

# Rubrics as a feedback strategy

Rubrics in formative assessment



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# Rubrics as a feedback strategy

## 1. Feedback at the UOC

Feedback is a vital part of the educational process. At the UOC, we view it as a **dialogic** and **formative** process, meaning it should genuinely help students to **improve their learning outcomes**.<sup>1</sup> Feedback should encourage students to reflect on their learning, helping them to identify what they've done well, where they need to improve, and how they can do better next time.<sup>2</sup>

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At the UOC, feedback is formative and therefore requires students to take an active role throughout the process. In other words, students are not mere recipients of feedback; the comments and suggestions they receive should engage them and encourage improvements in their learning (both in the current activity and in future ones).



Educational research and literature detail various strategies that can be used to provide feedback to students. One such strategy is the rubric, which is the focus of this document. Before jumping in, however, it's worth pausing to consider not only which feedback strategy to use, but what makes feedback truly effective, so that it genuinely supports students and their learning.

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<sup>1</sup> Feedback is often provided by teaching staff, but it can also come from peers, i.e. fellow students.

<sup>2</sup> Source: [Feedback site](#).

## 2. What makes feedback effective?

For feedback to be effective (i.e. formative), it should meet certain criteria. Keep the following in mind when preparing feedback for your students:

- Feedback should **acknowledge the student's successes**.

Clearly and specifically identifying successful outcomes has a strong motivational impact and helps to reinforce good learning practices. This recognition should align with the assessment criteria and the objectives of the activity to give the student's achievements genuine value.

- Feedback should **highlight and explain areas that have not been successfully addressed**.

Simply pointing out errors is not enough. **These must be explained, and the reasons why certain criteria have not been met must be clearly stated**, linking these issues to the intended competencies or learning outcomes. This transforms errors into opportunities for reflection, helping students to understand the reason for the improvement.

- Feedback should **include questions, suggestions and/or guidance** that prompt students to reflect and take action to improve their performance and learning.

Rather than merely correcting, feedback should equip students with the tools to recognize how to progress adequately and as independently as possible. This approach encourages students to take greater ownership of, and become more actively involved in, their own learning process.

- Ideally, feedback should also include suggestions and/or guidance to support **knowledge transfer**, help students **apply their learning in practice** and/or **connect it with other relevant content or situations**, whether now or in the future.

Table 1 below outlines the types of content to consider when preparing effective feedback:

Table 1. Examples of content to include in effective feedback.

Identifying positive aspects	Identifying errors and/or omissions	Explaining errors and/or omissions	Guidance or support for improvement
<i>"You have [verb] / Your work shows... [brief explanation of what has been done well]."</i>	<i>"You achieved/received [outcome or score] because... [clear description of the identified issue]."</i>	<i>"Remember that this concept/procedure refers to... [brief explanation of the correct rule, criterion or model]."</i>	<i>"If you have any doubts, I recommend reviewing/consulting... [resource, link, guide or activity], so you can address this point more effectively in future activities."</i>

Table 2 below provides four examples of feedback for a student who has referenced their sources incorrectly:

- The first comment is incorrect (🔴).
- The second comment lacks information on how to do it properly (🟡).
- The third comment provides good feedback that follows the structure outlined in Table 1 (🟢): it identifies the error, explains how to reference sources correctly, and includes a link that the student can refer to for future activities.
- The fourth comment includes all the aspects described above, as well as a positive remark on the student's performance in the activity (🔵).

Each feedback example is colour-coded to show how its parts correspond to the four types of content outlined in Table 1.

Table 2. Examples of feedback by quality.

Feedback quality	Example feedback	What this feedback provides
🔴	<i>The reference list is incorrect. It needs to be revised.</i>	The error is not specified. No guidance is offered on how to improve. This may frustrate the student.
🟡	<i>The reference list does not follow APA style, as required. The order of elements and reference formatting should be revised.</i>	The teacher points out the issue and mentions the correct style, but does not explain the error in detail or provide any support or guidance

		for improvement.
	<p><i>Your reference list contains some errors in APA citation style. For example, the publication year should appear in parentheses after the author's name, and references should be listed in alphabetical order. I recommend consulting this citation guide to review the criteria and apply them correctly in future activities.</i></p>	The teacher explains the error and how to correct it, and provides a resource that supports the student's improvement and autonomy in future tasks.
	<p>Your work demonstrates a good selection of current and relevant sources, particularly in the use of recent academic articles. <i>However, the reference list contains some errors in APA citation style. For example, the publication year should appear in parentheses after the author's name, and references should be listed in alphabetical order. I recommend consulting this citation guide to review the criteria and apply them correctly in future activities.</i></p>	In addition to identifying and explaining the errors and offering resources or guidance for improvement, this feedback also clearly highlights the strengths and positive aspects of the student's work.

Finally, when providing feedback, it's important to consider not only its content, but also **when it's given** and **how much time is allowed** for students to act on it. Feedback should be offered at an opportune time, enabling students to **self-regulate** their learning and **make use of the guidance provided**. This could mean **submitting a revised version of the activity with the suggested improvements, or applying the feedback to future activities or projects**.

### 3. Rubrics as a tool for formative feedback

#### 3.1 What are rubrics and how are they designed?

Using a rubric is one strategy for providing students with feedback. It takes the form of a grid or double-entry table, describing or defining the assessment criteria and achievement levels in relation to the activity and students' learning.

- **Assessment criteria** outline the key aspects to be evaluated. They are often linked to expected competencies or learning outcomes and are placed in the rows of the table.
- **Achievement levels** describe the different performance thresholds for each criterion and are arranged in the columns.
- **Descriptors**, or definitions, specify in detail what each achievement level entails for each criterion.

The number of rows in the rubric indicates the number of assessment criteria, and the number of columns depends on the number of achievement levels set for the activity as a whole. Each criterion must have its achievement levels clearly described, in line with the learning objectives and context (see Image 1).

**Assessment criteria**

**Achievement levels**

**Descriptors**

Criteria	Excellent	Satisfactory	Developing	Insufficient
<b>Structure and clarity of speech</b>	Organizes content in a logical and fluid manner. Introduces, develops and concludes topics smoothly and coherently. Connects ideas meaningfully throughout the piece, enabling the listener to gain a thorough understanding of the information presented.	Organizes content coherently, following a structure that facilitates comprehension of the piece. Presents ideas smoothly, enabling the listener to understand the content efficiently.	Organizes content somewhat haphazardly, which makes it harder to understand the piece. Presents ideas with limited fluency, making it difficult for the listener to grasp the content.	Expresses ideas without following a clear structure, resulting in a piece that is confusing or disjointed. Omits any sort of introduction or conclusion.
<b>Use of oral language and expressive devices</b>	Uses clear, precise and inclusive language that is appropriate to the communicative and journalistic context, ensuring that ideas are conveyed effectively and intelligibly. Employs expressive devices such as intonation, gestures and rhythm fluently and naturally, contributing to the energy and coherence of the piece.	Uses language and vocabulary appropriate to the field of study. Employs expressive devices such as intonation, gestures and rhythm effectively and communicates clearly.	Uses language that is not appropriate to the field of study and communicates with some interruptions. Employs limited expressive devices (intonation, gestures, rhythm, etc.).	Uses language inappropriate to the field of study and makes inadequate use of expressive devices (intonation, gestures, rhythm, etc.).
<b>Voice control and non-verbal communication</b>	Modulates their voice appropriately and confidently. Maintains sufficient eye contact, distributed among different listeners. Uses gestures appropriately to reinforce the orally conveyed message.	Modulates their voice appropriately. Uses gestures and eye contact with listeners regularly, without being excessive. Non-verbal language aligns with verbal language for much of the piece, though it could still be improved or further developed.	Modulates their voice with some difficulty. Eye contact or gestures are limited or slightly insufficient, or conversely, slightly excessive, causing some distortion. Some non-verbal language aligns with verbal language, aiding comprehension. At other times, it lacks coherence and causes confusion.	Modulates their voice with great difficulty, though remains intelligible. Non-verbal strategies are scarce or highly insufficient, or conversely, excessive and cause distortion in communication. Non-verbal strategies lack coherence with verbal language, do not support comprehension and cause confusion.

Image 1. Example of a rubric for assessing oral expression, with its main components highlighted.

Canvas includes a built-in tool for creating, sharing and using rubrics for assessment purposes (see Image 2). Teachers can use this feature to link rubrics directly to the activity submission page, enabling them to assess students' work against the rubric without leaving the submission screen. Similarly, students can access the rubric in the same place where they're expected to submit their work.



The image shows a screenshot of the Canvas rubric editor. The interface is organized into several sections:

- Rubric title:** A field labeled "Rubric title" with a red box around it, connected to the "Education & AI" section.
- Learning outcome:** A field labeled "Learning outcome" with a red box around it, connected to the "Gender perspective" section.
- Achievement levels for learning outcomes:** A field labeled "Achievement levels for learning outcomes" with a red box around it, connected to the "Ethical and Global Competence" section.
- Assessment criteria:** A field labeled "Assessment criteria" with a red box around it, connected to the "Gender Perspective" section.
- Comments:** A field labeled "Comments" with a red box around it, connected to the "Comment" section.
- Education & AI:** A section labeled "Education & AI" with a red box around it, containing "Gender perspective" and "Ethical and Global Competence" sections.
- Ratings:** A table with columns "Exceeds Mastery", "Mastery", "Near Mastery", "Below Mastery", and "No Evidence". Points are 4 pts, 3 pts, 2 pts, 1 pts, and 0 pts respectively. A red box highlights the "No Evidence" row.
- Points:** A table with columns "Exceeds Mastery", "Mastery", "Near Mastery", "Below Mastery", and "No Evidence". Points are 4 pts, 3 pts, 2 pts, 1 pts, and 0 pts respectively. A red box highlights the "No Evidence" row.
- Student's achievement level:** A field labeled "Student's achievement level" with a red box around it, connected to the "No Evidence" row.
- Achievement levels:** A table with columns "Achieved Excellent", "Achieved", "Partially Achieve", and "Not Achieved". Points are 3 pts, 2.4 pts, 1.8 pts, and 1.5 pts respectively. A red box highlights the "Not Achieved" row.
- Score:** A field labeled "Score" with a red box around it, connected to the "Not Achieved" row.
- Descriptors:** A table with columns "Achieved Excellent", "Achieved", "Partially Achieve", and "Not Achieved". Points are 2 pts, 1.6 pts, 1.2 pts, and 0 pts respectively. A red box highlights the "Not Achieved" row.
- Comments:** A section labeled "Comment" with a red box around it, containing "Leave a comment".
- Buttons:** "Cancel" and "Submit Assessment" buttons at the bottom right.

Image 2. Components of a rubric in the Canvas editor.

The **two resources** below may be helpful when designing a rubric, ensuring that it includes all the necessary elements and serves as an effective formative assessment tool.



This [detailed guide](#) will help you **design a rubric**.

Once you've created your rubric, you can use this [checklist](#) to **review and refine it**, if needed.

### 3.2 How should rubrics be implemented to make them formative?

A rubric can serve two purposes in the assessment process:

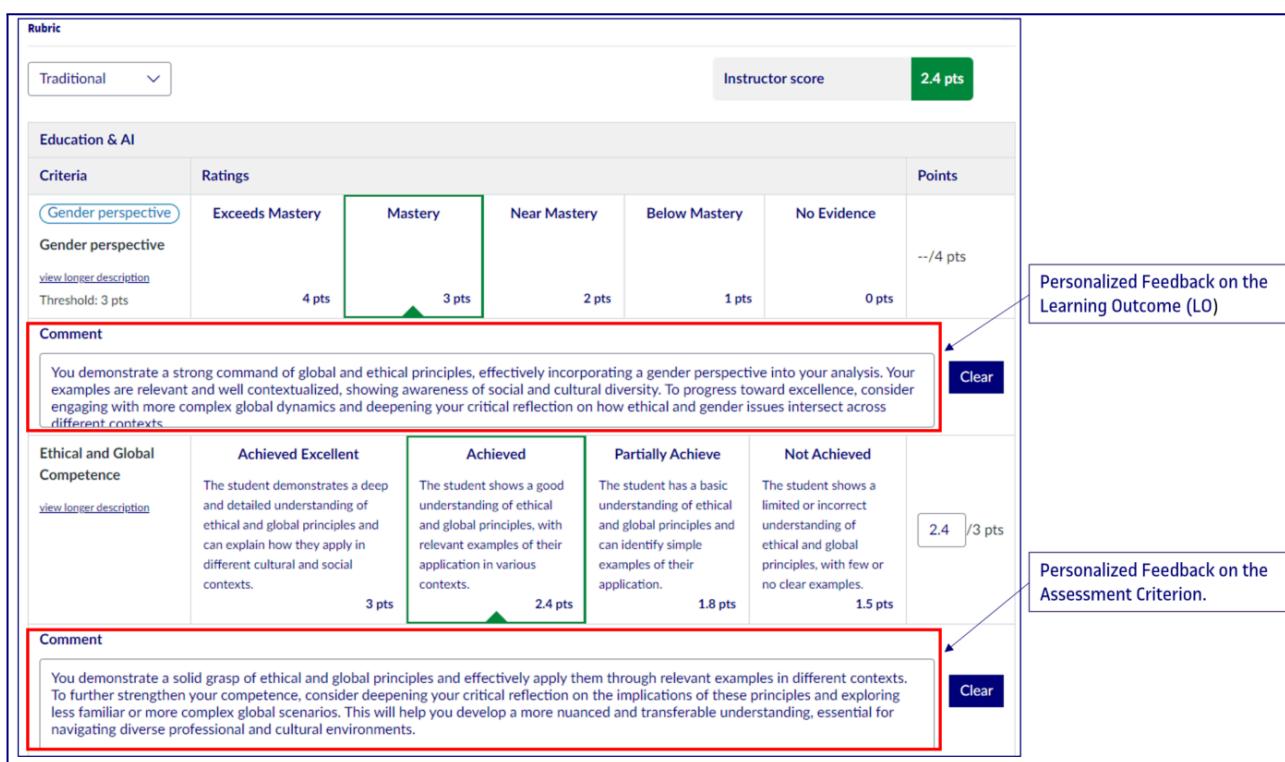
- **Awarding grades:** it enables teachers to award a grade based on a student's current level of progress. This is perhaps its best-known function.
- **Formative:** focusing on ongoing student development, a rubric can be a valuable tool for **self-regulation and improved learning**. This is one of the rubric's greatest strengths. However, to fulfil this role, it must be implemented in a specific way. Let's explore how.

Rubrics provide general feedback on specific activities or challenges, outlining the same criteria, achievement levels and descriptors for all students. However, for a rubric to serve as a truly formative tool, it cannot simply be designed, used for grading and then shared with students afterwards. Several key actions must be taken to ensure that the rubric provides genuine formative value in the classroom:

- **Share the rubric with students at the start of the activity or challenge.** Having access to the rubric from the outset helps students to understand what is expected of them and supports self-regulation in their effort to perform well. They can identify where they stand within the achievement levels, reflect on how to progress to higher levels and ask any questions that arise while working on the activity based on the guidance the rubric provides.
- **Explain the rubric to students when sharing it with them.** Explain what a rubric is, what it's for, and how to interpret its criteria and achievement levels. Show students where to find it in the virtual classroom and how to use it effectively throughout the activity or challenge. This will give them a clear understanding of what's expected, enabling them to use the rubric for self-assessment and self-regulation at any point in the process. It will also help them to make sense of the feedback and grade they receive later on.
- **Allow time in the course** for students to read the rubric and ask questions if anything is unclear.
- **Supplement the generic feedback** provided by the rubric with **personalized comments for each assessment criterion**. These comments should link the descriptor of the students' achievement level to their performance in the activity. When preparing these comments, refer to the types of content outlined in Section 2 for effective feedback.

### 3.3 How can rubric-based feedback be personalized in Canvas?

The Canvas rubric includes a dedicated space for entering personalized comments for each assessed criterion or learning outcome (see Image 3). These comments enable teachers to explain to each student how their performance aligns with the expectations of the activity or challenge, expand on or justify decisions made for each criterion, enhance transparency and reflection within the process, and pre-empt any doubts or misunderstandings students may have when they receive their feedback.



The screenshot shows a Canvas rubric for 'Education & AI' with two criteria: 'Gender perspective' and 'Ethical and Global Competence'. The 'Gender perspective' criterion is currently selected, showing a score of 2.4 pts. The 'Comment' box for this criterion contains personalized feedback: 'You demonstrate a strong command of global and ethical principles, effectively incorporating a gender perspective into your analysis. Your examples are relevant and well contextualized, showing awareness of social and cultural diversity. To progress toward excellence, consider engaging with more complex global dynamics and deepening your critical reflection on how ethical and gender issues intersect across different contexts.' A 'Clear' button is located to the right of this comment box. The 'Ethical and Global Competence' criterion shows a score of 2.4 pts, with a comment box containing: 'You demonstrate a solid grasp of ethical and global principles and effectively apply them through relevant examples in different contexts. To further strengthen your competence, consider deepening your critical reflection on the implications of these principles and exploring less familiar or more complex global scenarios. This will help you develop a more nuanced and transferable understanding, essential for navigating diverse professional and cultural environments.' A 'Clear' button is also present here. The rubric table includes columns for Criteria, Ratings (Exceeds Mastery, Mastery, Near Mastery, Below Mastery, No Evidence), and Points (4 pts, 3 pts, 2 pts, 1 pts, 0 pts). The 'Instructor score' is 2.4 pts, and the total points available are 4/4 pts.

Image 3. Example of a Canvas rubric with personalized feedback in the comments.

Teachers can use this approach not only to provide general feedback, but also to detail specific areas for improvement and offer guidance on how to address them, personalizing the assessment process. For this reason, it's important that these personalized comments include suggestions for improvement to help students progress upwards through the achievement levels described in the rubric. As explained in Section 2, a well-designed rubric will include the types of information coloured in **green**, **red** and **orange** in the achievement level descriptors for each assessment

criterion. However, it won't typically include the **blue** part: **guidance or support for improvement**. Teachers should take care to incorporate this into their personalized feedback.

This combination is particularly useful as it centralizes all feedback in one place, linking it directly to a specific assessment criterion or learning outcome from the rubric. This adds greater context and meaning to the feedback provided.

## 4. Conclusions

When implemented in line with the contents of this document and the accompanying design guide, rubrics help to ensure that assessment criteria are transparent, easy to understand and useful for both teachers and students. Moreover, when a rubric is shared with students at the beginning of an activity, and they are helped to understand its content and purpose, it can also become a powerful tool for self-assessment and self-regulation throughout the learning process.

Combining a rubric with targeted comments for each criterion results in feedback that is more personalized, meaningful and actionable for both students and teachers, contributing to a more useful learning and assessment experience for all.