallagher (2008) warned, “If teachers are handed a rubric—from state, district, or the teacher next door—we need to consider the law of distal diminishment and be skeptical of the ability of that rubric to improve students’ writing” (p. 92). There are dangers to separating any rubric from its original context or believing that it can easily be ported to a new setting. Thus, I originally saw classroom use of the VALUE rubrics as a part of the problematic guiding my study. I was concerned that faculty were finding the rubrics or being given the rubrics by administrators and then using them directly in assessing student work for grades in the classroom.

The AAC&U originally recognized the danger of using the VALUE rubrics in the classroom. Rhodes (2010) explained in the introduction to the rubrics that they were “not designed for use in assessing individual class assignments” (p. 2). This idea is reinforced by the statement at the top of all the VALUE rubrics that they are “intended for institutional-level use in evaluating and discussing student learning, not for grading” (McConnell et al., 2019, p. 6). Yet, in my 2016 survey of how the Written Communication rubric was being used, “as an example rubric for faculty” was the second most popular option, just under university-wide assessment. Similarly, in 2019 the AAC&U noted that there were many articles written about the VALUE rubrics that “described making modifications for specific grading of assignments” (p. 16). The VALUE rubrics’ status as boss texts and meta-rubrics means that they are often presented as exemplar rubrics, not only for assessment professionals but also for instructors.

However, tracing the connections between the classroom and larger scale assessment efforts is not a simple matter of collecting documents and tracing their origins. Faculty often rely on others to share rubrics, but they do not always remember where they got them. Amelia, a science professor at Oak, expressed a common sentiment: “I stole it from a colleague who developed it again from a colleague, right?” Meanwhile, Dwayne, who wanted general education revisions

at St. Rita's to impact pedagogy, longed for "a trail of breadcrumbs that leads back to the curricular." When talking to faculty about their rubrics, I often felt that I was being presented with an isolated breadcrumb, disconnected from its path, and I wondered how we can "close the loop," as assessment professionals often say, without much of a trail to follow. When I asked participants at Oak and St. Rita's directly if they would use the VALUE rubric in their classroom, I repeatedly heard "no." Thus, I did not focus on collecting classroom rubrics, observing classrooms, or asking students how they interpreted the rubric. However, classroom practice did frequently come up in my study. In keeping with common interviewing practice in institutional ethnography (DeVault & McCoy, 2006), when participants mentioned their classroom rubrics or offered me examples, I gathered these as a part of my data. This sometimes was a trail of breadcrumbs itself as faculty turned to a file cabinet or folder in their office and rifled through, handing me rubrics they found. I also listened to the interviews for descriptions of classroom practice, particularly when it came up in reference to work done on the committees creating rubrics and outcomes.

In this chapter, I describe what crumbs I did find—what participants at Oak and St. Rita's said about using rubrics in their classroom, including what they consider rubrics to be and how they develop them. Even when there seems to be little direct connection to the VALUE rubrics, there are multiple parallels between the way rubrics as boss texts operate in the classroom and the way they operate in large-scale assessment. Furthermore, classroom practice directly impacts the modification of and use of the rubrics at the institutional level. Even when they try not to, faculty often envision particular classroom settings and students when scoring artifacts across a program. So, too, they work to make the rubric flexible (and vague) enough to capture all possible classroom practices. At both institutions, faculty were also concerned with how the work done on their committees would change pedagogy. In some cases, faculty hoped for a change in classroom practice, fearing the committee work would have no real impact on curriculum or student learning. In other cases, they feared having to change their own assignments and assessment in the classroom. Either way, these tensions represent the frustrations faculty feel when larger ruling relations interact with their teaching.

Finally, I use rhetorical genre theory to understand what happens when we attempt to either use the same rubric across contexts or "translate" it for use in a different context. The notion of translation indicates that moving between contexts is simply a matter of tweaking language. Yet writing scholars know that context intimately affects genres. So, too, does the role of the individual person within a system of genres. Each role (or standpoint) within a system has its own genre set. Those genres gain meaning through their interaction with other

genres in the system (Bazerman, 2004). For example, a student essay (part of the set of the student) directly responds to the assignment prompt (part of the set of the teacher). The two work in concert as a part of the rhetorical situation, one informing the other. Similarly, rubrics as a genre work differently in the classroom than they do in large-scale assessment. In the classroom, rubrics are a part of a classroom-based system: they work in conjunction with the assignment sheet, teacher feedback, peer review, and other classroom genres. In large-scale assessment, as Kristen reminded her raters at Oak, the only context that matters is the rubric itself. Here, the genre of the rubric stands in for all teaching while the student artifact must stand in for all student writing.

Although the VALUE Written Communication rubric was designed to be used in conjunction with assignment prompts, it is purposefully vague in order to represent multiple classroom contexts over the course of a college student’s career. Furthermore, both logistical and philosophical concerns have led to the separation of the rubric and the assignment sheet in actual assessment. This practice has then reinforced the need for assignments that fit with the rubric in the first place and led to the direct intervention by the AAC&U in assignment design. While these efforts are newly underway at the time of this writing, the direct impact of large-scale rubrics on classroom assignments has long been felt in secondary education. Joanne Addison (2015) detailed how the Gates Foundation used grant funding for educators to align assignments with Common Core Standards and the rubrics that assess these standards. In addition, compositionists have worried that generic rubrics, such as VALUE, lead to generic assignments that “violate principles of good assignment creation” (Anson et al., 2012, para 6). The relationship between large-scale assessment and classroom practice thus represents another tension between institutional power (ruling relations) and everyday local practice. By removing the rubrics from their context, from their genre sets and systems, ruling relations continue to flourish and obscure the everyday work of faculty and students.

## FACULTY USE OF CLASSROOM RUBRICS

Collecting documents from faculty gave me a fresh perspective on how they viewed rubrics, including what they considered a rubric to be and what role it played in their pedagogy. In the glossary of Peggy O’Neill, Cindy Moore, and Brian Huot’s (2009) *Guide to College Writing Assessment* they define a rubric as a “scoring guide” that “specifies a point scale and identifies the salient features of the text for each point” (p. 204). They note that rubrics may use checklists or paragraphs when describing each point level. This description does seem to presuppose a certain form—one that is linear in order to show a progression in quality. Defining a

scale is key to making assessment criteria a “rubric” rather than a list of guiding questions or dimensions to be assessed. Similarly, in an *Assessing Writing* editorial, Martin East and Sara Cushing (2016) defined a rubric as “a guide listing specific criteria for grading or scoring academic papers, projects, or tests, an instrument that describes a specific level of performance within a scale” (p. 1). Yet, not all the documents faculty provided to me as example rubrics had a scale or described what point level equated to what grade. Just as I was surprised to learn that administrators at different universities saw their programmatic rubrics as adaptations of the VALUE rubric when they differed significantly, I noticed that some faculty used the word “rubric” to refer to any type of grading criteria. This appears to signal something about how faculty view and understand the rhetorical role of rubrics and their genre function within the classroom. As boss texts, drawing on rubrics adds a certain legitimacy to grading practice.

## THE PROMISE OF CLASSROOM RUBRICS

Rubrics are a promise to teachers that grading can be quicker, more objective, and more focused (Wilson, 2006). Teachers can be “fair” if only they use a rubric. Under this objective epistemology, fairness is defined as a lack of bias and “ensured through reproducibility” (Lynne, 2004, p. 136). Brian Huot (2002) argued that equating reliability and replicability with fairness is “not only inaccurate,” but also “dangerous” (p. 88). So, too, Inoue (2015) challenged this notion of fairness as a “White liberal value” that works to maintain racist practice (p. 56). However, this value of reproducibility is deeply embedded in the current system of higher education. The rubric also fits with promises made by neoliberal universities to students. As explained in Chapter 2, students are trained to make sure that their college experience offers them a good deal—one that is comparable to other universities and that will lead to a career—and promised that rubrics will keep their teachers objective and fair. Reproducibility might refer to scores on a rubric, but it also refers to the reproducibility of classroom experience. This need for objectivity and fairness has historically been tied to a system where students can demonstrate “proficiency” by testing out of a course or transferring one in from a different college (Behizadeh & Engelhard Jr., 2011). The course over here must be equivalent to the one over there, and rubrics, distributed *across* university contexts, work to meet this goal. The classroom rubric, particularly when based in a national or programmatic rubric, is meant to keep teachers consistent in their grading to ensure that all students have a similar classroom experience regardless of who their teacher is.

This attitude was reflected by multiple participants in my study. St. Rita’s faculty member Patrice expressed that she is more consistent when using rubrics.

She framed this consistency in terms of morality: “This forces me to be more honest.” Kristen, too, uses rubrics because she values consistency in her grading. She sees rubrics as a means to help her discover her own expectations and be consistent with students. Shawna, a religious studies professor at Oak, said that she doesn’t want to be “too subjective” in her grading, and the rubric helps her make sure she is “following the guidelines.” Jeremy at St. Rita’s tied this way of thinking to student expectations. He noted that students often complain about teacher subjectivity and that “providing a standard rubric across the curriculum was helping students see that there is a standard.” Similarly, Wendy from Oak directly stated that rubrics are useful for justifying student grades. Across both institutions, faculty saw rubrics as performing this common function of making the inherently messy thing of grading student writing into a fair and consistent process.

The fact that grades need this sort of external justification speaks to their role in a system where teachers are viewed as subjects to be relegated rather than as expert readers of student texts. Going back to the beginnings of modern composition, early CCCCs workshops focused on methods to standardize grading, thus creating what Strickland (2011) called a “proper teaching subject” (p. 71). Strickland draws on a Foucaultian notion of the subject here as “someone who comes into being as a result of subjection” (p. 52). The writing teacher, for Strickland, is a position that requires systemic management and continued training in order to create “a better product” for student-consumers (p. 54). Rubric-use maintains this subject position and also asks that teachers self-regulate. As seen in the comments from my participants, instructors use rubrics to ensure *their own* consistency, to hold themselves accountable. In addition, the general education committee at St. Rita’s is explicit about this use of both the rubrics and the outcomes they are creating. Dwayne told a story about a faculty member who would take off a point for every grammar error. Therefore, he values the language of the rubric, which directly states under the third level, sufficient: “the writer makes one or a few minor errors repeatedly.” This language was specifically added to counter the practice of those like the faculty member in Dwayne’s story.

The classroom rubric is also used as tool to get students to self-regulate, to be responsible for ensuring the consistency of their own educational process by adhering to the norms presented in the rubric. The classroom rubric is used as a tool to legitimize both qualities of student writing and the student themselves. Art History Professor Brad stated this best when he told me: “what we valorize in terms of writing habits and pedagogical habits in the classroom is embedded in the language of the rubric.” Brad’s English colleague Ronnie gives his students the assignment rubric during peer review and asks them to use it to evaluate

their peer's work. "I want them to start thinking just a smidge like teachers themselves," he stated. Scientist Amelia, too, said that she expects students to use the rubric to write their assignment. Regardless of their discipline, Oak faculty saw the rubric as a way to get students thinking about the expectations of the assignment. Dwayne also embraced this self-regulatory function of the rubric but focuses more on the idea of behaviors and habits that could help the struggling students at St. Rita's. In my last interview with Dwayne before he left St. Rita's, he was working on building a rubric for his writing class that added a dimension that he hoped would convey the types of habits he wanted to instill in student learners. For this rubric dimension, he mentioned drawing not on the VALUE Written Communication rubric but on the VALUE rubrics for Lifelong Learning and Teamwork. However, unlike the Teamwork VALUE rubric that follows AAC&U asset-based approach by defining the lowest "benchmark" performance level in positive terms: "Completes all assigned task by deadline" (AAC&U, 2009a), Dwayne created the weakest row to communicate to students what not to do. In an interview, he shared part of this new rubric. In it, he titled the lowest performance level "absent or counterproductive" and used language such as "leaves the task incomplete, misses meetings, perhaps without notice, completes work late" to describe this level. He feels that these descriptions are necessary to communicate to the type of students at St. Rita's what it means to be "in the ballgame" of college. A similar issue of student behavior comes up at Oak but with less of a focus on preparedness. Ben, possibly drawing on Stephen North's (1984) famous writing center statement, has his students list not just qualities of good writing, but also "qualities of good writers." He then incorporates what they list into his classroom rubric.

While these discussions about writing process and college success are absolutely necessary to have with students, what is interesting is that these instructors find them also necessary to put on a rubric. The rubric, as a classroom genre, reifies and legitimizes these behaviors in a way a classroom discussion does not. Furthermore, rubrics shift the responsibility for regulation of these habits to the individual reading the text of the rubric. When this is the teacher grading the assignment, they must regulate their grading practice to be consistent with the rubric. Rather than start from the student text as a separate artifact, when guided by a rubric, the faculty member begins from a set of criteria, and this limits what they see in the student text itself. Rubrics are meant to "identify sameness, not surprises or difference" (Inoue, 2019, p. 71). Even if a rubric were to reward innovation as a dimension, an instructor would have to consider what levels of innovation looked like. Is the paper innovative or surprising enough for a "highly proficient" score or is it only "satisfactorily" innovative? Similarly, when students are asked to use a rubric to guide their writing, they are asked to

read the assignment prompt through the lens of outcomes, and the rubric—as a genre—defines writing as steady progress toward the highest level of proficiency. Rather than accepting the assignment as an open invitation to writing or recognizing the degree to which failure is an important part of writing (Brooke & Carr, 2015), the student must become the writing subject who works to produce the writing the rubric calls for. They must *be* the writer whose behavior matches that of the rubric. Then, all traces of the ebbs and flows of the writing process are separated from the product of that work. Even if they become the writer invoked by the rubric, that writer is represented only by the final written product.

### FACULTY DEFINE “RUBRICS”

While the rubric as a boss text asks teachers and students to take up generic subject positions in relation to the text, that does not necessarily imply uniformity in the genre. Devitt’s (2004) views on genre fit well with institutional ethnography because they encourage researchers to study how individuals enact texts. While genres “exist institutionally and collectively,” they “never operate independently of the actions of people” (Devitt, 2004, p. 49). Faculty use rubrics in great number, as the reference from FSSE above shows. So, too, they seem to agree on their function in the classroom—to guide both student work and teacher grading. However, without collecting these documents or discussing them with individual faculty members, it is difficult to define actual classroom practice. I found that faculty at Oak and St. Rita’s sometimes used rubrics in the classroom in strikingly different ways, and those rubrics took vastly different forms. In particular, Kristen, the chair of the writing committee at Oak, had a very open perception of rubrics and how they could be designed and used in the classroom. Her “rubrics” are meant to share her expectations with students, but they are flexible and vary in both content and form depending on the course she is teaching and the assignment. In contrast, Patrice at St. Rita’s felt a need to use the rubrics provided for her by her colleagues from English. She also saw rubrics as a means to give students a strict structure to follow in their essays—the five-paragraph form—and to dictate the content of those assignments. While I talked with others about their classroom rubric use, the contrast of these two participants in particular highlights how disparate classroom rubric use can be.

In one of my initial interviews with Kristen, she proclaimed her love of rubrics, followed by a list of all the different types of rubrics she could choose from:

I love rubrics. And I have them in all kinds of forms. I have checklist rubrics. I have box rubrics. I have just general question rubrics. I have narrative rubrics. For my senior sem-



inar, I just use a narrative rubric where basically I'm sort of explaining to students in a narrative how I approach grading their papers.

As a follow up, Kristen sent me copies of her first-year writing "question rubric" and her senior level "narrative rubric." Neither of these fit the definitions of rubrics from O'Neill, Moore, and Huot's (2009) in that they do not have a clear scale imbedded. The senior level evaluation criteria discussed grade levels but did not organize them in any form of chart or table. Rather, it proceeded in a fully narrative fashion:

How I grade your final project: The first two questions I ask myself when I read your paper are: Is it based on primary sources? Does it have an argument? If the answer to the first question is no, if there are few or no citations of primary sources in your paper, the highest grade you can earn is a D. If your paper does not have an argument, the highest grade you can earn is a C.

Similarly, the "rubric" associated with her first-year writing assignment did not have any kind of linear chart format. Rather, it divided a series of questions into higher-order and lower-order concerns. For example:

Higher-order questions: 3) Have you provided concrete examples to support your points?

Lower-order questions: 4) Have you followed the format for this assignment, as specified above?

The criteria then went on to explain that if the student can answer "yes" to all the questions they will receive a "B." It also clarifies that the higher-order questions will be considered more heavily than the lower-order questions, though no points are directly associated with either. While both artifacts mentioned performance, there is more discretion on the part of the instructor built into these grading criteria than a typical rubric. There is an indication of what the teacher should look for when grading and what the student should aspire to, but there is no clear scale with performance levels.

In contrast, at St. Rita's, I collected grading criteria that was very focused on specific points but did not have the dimensions we've come to associate with the typical rubric. Here, the format of the five-paragraph essay is rewarded with point values associated with each paragraph. This "rubric" was sent out by Dr. Z to all the faculty in an attempt to get them to teach the five-paragraph essay in their classrooms. It is titled "General Education Expository Es-



say Rubric” and begins with a paragraph stating the importance of all general education classes requiring the five-paragraph essay. The text states: “Here is a simplified rubric for grading an expository essay in any discipline.” There is then a chart with the structure of the five-paragraph essay and a blank spot for point totals. And yet, this document does not specify levels of performance. Rather it tasks professors to set the point values based on their assignment (see Figure 6.1).

Although Patrice did not recall seeing this particular rubric (much to her chagrin), she is also very focused on points: “I give 15 points to responding to the assignment, 5 for structure, 3 for evidence.” She also gives her government class an assignment sheet for a five-paragraph essay that dictates exactly what they should say in each paragraph, including the content. For example, the assignment states that the fifth paragraph is “where you restate your thesis statement (youth voter turnout matters) and repeat your three reasons why.” Thinking about grading criteria without points is difficult for Patrice, and she struggles with the committee discussion of the VALUE rubric because of this. Dwayne, too, mentioned that when he attempted to bring a holistic rubric to St. Rita’s faculty, many wondered, “What equals a B?” For many at St. Rita’s, such as Patrice, rubrics are defined by having a very specific point-based form.

COMPETENCY	POINTS
<b>Content (___ points)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accurate, interesting, substantive ideas</li> <li>• Responds appropriately to assignment</li> </ul>	
<b>Thesis (___ points)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear and Focused/Asserts a Position</li> </ul>	
<b>Introduction (___ points)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grabs Attention</li> <li>• Clearly States Thesis</li> <li>• Indicates how thesis will be supported</li> </ul>	
<b>Body Paragraphs (___ points)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• States main idea in topic sentence that supports thesis</li> <li>• States specific, accurately-reported details that support topic sentence</li> <li>• Includes transition words that make logic of paragraph and essay clear, linking sentences within paragraph and paragraphs to one another.</li> </ul>	
<b>Conclusion (___ points)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restates the thesis</li> <li>• Recaps the support for the thesis</li> <li>• Concludes with implications or look to future</li> </ul>	
<b>Sentence Grammar and Style (___ points)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uses correct, appropriate grammar</li> <li>• Uses proper punctuation and spelling</li> <li>• Prose is concise and clear</li> </ul>	
<b>Total</b>	

**Note:** The weighting of different elements of the essay can vary from assignment to assignment but all elements of the essay should be assessed.

*Figure 6.1. WAC Rubric from St. Rita’s.*

Patrice's view of the purpose and form of a rubric is still very tied to a positivist testing mentality. Patrice is frustrated that her government students do poorly on the five-paragraph essay assignment when she "gives them what the answers are." In this case, Patrice is really testing students on their reading of an article not evaluating their writing ability. Rubrics, to her, function more as an answer key. In fact, she used this language again when telling me about helping a student on an essay about abortion. "I spend a whole hour and a half going over that article, and I go over the answers," Patrice lamented. This is perhaps why Patrice gets upset at the general education meeting when she thinks that introducing a new writing goal, and possibly a new writing rubric, will change what she is teaching. Several times in the meeting discussing general education goals for writing, Patrice complained, "That means I'm changing all my assignments!" Each time, the committee reminded her they were not discussing classroom level rubrics. "But if that's on the syllabus, if that's on, if that's the rubric I'm using to assess that assignment," Patrice continued to "no, no, no" responses from multiple committee members. Patrice's view of the rubric as answer key potentially impedes her ability to see them as anything other than a tool for the classroom.

Although both Kristen and Patrice valued the rubric for adding consistency to grading, this closer look at their criteria highlights the different views they hold on what a rubric looks like and how it functions. For Patrice, it is a very specific tool used to show students the answers and structures on which they will be graded. In contrast, Kristen sees the rubric as a diverse tool for evaluating student work, one that can take many different forms. Whether posed as a narrative description or a question, Kristen values these "rubrics" as a tool to communicate her expectations to students. Put in rhetorical genre theory terms, Kristen uses the same term—rubric—to refer to multiple types of assessment criteria because she views them all as responding to the same exigence and performing the same social action. That action is communicating to students about the grading process. Meanwhile, Patrice seems to draw on prior genre knowledge that comes from testing; just as essay writing replaced multiple-choice tests, rubrics have replaced answer keys.

With such disparate views on what even constitutes a rubric, it seems difficult to trace ruling relations. Identifying common word choices or common forms here is difficult. Yet, I would argue that simply the repeated use of the term "rubric" to describe this work signals something about how rubrics perform ruling relations in higher education. What is happening here seems similar to what I described in Chapter 4 where administrators drew on the ethos (and sometimes the funds) of the AAC&U to support their assessment efforts, even those that varied significantly from AAC&U best practice. So, too, faculty understand that rubrics carry a certain ethos on campus—among colleagues and

among students. Whether or not their grading criteria fall neatly into the technical definition of a rubric, using the term carries with it a form of legitimacy. At the classroom level, rubrics legitimize teacher practice, just as they legitimize institutional practice at the national level.

## WHERE FACULTY FIND RUBRICS

In order to see how ruling relations connect these disparate views on what a rubric is and what it should do, I turn to how faculty find example rubrics and learn about implementing them in the classroom. As reflected in the AAC&U’s 2018 survey discussed in Chapter 5, administrators often pass down the VALUE rubrics as an example for faculty. However, it would be wrong to assume that faculty receiving these rubrics are a blank slate with no prior knowledge of rubrics. As with learning any genre or practice, a network of influences are at work here, including the influence of textbooks, training, and disciplinary colleagues. Sometimes faculty are aware of these influences; other times they are unsure where their practice comes from or how it evolved.

Several faculty members mentioned books that influenced their practice. At Oak, Kristen and Nina both use John Bean’s (2011) well-known *Engaging Ideas*. Bean is a compositionist, and his book has been quite popular with faculty in different disciplines who teach writing. In chapter 14, Bean explained many different types of rubrics, and while most follow the standard grid form, he does include an example of a “gridless rubric.” Unlike Kristen’s rubrics, Bean’s does still use points, but rather than using a scale of points, this example lists seven grading questions along with their point value (see Figure 6.2). Bean (2011) still called this a rubric but acknowledged that this form works well for teachers who find traditional rubrics “overly positivist and prescriptive” (p. 276). Nina, an environmental scientist, too, mentioned the book, although she couldn’t remember what exactly she used from it. Unlike Kristen, Nina is not a fan of rubrics, which she associates with assigning numerical scores. “I read a paper, and I know this is an 83 or an 84,” said Nina, “and when I’ve graded with rubrics before, I ultimately just end up making up numbers.” However, Nina had saved an interesting document titled “Sample Rubric for Writing Program Assessment” that combined the “question rubric” format from Bean’s book with the first goal of the Oak writing program (see Figure 6.3). Like with her reference to Bean’s book, Nina was unsure where this document came from or how she used it. Returning to Dwayne’s breadcrumb metaphor, we see that Kristen can clearly trace her path from Bean to classroom while Nina finds scattered crumbs, unsure how one thing leads to the next. Yet, we can see the connection to Bean by comparing this document to his example.

**EXHIBIT 14.9**  
**How I Assign Letter Grades**

**In grading “thesis papers” I ask myself the following set of questions:**

- 1. Does the paper have a thesis?
- 2. Does the thesis address itself to an appropriate question or topic?
- 3. Is the paper free from long stretches of quotations and summaries that exist only for their own sakes and remain unanalyzed?
- 4. Can the writer produce complete sentences?
- 5. Is the paper free from basic grammatical errors?

If the answer to any of these questions is “no,” I give the paper some kind of C. If the answer to most of the questions is “no,” its grade will be even lower.

**For papers which have emerged unscathed thus far, I add the following questions:**

- 6. How thoughtful is the paper? Does it show real originality?
- 7. How adequate is the thesis? Does it respond to its question or topic in a full and interesting way? Does it have an appropriate degree of complexity?
- 8. How well organized is the paper? Does it stick to the point? Does every paragraph contain a clear topic sentence? If not, is another kind of organizing principle at work? Are the transitions well made? Does it have a real conclusion, not simply a stopping place?
- 9. Is the style efficient, not wordy or unclear?
- 10. Does the writing betray any special elegance?
- 11. Above all, can I hear a lively, intelligent, interesting human voice speaking to me (or to another audience, if that’s what the writer intends) as I read the paper?

Depending on my answers to such questions, I give the paper some kind of A or some kind of B [pp. 149–150].

*Figure 6.2. Example from Bean’s book (2011, p. 277). Reprinted with permission from Wiley.*

1. Overall, has the author crafted and supported a cogent argument?	Excellent		Good		Satisfactory		Weak		Poor	
	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
2. Has the author formulated a clear thesis?	Excellent		Good		Satisfactory		Weak		Poor	
	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
3. Has the author used evidence appropriately?	Excellent		Good		Satisfactory		Weak		Poor	
	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1
4. Has the author organized his/her ideas effectively?	Excellent		Good		Satisfactory		Weak		Poor	
	10	9	8	7	6	5	4	3	2	1

*Figure 6.3: “Question rubric” from Oak.*

Interestingly, the first draft of the writing program rubric at Oak that I collected from Ben also had a cover sheet that was formatted in this question and then scale format. While each performance descriptor was explained in detail on a separate page, this cover sheet represented a raters overall impression in each of the four assessment areas scored at Oak. Later drafts keep the cover sheet, but question-format is replaced by statements. For example, “How well does this paper demonstrate the student’s ability to craft and support a cogent argument?” is replaced by “Based on this artifact, the student’s ability to craft and support a cogent argument could best be characterized as:”. In this case, the question-format was problematic because it would be impossible for the assessment committee to know how well one paper demonstrated a student’s overall ability. Rather, the assessment at the programmatic level is entirely “based on this artifact,” removed from the overall context of the classroom and the student.

Participants at Oak explained how rubrics are documents that frequently get passed around among faculty members. As such, they are documents that hold institutional power and influence practice. Using rubrics becomes tied to a discipline or a department. For example, Marisella noted that rubrics are a common disciplinary practice in the modern languages department. They are frequently used and shared by those who teach the same courses, although instructors often change them for their individual classrooms. Similarly, Amelia told me about a grid rubric that was developed and came through her chemistry department. Shirong in history also consulted rubrics from his department colleagues, although he had not yet ventured into creating his own. At Oak, it appears that the process of rubric-sharing is seen as a part of a collaborative, collegial driven practice, one that also values faculty autonomy in the classroom. Ronnie, the English department chair, appreciated the communal culture where people don’t mind if you borrow their assignment or rubric.

In contrast, St. Rita’s faculty expressed concern—and sometimes hope—that sharing rubrics was a way of dictating the pedagogical practice of others. Patrice felt like she must use the exact rubrics that are passed down to her by English faculty and this contributed to her resentment of English as a ruling faction as discussed in Chapter 5. Jeremy noted that he, too, had this misconception about what was required when he arrived at St. Rita’s. He believed he had to use a rubric presented to him at his orientation. However, when he attempted to do so, he quickly discovered it wasn’t “really an assignment level rubric.” Thus, he opted for borrowing the basic format but adding specifics for his classroom, such as a row for “meeting the assignment.” However, Jeremy didn’t question that he should use *a rubric* to grade writing. Meanwhile, Heather had a different experience with orientation. When she began as adjunct faculty at St. Rita’s, she noted that rubrics were provided at orientation but that she got the impression

that “they never expected us to use them.” However, as she grew into a full-time role and participated in the first-year writing portfolio review process, she changed her mind. She now feels that using the campus writing rubric in class is necessary so that students learn what is expected on the timed essay exam.

Whether the faculty at St. Rita’s resent it or embrace it, there is a shared sense that rubrics are the way to evaluate classroom writing. That sense is reinforced through conversation and documents on campus. Even though Andrea, as co-chair of general education, strongly stated that she does not want to dictate classroom practice, the specifics of what she says reinforces the notion that rubrics should be used. She stated, “It is not for us to say what rubrics faculty use in their classroom for their assignments.” Again, there is the desire to leave the specifics open to faculty, but there is an assumption that rubrics of some sort will be used. Emails, like the one Dr. Z sent with the general education expository essay rubric, have historically sent this message to faculty. Even though it was never an official practice, the top of that rubric states that “it is *necessary* [emphasis added] that all general education classes assign, assess, and submit to the general education committee one traditional five-paragraph expository essay.” And although the document does not say the committee will look at it, it is clear that the attached rubric is meant for those instructors to use when grading the “necessary” essays. Although Dwayne feels that putting the VALUE rubrics in the university handbook had no real affect, the continued emphasis on rubrics at St. Rita’s seems to teach faculty there that they have little choice but to adopt a rubric of some kind when assessing writing.

Whether rubrics are passed on as an act of collegial good-will or with the intent to dictate faculty practice, at both Oak and St. Rita’s, faculty learn the use of rubrics from their colleagues. In addition, workshops about teaching served to reinforce rubric use. For Kristen, it is the VALUE workshops themselves that leave her thinking more about her own rubrics in the classroom. In particular, after scoring for “context and purpose” on the VALUE Written Communication rubric, Kristen realized that she needed to be clearer about what the context was and who the audience should be in her assignments. For others, local workshops significantly influenced their practice. Brad, who taught art history at Oak, solidified his writing pedagogy through attending writing across the curriculum (WAC) workshops. He noted that before these workshops, he did not use rubrics, but afterwards he began writing his own rubrics that were specific to his assignments. Even though there are few writing studies scholars on Oak’s campus, several of these workshops brought in speakers from elsewhere, such as Carol Rutz, known for her WAC program at Carleton College. Rutz (2016), one of authors of the VALUE Written Communication rubric, is a big proponent of assessment as a means of faculty development in writing. Kristen followed this

perspective and saw her test run of the rubrics with faculty in Summer 2017 and her full assessment process in Summer 2018 as a form of faculty development. She hoped to influence faculty practice through these assessment opportunities, while maintaining that the writing program rubric is meant for programmatic rather than classroom assessment. She is successful in this goal, as several faculty members who participated in these sessions commented that they would think more about audience and purpose in their own assignments after participating in the assessment process. Thus, rubrics used in an assessment workshop or programmatic setting influence the use of rubrics and/or the development of assignments in the classroom. These venues become a place where faculty not only work together to define programmatic goals, but they also learn skills and genres of assessment that they bring back to classroom practice.

Yet, St. Rita's is so small that this type of workshop never happens. I kept inquiring about attending a norming session for those who scored the first-year writing portfolios until I gradually realized that a session such as the one that I observed at Oak did not exist. Rather, only a few faculty members, the same ones who did it year after year, gathered and scored with little to no professional development piece to their assessment. Similarly, Dwayne and others talked about new faculty orientation, and I wondered if this was a place where professional development on rubrics might occur. Clearly the rubrics used across campus were presented to faculty there, but the message about the rubrics remained unclear as indicated in my interviews with Jeremy and Heather. Jeremy thought the rubrics presented at orientation were a mandate for classroom practice, while Heather got the impression that no one really cared about their use. Rather than a full professional development workshop on rubrics, they seem to be one very small piece shared with new faculty at a larger orientation. It is not only that faculty at St. Rita's often take a more confrontational stance with their colleagues than those at Oak, it is also that they do not have the same types of opportunities for collaboration and learning that happen at Oak. These institutional factors affect how the faculty learn about rubrics and how they view them as a part of both institutional and classroom practice.

## **THE INFLUENCE OF CLASSROOM PRACTICE ON PROGRAMMATIC RUBRICS**

As we see rubrics shift from being classroom-based to programmatic, the rubric as a genre and its relationship to other texts also shifts. In the classroom, faculty seek to hold both themselves and their students accountable by creating a coherent genre set: the rubric reinforces the assignment prompt, and the two work in conjunction to define the student artifact. Because these genres are closely con-



nected in the classroom, when faculty use a rubric for programmatic assessment, they often consider how it might affect not only their classroom rubrics but also their classroom assignments. Yet, at both Oak and St. Rita's those guiding larger committee meetings and assessment workshops encouraged faculty to set these thoughts about teaching aside. Individual classroom assignments are separated from the design of rubrics and outcomes. In the programmatic setting, it is the goals of the program, not the classroom, that are paramount; yet each faculty member participates on these committees as a representative of a particular field of study. They are asked to speak as a generic teacher within their department in order to make sure that the rubric is disciplinarily inclusive.

In their study of faculty disciplinarity and assessment, Christopher Thaiss and Terry Meyers Zawacki (2006) found that terms on a generic rubric often had different meanings and applications within different departments on campus. Similarly, Adler-Kassner and O'Neill (2010) noted that even terms as common as "grammar" are often used differently by different faculty members. Both of these sources warn against the assumption that common terminology equals consensus or even common understanding. "Common terminology that faculty use," Thaiss and Zawacki (2006) noted, "often hides basic differences in rhetoric, exigency, epistemology, style, form, and formatting" (p. 59). From the perspective of institutional ethnography, that is inherently the role of common terminology. LaFrance (2019) explained that "key terms operate discursively to create a sense of unity and shared practice" (p. 112). These terms are "never accidental" (LaFrance, 2019, p. 113). They are the building blocks of boss texts; they organize, guide, and regulate our work. Compositionists may worry that faculty in the disciplines fail to recognize this; that they will take these generic terms and ideas about writing to heart, leading to a lack of rhetorical awareness, poor assignment design, and generic rubrics applied uncritically to classroom writing. Yet, Broch Colombini and McBride (2012) felt that we do faculty a disservice by assuming that they lack the "facility to switch codes, adapt various rhetorical identities, [and] respond in appropriate ways to changing rhetorical constraints" (p. 194). Like our students, faculty possess a range of rhetorical awareness. Some clearly know how disciplinary difference affects their own understanding of the common terminology on the rubric, while others do subscribe to "universal," generic ideas about writing. Too, we should not assume that faculty who use common terminology do so uncritically or unaware of the political power of using that terminology to represent their work to external stakeholders.

In shifting to the epistemological stance of institutional ethnography, I became more interested in how faculty understandings of classroom practice interacted with their work building rubrics and outcomes at the committee level than with their definitions of terms. Campbell (2006) explained that institu-

tional ethnographers use transcripts to ask questions about how an individual’s work connects to other people as well as institutional processes. By examining how faculty negotiate their own work as classroom teachers in relationship with their work as committee members, we gain a fuller picture of how the work of assessment is coordinated on campuses. Faculty members at Oak and St. Rita’s often use their experiences as classroom teachers strategically to guide the work of their committees in developing outcomes and rubrics, yet how they do so depends on how both individuals and institutions see that work aligning.

The institutional setting and the goals of Oak’s writing committee versus St. Rita’s general education committee made a significant difference in how their classroom experiences interacted with the work of building outcomes and rubrics. At Oak, the faculty were selected for the writing committee in order to represent their separate divisions or colleges. When I asked these faculty members if they would use the rubric created by the writing committee in their classes, they almost universally said they would not, particularly without significant revisions for their specific classroom context. Yet, these faculty viewed their classroom contexts as important to writing the rubric because they wanted the rubric to be able to assess artifacts from courses across the curriculum. Rather than change their classroom practice, these faculty presented their classrooms as test cases for whether or not the rubric was inclusive enough to capture pedagogical practice across campus. In contrast, at St. Rita’s, the general education committee used the rubrics to create outcomes for general education. While they recognized that not every course would incorporate every outcome, they *did* have a goal to regulate classroom practice. They discussed how the next phase would be to “operationalize the outcomes.” The committee discussed how these outcomes needed to be directly present in the core classes and how those classes needed to connect to one another to make up the overall general education curriculum. They, too, used current classroom practice as evidence of where the outcomes were already in operation, and thus clung to current practice rather than initiating change. In addition, since this school is so small, operationalizing outcomes means dictating practice in specific classes, and it was seen as the role of those classes to prepare students for an assessment process that ultimately has high stakes for the students. In this section, I examine the relationship between classroom practice and writing rubrics and outcomes on the committees I observed at these two different institutions.

## OPERATIONALIZING OUTCOMES AT ST. RITA’S

At St. Rita’s the general education committee was revising outcomes for their core curriculum based on the VALUE rubrics. While they did not see their reach

going as far as to dictate what rubrics faculty used in the classroom, they did seek to build a curriculum in which the outcomes could be “operationalized.” To do this, they envisioned a common assessment involving the same type of assignment repeated at multiple points in the core to see whether or not students improved. This scaffolded sequence depended on first-year writing courses at the entry level and a capstone theology course at the end of the core. As previously described, St. Rita’s used what was referred to as a portfolio system, but their portfolio process fits with an outdated model of portfolio assessment as exit testing where students’ portfolios are scored by a faculty member other than their instructor and that score determines whether or not the student passed the course (O’Neill, Moore, Huot, 2009). At St. Rita’s, the work in these portfolios came from first-year courses and also from timed essay exams. One significant change that Dwayne and his colleagues made was to move the second first-year writing course to the sophomore year so that there was also a middle point for assessment of core goals. The process of assessing portfolios, or at least timed essays, then repeated at the capstone level, again as a high-stakes assessment where students passed based on scores assigned outside the classroom. The same rubric was used at these different points in the assessment process, but students had to score higher on the rubric to pass the junior level course than they did to pass the entry level course. The hope here was to have a through line of writing expectations in general education.

Because these assessments are high stakes for students, who must retake courses until they pass the portfolio process, instructors are particularly concerned with how their teaching prepares students for success as dictated by the rubric. Jeremy was the co-chair of the general education committee and a faculty member in English at the time I visited. He taught basic composition courses for students who are not prepared to begin in the regular composition sequence. He was concerned that these courses have traditionally taken an inordinate amount of time and that student skills don’t improve quickly enough to help them pass other courses. Thus, when I spoke to him in 2016, he was piloting what he referred to as a “competency-based model” of the basic writing course. In this version, he worked with students to use grammar software (IXL) to drill grammar competencies at the student’s own pace. Students in the class received a weekly progress report with a score showing how many exercises they had passed. While such a system may strike many as oppressive, for Jeremy, it is unethical to have students accruing debt by continually having to take and retake the first-year writing portfolio. So, too, is Jeremy aware that “traditional research has said that drilling grammar out of context doesn’t work.” However, he believes that his system is authentic because students must infer grammar rules from reading passages of writing. He also believes that by having students use this software in

a classroom setting where he can answer questions as they work, he can get to the bottom of where students infer incorrect grammar rules. He can interrupt and correct their thinking, which the computer program can’t “diagnose.” This type of pedagogy fits the definition of eradicationist (Baker-Bell, 2020) or acculturationist pedagogy (Balester, 2012) where only White standard English is seen as acceptable, a point I will return to in Chapter 7. However, as long as the high-stakes portfolio process is in place and scored on a rubric with two out five sections focused on grammar and usage, Jeremy feels the pressure to get students to a point where they can pass this assessment. Thus, classroom practice is driven by assessment practice.

The general education committee used the VALUE rubrics to write general education outcomes. However, when it comes to written communication, they looked to their current portfolio rubric as well as the VALUE rubric. In doing so, they briefly considered whether both dimensions about sentence level concerns from their rubric should also become two separate general education objectives, a moment I discuss in Chapter 5 as well. They considered that the rubric might be more detailed than the general education goals need to be. To answer this question, they rely on current classroom practice to justify their decisions. Dwayne pointed out that the proposed objective about sentence variety, which corresponds to the “prose, style and syntax” part of the portfolio rubric, is more specific than general education objectives in other areas. He also wondered whether faculty themselves can “really name the sentence types.” The ensuing conversation revealed how pervasive the assimilationist thinking and focus on grammar is across faculty members and courses at St. Rita’s. Dwayne backed down when Thomas, a business professor, stressed the importance of these goals in his 300-level course (and does indeed name several sentence types). Dwayne’s argument had been that sentence variety is a specific course goal, not an overall general education goal. Thomas, however, argued that he teaches sentence types and similar issues, like parallelism, in his 300-level business course, and that he hoped that students come to his class with some knowledge of this material already. He saw sentence variety as a general education outcome that is addressed in first-year writing and that his course will reinforce. Lucinda stated this directly, “if those objectives were introduced in [the FYC course], wouldn’t it be great if they’re reinforced in other general education courses? That would be where they would get to a level of mastery.” The committee agreed with this sentiment and decided to keep sentence types as a part of the overall general education goals because they are *already* being taught in classrooms. Thus, the goals are written to fit current practice rather than to guide future classroom practice.

Assessment professionals often talk about “closing the loop” by using assessment data to improve classroom practice. What we see here is the circularity of

that loop. Faculty justify their pedagogy because it prepares students for assessment while at the same time justifying assessment outcomes based on current pedagogy. When neither takes the lead, they feed off each other like the snake eating its tail. Pedagogical practice at St. Rita's fixates on grammar because it is necessary for the students to pass the high-stakes writing assessment scored on a rubric with multiple sentence-level dimensions. Yet, those categories remain because they fit with the current pedagogical practices in classrooms. Each one acts as a way to rule the other and keep it from changing.

### **OAK'S WRITING COMMITTEE & REPRESENTATION ACROSS THE CURRICULUM**

At Oak, I was able to observe multiple meetings where the writing committee was discussing, revising, and testing their writing rubric. Since the writing committee was designed to include representation from each division on campus, members saw it as their role to speak for their discipline, including explaining how writing conventions in that discipline might vary. When I interviewed these committee members individually, they also talked about how their specific disciplinary approaches to teaching writing caused them to question the rubric. Faculty saw their role as making sure that the rubric and assessment process are inclusive of their discipline and classroom practice. This drive took precedence over changing classroom practice itself.

Arguing for rubric language that captures current practice is particularly prevalent in the discussion of the "research and sources" dimension, later changed to "evidence." The faculty at Oak are guided by an understanding that what qualifies as research varies by discipline. This is, I would argue, an assumption that guides faculty life on a broader scale. Not only does it apply to pedagogy, but it also guides discussion of faculty merit. For example, tenure and promotion committees draw on disciplinary experts to write letters on the merit of a candidate's scholarship because faculty recognize that what qualifies as good research is not always discernible to a disciplinary outsider. The faculty at Oak bring this assumption into their discussion of the rubric. In particular, they discussed whether the word research implies the use of external sources. The Oak writing program goals, not unlike writing curriculum elsewhere, specifies that students should "evaluate the credibility of potential research sources." However, Kristen does not believe this necessarily implies they are finding those sources on their own, but rather that they are evaluating sources provided within the classroom. Meanwhile, Amelia from chemistry is concerned about the lack of discussion of primary data in conjunction with sources. The overarching writing program goal specifies "synthesizing evidence," yet, the bullet point underneath this seems to define this as "integrat[ing] sources in rhetorically effective ways." For Amelia,

chemistry papers must put data in the context of sources; integrating secondary research is not enough. Meanwhile, when the committee looked at a sample student artifact about a theater performance, they wondered what counts as research in this context as it seems the student bases their analysis solely on their observations as an audience member. “Does this meet the disciplinary standards for research?” they asked. Ultimately, the committee changed the dimension name, but the details here are also up for discussion. Shirong, a historian, is concerned that the weak performance descriptor under this dimension stated, “Students fail to accumulate a broad and reasonable spectrum of sources.” He argued that while he sees the value of source variety, some assignments in history are about engaging deeply with only one or two sources.

Disciplinary difference also caused committee members to distrust moments of perceived consensus building. When Brad passionately launched into a story about how he limits his students from using direct quotation, and several faculty excitedly agreed, Kristen disrupted this moment with a simple statement: “See, this is the disciplinary thing.” Quotes in history, she explained, are necessary and valued but only when dealing with primary source material. Even something seemingly neutral, like citation style, has disciplinary values attached to it. In a somewhat amusing committee moment, Brad expounded on the virtues of Chicago style and how it helps students synthesize their source material in sophisticated ways. The committee joked that the top level of the rubric should say “uses Chicago style.”

These discussions highlight one of the main differences between the VALUE rubric and the modified version the Oak faculty create. Rather than attempt to specify all of these disciplinary conventions, the dimension for “sources and evidence” on the original VALUE Written Communication rubric simply states that sources and supporting ideas are “appropriate for the discipline and genre of the writing.” Meanwhile, the faculty at Oak try to expound on this to define what that looks like while still being inclusive of all disciplinary possibilities. A key difference here is that original VALUE rubric was meant to be used with an assignment prompt. Thus, in the original VALUE model, the burden of describing disciplinary practice fell to each instructor as they composed their assignments. In the absence of this, it falls instead to representative committee members attempting to word the rubric to include the many possibilities of genre and disciplinary context. The committee members recognize, however, that no one person on the committee could reasonably know what the appropriate conventions are for every discipline and genre, not even those within the college or division they represent. Thus, the committee relies heavily on language, such as “consistency,” to describe student work. If, they propose, the work is consistent in style, use of sources, and argument then the student must be aware of and

following disciplinary standards, even when the specifics of those standards are unknown to the reader.

## THE DEMOTION OF THE ASSIGNMENT PROMPT

Here we come to a bit of a catch-22 in the VALUE process: the assignment prompt. The AAC&U has walked a bit of a tightrope when it comes to assignment prompts and design. They have continually promoted that their rubrics can be used with authentic, classroom assignments, but they have also dabbled with common “signature assignments” and assignment design workshops to lead to more consistent artifacts. Common assignments lead to more reliability when using a generic rubric, but as we have seen in examples such as St. Rita’s faculty member Patrice’s use of the five-paragraph essay, they can resemble the testing the AAC&U seeks to move beyond. Yet, without a common assignment, artifacts sometimes don’t fit the rubric at all.

This issue was on my radar from the start of my study when I heard stories from my own institution about raters trying to score dance performance videos with the Critical Thinking VALUE rubric. The VALUE rubrics were originally written to be used with the assignment prompt but collecting them has been both a logistical and philosophical challenge. The original VALUE Written Communication rubric (2009) is clear that the assignment prompt should be used for scoring: “Evaluators using the rubric must have information about the assignments or purposes for writing that guided the writer’s work.” Yet, that information is impractical to collect and does not always lend the clarity that assessors might wish for. In 2016, Kristen hoped to collect the assignment prompt, but by the actual assessment in 2018, she explained that scoring is meant to happen without it. Kristen encountered some of the logistical problems with the use of assignment prompts when she went through the AAC&U scoring process. In her experience with national scoring, she found that assignment prompts were inconsistently attached to artifacts. Also, when there was an assignment prompt, it was not always helpful. Kristen recalled: “Sometimes the assignment just was so general that it didn’t speak to who the audience of a particular piece should be or what kinds of sources students should be using.” When separated from the classroom context where the instructor often pairs an assignment prompt with classroom exercises, lectures, readings, and discussions; assignment prompts may not be helpful. Kristen also found that sometimes assignment prompts ended up incorrectly paired with artifacts. In talking with Terry Rhodes, then Executive Director of VALUE, Kristen got the sense that collecting assignment prompts and pairing them with artifacts was a “massive logistical challenge.” Even on the smaller scale she encounters at Oak, she worries about the logistics of collecting assignment prompts as



well as the fact that all assignment prompts will not all include the same information, and thus will inconsistently affect the scoring process.

Philosophically, there is the need to distinguish large-scale, programmatic or university-wide assessments from classroom grading. Faculty raters need to shift their thinking away from grading, to take on a different role as a reader, and some argue that having an attached assignment sheet counters this goal. This is particularly true in the case of the VALUE rubric since it is meant to represent progress over a college degree rather than one course. If instructors know what course and what level of course the artifact stems from, that could very well skew how they read the artifact in relation to the rubric. Kristen comes to believe the assignment’s connection with grading will hinder the assessment process. When the 2017 pilot assessment group wondered about the assignments and which courses artifacts came from, Kristen encouraged them to separate classroom grading and programmatic assessment:

When we grade, the context usually for us is the specific assignment: how well did this student demonstrate the goals that I wanted them to demonstrate for this particular assignment. And then the other context when we are grading is the course: how well are they demonstrating the goals that I’m trying to teach them about writing and communication. So, of course, it’s natural to think it’s hard for me to react to this without the prompt. But with assessment, the context for us is the writing program. The context in which we’re trying to evaluate students’ writing is the goals of the writing program. So, it’s not a, you know, so it doesn’t matter if it’s a first year or a senior. It doesn’t matter if it’s the beginning of the semester or later in the semester. In the context of assessment, none of that matters.

In the full 2018 assessment, Kristen continued to stress this point, reminding scorers: “It’s not about the assignment, it’s not about what was the student asked to do. It’s about this rubric.”

Yet,, it is difficult to score dimensions such as “context of and purpose for writing” or “genre and disciplinary conventions” without knowing the context of the writing or the discipline from which it hails. In the classroom, rubrics and assignment sheets are intertwined and meant to be genres that work together. When rubrics become disconnected from classroom practice, their relationship with the assignment becomes fraught. The boss-text rubric comes to “rule” over the assignment prompt. Even if it does not directly dictate classroom practice, it dictates how that practice is read and interpreted for stakeholders.

Rhetorical genre theory is helpful here in understanding the shift in the relationship of the genre of the rubric to the genre of the assignment sheet. In the classroom, the rubric, the assignment prompt, and the student artifact work together to dictate the terms of writing within that classroom, for both the student and the instructor. But in large-scale and programmatic assessment, the rubric and assignment prompt function as a part of a different system. The assignment prompt, student artifact, and rubric no longer work together or respond to one another. The student artifact—selected randomly, anonymized, and separated from the classroom—no longer belongs to that classroom or any particular student. Rather it is an exemplar text—a representation not of *a* student but of *the* student, a subject position within the institution of the university. The rubric, too, is not a specific teacher's expectations but fills in for all teacher expectations, for *programmatic* expectations, or even national expectations (agreed upon by *all* teachers, employers, and stakeholders).

Faculty raters are asked to take the position of representatives of faculty at large. They are chosen to represent the sciences or social sciences on the writing committee, to speak not for themselves as individuals but for the group. When they score, too, they are asked to represent the generic "faculty member" rather than draw on their own expertise. Classroom rubrics position faculty in readerly roles where the student work is read through the lens of the rubric, but the faculty member still has other texts to draw upon. Large-scale rubrics require the faculty to read the student text *only* in relation to the rubric. Gallagher (2012) argued that the process of norming "conditions what we are able (and unable) to see in the text" because it asks readers to start with the rubric as the primary text, not the student work (p. 46). Even those who take a more positive view on norming cannot deny that the rubric used for norming is the primary text under discussion. For example, Broch Colombini and McBride (2012) favored norming as means of community and consensus building, a process in which programmatic values and individual values are honored. So, too, Kristen is a generous workshop leader who facilitates this type of dialog about what the rubric means. How raters at Oak interpret the rubric is a matter of negotiation and discussion rather than top-down mandate, and yet, the reading still begins with and focuses on the rubric. The rubric is the dominant text, not student writing. The reader begins and ends with the rubric.

## ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT ASSIGNMENTS

Although large-scale assessment asks readers to sever the connection between the student artifact and the classroom assignment prompt, they have difficulty doing so. The assignment prompt acts a sort of phantom genre—faculty are

aware of its existence but attempt to forget its role in relation to the student work in order to maintain a sense of objectivity when scoring. Assumptions about the assignment prompt or the course are seen as problematic—intrusive thoughts the neutral rater must put aside. Shawna, a faculty member in the pilot 2017 assessment at Oak, noted that this separation between the prompt and the artifact was particularly difficult when it came to scoring the “audience and community” dimension. Even though the dimension asked for her to assess how well the student “anticipates the audience needs,” she tried not to imagine who that audience might be because she imagines that audience is something determined by the assignment prompt, not the student author. “I try not to imagine the assignment too much,” she said, “or to imagine the community, who I think that community was.”

Yet, even without the assignment prompt, faculty raters may be drawn to infer the assignment from seeing multiple artifacts from the same class. The smaller the institution and the sample size, the more likely this is to occur. Again, faculty often attempt to put this information aside, to forget what they have seen before and how it might connect to what they score next. Several participants mentioned how they had to purposefully try not to connect similar artifacts. When Ben participated in the 2018 Oak scoring session, he noted that it was difficult when he got two papers in row that seemed to respond to the same assignment prompt. He would have to purposefully make sure he wasn’t confusing the two papers and misremembering which said what. Kristen encouraged raters to turn off the part of their brains that thinks about whether or not they have seen this assignment before. Ben suggested that re-norming in the middle of the assessment might be a good way to fight this bias. This overlap even occurs with the national VALUE scoring. Philip recalled scoring national artifacts using the Civic Engagement VALUE rubric, one for which the AAC&U collected far fewer artifacts than the more popular area of Written Communication. He noted that a number of the artifacts came from the same project, one in which students posted signs in parks, something that he did not consider fitting with the core of civic engagement.

In all these discussions, there is an underlying assumption that the assignment prompt specifies many decisions for the student writer, such as who the audience for the paper will be. This assumption does not account for student agency or teachers who deliberately incorporate a great deal of student choice into their assignments. Likely, the assumption that assignment prompts dictate student work comes from the way that faculty interact with assignments in their own classroom. After all, faculty take what they learn in assessment and apply it to their own assignments—like when Kristen adds the audience to her prompts after using the VALUE Written Communication rubric. There is also the as-

sumption that the student work reflects the assignment prompt. Kristen, for example, tells the faculty raters: “That’s something you can tell, whether or not the assignment specifies an audience. That’s something you can actually assess in a given artifact.” So, too, Nina from the writing committee thinks that “a well-written paper” will be one where you can understand the assignment from just reading the student text. Thus, the student artifact becomes the bridge between the absent assignment prompt and the rubric, a way to infer the context of the classroom. While specific inferences about the assignment prompt are not welcome, the process rests on an unstated assumption about the relationship of the assignment prompt and the student artifact.

### **ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT WRITERS AND READERS**

In addition to not wanting the assignment prompt to influence scoring, so too, is knowledge of the student forbidden. While data on their class standing, race, gender, and other demographics may be collected and analyzed as a larger part of the assessment, it is not often provided to those reading and scoring the student work, a point I return to in Chapter 7. Faculty raters fill in this knowledge with assumptions, and even complete reconstructions of student identity in their minds, perhaps even more so than of the assignment prompt. Broad (2003) explained, “constructing writers is a widespread and perhaps inescapable feature of reading” (p. 83). The most glaring example of this from Oak was when Wendy, the coordinator of multilingual learning, shared detailed false memories of meeting one-on-one with the author of a sample paper, even though Kristen tells her multiple times that there is no way she did so. In addition, Wendy used this false memory in her scoring: “I scored this person fairly high on process and style because the person came to see me.” She went as far as to say she remembered a young man coming in with the paper some time ago but can’t remember who. Even after Kristen assured her that this is simply not possible, Wendy continued to explain her memory of talking to the student about the specific points made in the paper and about how it was organized. Kristen noted that she may have seen a paper on a similar topic, but that she has not seen this specific paper. That finally convinced Wendy that she should ignore the context that she believes she brings to scoring the paper. Kristen then told the committee that if they do happen to see a paper from their own class, they should ignore it and score a backup artifact. So, too, at St. Rita’s, the faculty scoring the portfolios are different than the professor for those students. Knowledge of the student is seen as a hinderance to the scoring process.

Yet, assumptions about the student writer permeate the scoring process in less direct, but perhaps even more problematic ways when faculty assume a

particular default identity for student writers. It’s a small moment during the norming session that begins Oak’s 2018 assessment, but one I keep returning to. Erin, a sociology professor, was discussing a sample paper and stops herself mid-sentence: “I thought he... I want to keep saying he, I don’t know why.” Erin then worked to use gender-neutral language in describing the student author, but this moment shows how these assumptions about the student author are impossible to completely remove from the scoring process. Davila (2012) outlined the way that language use in student papers led to assumptions on the part of faculty about the identity of the student. While her participants were able to identify specific features in the text that led them to draw conclusions about the socioeconomic status and race of the students, she found that when making assumptions about student gender faculty “relied on their intuition” (p. 192). Perhaps this is why Erin is unable to say why she used the pronoun “he” when referring to the student author.

So, too, the reader’s identity is assumed to be a generalized White, academic reader whose is fluent in English. Although Shirong’s background allows him to recognize errors in usage that come from translation from Chinese to English, there is no way for him to read for this if he begins with only the rubric in mind. His own experience with languages other than English is not relevant to the assessment process. Even the assumption that English is the dominant language of the artifacts can be challenged. Marisella teaches Spanish, including a Spanish course that carries the writing designation. Officially, this is a writing program course, but Marisella is not contacted to provide artifacts for the assessment. Marisella challenged the committee on this matter but was not taken seriously. Kristen expressed concern that it would be difficult to get a reader who was able to score those papers but who wasn’t already the instructor for that course. Marisella maintained that there are plenty of qualified faculty to read a Spanish paper, but Kristen still worries that this would not be true for other modern language courses. So, too, this would violate the principle of not knowing what course the artifact comes from, as a Spanish artifact would be unlikely to come from a course outside of the modern language department. After a brief interchange between Marisella and Kristen, Ben interjected with the playful suggestion that the entire committee needed to go to France and ask French speakers to score artifacts. The committee engaged more with this joke than with Marisella’s concern, imagining themselves on a tour of Europe, eating croissants and asking native speakers to score essays for them. This fantasy was evoked in fun, and yet, it devalues the linguistic expertise of Marisella and other faculty members on campus. English is the language of the writing program, it seems, and an assignment in another language is excluded. On the national level, even though the VALUE rubrics have been translated into multiple languages

(AAC&U, n.d., “Japanese”), at the time of this writing, the VALUE Institute does not offer scoring of any non-English language artifacts.

## RELOCATING THE ASSIGNMENT PROMPT GENRE

Anson et al. (2012) discussed at length their concerns that assignment prompts that stem from generic rubrics lose important aspects of situated practice. “Such rubrics,” they argued “can drive the creation of assignments and communication experiences from the ‘outside in’” (para 38). The relationship between assignments and large-scale assessment at Oak and St. Rita’s affected the classroom, but neither school took an entirely top-down approach. Kristen explained that there was no common assignment for writing courses at Oak, nor did she want to impose one. Even if it would make assessment easier, Oak faculty value autonomy in the classroom. While St. Rita’s did want more common practice across courses in their general education curriculum, they saw this as a part of dictating common outcomes, not common assignments. The committee repeatedly assuaged Patrice’s concerns that her specific assignments would need to change when the outcomes or the rubric changed. Rather, this would be up to her. However, that is not to say these processes had no effect on the classroom. For example, Kristen and others on her committee became more aware that they should talk to students about audience, genre, and disciplinary conventions, and that some of this information should be specified on their assignment prompts. However, the genre of the assignment prompt remained under the control of the instructor, a genre associated with the classroom rather than with large-scale assessment.

But the story doesn’t end there. The assignment prompt is the next target of the AAC&U’s VALUE initiative, which may also move this genre outside the control of the individual classroom teacher. Since I finished my data collection in 2018, the AAC&U has become increasingly involved in assignment design. A 2020 initiative titled VALUE ADD is just getting underway and will require further study. ADD stands for Assignment Design and Diagnostic. Although the AAC&U no longer pairs assignment prompts with artifacts for scoring, through the VALUE Institute they have collected assignment prompts for analysis (Rhodes & McConnell, 2021). The AAC&U is working on a set of tools that faculty can use to determine how to better craft assignments to fit with the outcomes assessed by the VALUE rubrics. The term “diagnostic” is troubling here, as it implies that assignments that do not fit the rubrics are in some way deficient. At the time of this writing, only the critical thinking tool has been released for publication; yet the path toward assignment design tools has been a long time coming.

The AAC&U is not alone in their involvement with assignment design at a national scale. Lumina and The National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NIOLA) worked together in 2016-17 to create an assignment database. The goal of this database is to “strengthen assignment alignment to specific DQP proficiencies” by showcasing “high-quality, peer-reviewed assignments linked to DQP outcomes” (Beld & Kuh, 2014). Within this database, one can even search specifically for assignments that are tagged with a “VALUE rubric” descriptor. As discussed in Chapter 2, it is often advocacy-based philanthropists who fund such efforts. In addition to Lumina, the Gates Foundation has historically been involved in funding assignment design initiatives. They began a grant program called “Assignments Matter” in 2014 as a part of their funding of the National Writing Project. This program enlisted writing project sites to create a “Literacy Design Collaborative” of “juried” writing assignments that align with secondary education’s Common Core Standards. Addison (2015) critiqued this program, noting that while Gates claimed to put teachers at the forefront, those teachers were obligated to use the rubric created for the Literacy Design Collaborative. So, too, the assignments included in this project are valued and judged based on their fit with Common Core Standard outcomes.

While it is unclear how the ADD will work or if it will lead to another database of exemplar writing assignments, these precedents are concerning. Addison (2015) worried that organizations such as the Gates Foundation “may quickly position themselves to rival long-standing professional organizations such as the National Council of Teachers of English.” The VALUE Written Communication rubric (2009) was originally tied to NCTE’s statements about best practices in assessment, which were directly referenced in the framing language. Yet, as shown in Chapter 4, that language is wont to disappear as the rubric moves from national use to local institutional use. Of the 16 adapted Written Communication rubrics I collected in my 2016, nine included a note crediting the AAC&U for the original rubric, but none referenced NCTE. The rubric itself loses its connection to the original rhetorical situation and becomes a genre separated from its exigence. As assessment practice then shifts to the national level, the student artifact represents not only a particular classroom but an entire university, and assignment prompts from that university become exemplars for college-level classroom assignments at large. The rubric is a thin thread connecting classroom to program to national assessment, one that carries with it many assumptions about actual pedagogical practice and actual teachers and students. These assumptions then impact individual universities and their local practice. Although Oak’s rubric includes the goals of the writing program as a whole, and St. Rita’s rubric comes with a page-long description of their local practice, the breadcrumbs that lead back to national disciplinary practice have scattered in the wind.