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A Framework for Writing Rubrics to Support Linguistically Diverse Students

To humanize feedback, two teacher educators collaborated with students in their classes and inservice teachers to develop a set of questions to consider when designing writing rubrics.

During a recent study we conducted about student perceptions of academic language, Christina taught English to eleventh graders, and when she asked a student why he did not want to edit his draft, he said, "I'll still just be 'Below Basic,' no matter what." "Below Basic" was the lowest score a piece of writing could receive on the writing rubric used in all of the student's classes. Christina has carried that moment with her, concerned that the student thought of the writing rubric label as a referendum on his potential as a writer. Young writers encounter this implicit and explicit messaging in rubrics throughout their schooling career, including high-stakes assessments such as statewide exams and standardized assessments related to college access. The ACT Writing Test Rubric for argumentative writing—that uses terms such as "weakly responds," "fails," "unclear," and "irrelevant,"—for example, offers a sample of what language rubrics may unintentionally communicate about language deficits (see Figure 1). It is easy to imagine how a phrase like "little or no skill in writing an argumentative essay" could be discouraging to writers. This language would be especially discouraging, though, if used regularly in the classroom to describe students' writing performance.

Furthermore, writing feedback practices sometimes position students' work as either sufficient or insufficient using phrases such as "little or no control," which may also detract from students' writing self-efficacy. Though we cannot change writing rubrics in high-stakes assessments, as teachers we can reflect and take action in our use of writing rubrics in our classrooms. It is our aim in putting forth this framework to connect writing assessment to a culturally sustaining pedagogical stance and confront school policies and classroom practices that support a monocultural and monolingual society (Paris 93).

Students' struggles with writing have been well-documented, especially because oral discourse can be in high contrast with written school discourses (Bruning and Horn 27), and the number of strugglers is particularly high for language users who learn English at school or use dialectal variants of English that are unfairly perceived to be non-standard (NCES 29). Django Paris and H. Samy Alim have argued that "[f]or too long, scholarship on 'access' and 'equity' has centered implicitly or explicitly around the question of how to get working-class students of color to speak and write more like middle-class White ones" (87). They go on to argue that a culturally sustaining pedagogy would not pursue these same goals and would instead encourage and support language diversity.

In this article, we share a question framework for teachers to use in developing writing rubrics for students that communicate a clear assessment of progress while also valuing language diversity, addressing student agency in writing, and connecting to purposes and audiences for writing. We do not mean to suggest that revising rubrics is a substitute for

Snapshot of the ACT Writing Test Rubric for Argumentative Writing

	Ideas and Analysis	Development and Support	Organization	Language Use
Score 2: *Responses at this score point demonstrate weak or inconsistent skill in writing an argumentative essay.*	The writer generates an argument that weakly responds to multiple perspectives on the given issue. The argument's thesis, if evident, reflects little clarity in thought and purpose. Attempts at analysis are incomplete, largely irrelevant, or consist primarily of restatement of the issue and its perspectives.	Development of ideas and support for claims are weak, confused, or disjointed. Reasoning and illustration are inadequate, illogical, or circular and fail to fully clarify the argument.	The response exhibits a rudimentary organizational structure. Grouping of ideas is inconsistent and often unclear. Transitions between and within paragraphs are misleading or poorly formed.	The use of language is inconsistent and often unclear. Word choice is rudimentary and frequently imprecise. Sentence structures are sometimes unclear. Stylistic and register choices, including voice and tone, are inconsistent and are not always appropriate for the rhetorical purpose. Distracting errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics are present, and they sometimes impede understanding.
Score 1: *Responses at this score point demonstrate little or no skill in writing an argumentative essay.*	The writer fails to generate an argument that responds intelligibly to the task. The writer's intentions are difficult to discern. Attempts at analysis are unclear or irrelevant.	Ideas lack development, and claims lack support. Reasoning and illustration are unclear, incoherent, or largely absent.	The response does not exhibit an organizational structure. There is little grouping of ideas. When present, transitional devices fail to connect ideas.	The use of language fails to demonstrate skill in responding to the task. Word choice is imprecise and often difficult to comprehend. Sentence structures are often unclear. Stylistic and register choices are difficult to identify. Errors in grammar, usage, and mechanics are pervasive and often impede understanding.

FIGURE 1

The ACT Writing Test Rubric for argumentative writing uses terms such as *weak* and *little or no skill*.

instruction that stresses the value of language diversity and the purpose of writing, but, instead, to point to rubric design as an explicit starting point from which to backward map into more culturally and linguistically sustaining pedagogies. Our goal is to help teachers create rubrics that encourage students' writing self-efficacy, provide effective and careful feedback, and value linguistic diversity.

WRITING RUBRICS IN THE CLASSROOM

It is common for teachers to use rubrics to summatively (Reddy 3) and formatively (Panadero and Jonsson 130) assess writing in classrooms, and test developers have used them frequently to assess writing, at least somewhat reliably (Andrade and Valtcheva 15). Given the ubiquity of rubric tools to

assess writing, we focus on them here as a mechanism to provide supportive and thoughtful feedback to student writers (see Figure 2).

Rubrics have been shown to help students understand more clearly the criteria by which their writing is being judged (Andrade 8). But the evidence about whether students improve their writing performance because of rubrics is mixed (see Reddy and Andrade 441), with some studies finding improved student performance and others finding no differences in student understanding of performance with and without rubrics (e.g. Andrade and Du 2; McCormick et al. 23; Rezaei and Lovorn 18). In additional studies, the impact of rubrics on student performance has been shown to differ by gender (Andrade 7; Andrade and Boulay 27), and student performance was also shown to sometimes be improved if teachers received training in how to use rubrics (Schafer et al. 15). Studies remain varied in their assessment of the impact of rubrics on student writing and writing processes.

Perhaps this lack of consistent success of rubrics to improve student writing or writing self-efficacy is tied more broadly to what research has shown about providing effective feedback. For adolescent students, trust is a key component of critical feedback being viewed positively by its recipient (Bryk and Schneider 72; Yeager et al. 806). Adolescents are becoming more conscious of how negative stereotypes may impact their teachers' responses to them (Cohen and Steele 303; McKown and Weinstein 1655). Feedback that is considered "wise" can be more effective at refuting stereotypes for racial minority students and helping students be more motivated to use the feedback they are given (Yeager et al. 810). "Wise" feedback has three components: (1) it conveys critical feedback in relationship to a teacher's high standards, (2) it explicitly addresses a student's ability to meet those high standards, and (3) it provides specific and actionable guidance about how to

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improve. We argue that "wise" feedback could be used in writing, alongside language that values language diversity, to avoid triggering stereotype-driven mistrust among student writers and make them more likely to use feedback. Thus, developing rubrics is a classroom practice that allows teachers to better communicate students' potential as writers and the value of linguistic variation.

WRITING SELF-EFFICACY AS A KEY TO WRITING DEVELOPMENT

Writing self-efficacy, a factor related to a sense of belonging in a writing community, builds on the broader concept of self-efficacy (Bandura 193) and is defined as a person's belief in how capable that person is of tackling writing tasks effectively (Pajares 142); writing self-efficacy has been hypothesized to include how one perceives mastery of writing, observations of others' writing, messages from others about writing, and physiological states such as stress (Pajares 142). Additionally, students' self-efficacy is a highly influential component in writing engagement and performance, with low efficacy being associated with weaker writing as well as less engagement in writing tasks in school (Bandura 193; Pajares and Johnson 171). These experiences related to developing writing self-efficacy, such as receiving negative feedback, leave strong impressions on writers (Bruning et al. 28).

Teachers often lack specific training or experience in writing instruction and assessment (Crusan et al. 48; Grisham and Wolsey 361; Myers et al. 317), and they sometimes report a lack of confidence in teaching writing. Given this lack of training, it is easy to see how teachers might accidentally send unintended messages about students' language. And in turn, students' beliefs about their language and writing skills are shaped by assessment tools. Careful examination of the tools we use to discern the messages they send can help us make necessary adjustments.

LANGUAGE DIVERSITY IN US CLASSROOMS

Christina recently conducted a pilot study designed to help students think about academic language in which many students reported feeling as though their language resources were negative or were viewed by

Six-Trait Writing Model

CATEGORY	Advanced	Proficient	Needs Improvement	Warning
Focus on Topic (Content)	There is one clear, well-focused topic. The main idea stands out and is supported by detailed information.	The main idea is clear, but the supporting information is general.	The main idea is somewhat clear.	The main idea is not clear. There is a seemingly random collection of information.
Sequencing (Organization)	Details are placed in a logical order and the way they are presented effectively keeps the interest of the reader.	Details are placed in a logical order, but the way they are presented/introduced sometimes makes the writing less interesting.	Some details are not in a logical or expected order, and this distracts the reader.	Many details are not in a logical or expected order. There is little sense that the writing is organized.
Commitment (Voice)	The writer successfully uses several reasons/appeals to try to show why the reader should care or want to know more about the topic.	The writer successfully uses one or two reasons/appeals to try to show why the reader should care or want to know more about the topic.	The writer attempts to make the reader care about the topic but is not really successful.	The writer makes no attempt to make the reader care about the topic.
Word Choice	The writer uses vivid words and phrases that linger or draw pictures in the reader's mind, and the choice and placement of the word seems accurate and natural.	The writer uses vivid words and phrases that linger or draw pictures in the reader's mind, but occasionally the words are used inaccurately or seem overdone.	The writer uses words that communicate clearly, but the writing lacks variety, punch, or flair.	The writer uses a limited vocabulary that does not communicate strongly or capture the reader's interest. Jargon or clichés may be present and detract from the meaning.
Sentence Structure (Sentence Fluency)	All sentences are well-constructed with varied structure.	Most sentences are well-constructed with varied structure.	Most sentences are well-constructed but have a similar structure.	Sentences lack structure and appear incomplete or rambling.
Grammar and Spelling (Conventions)	The writer makes no errors in grammar or spelling, showing strong command of language.	The writer makes occasional errors in grammar or spelling, showing some command of language.	The writer makes some errors in grammar or spelling, showing minimal command of language.	The writer makes many errors in grammar or spelling, showing little command of language.

FIGURE 2
Six-trait writing rubrics are often used in language arts classrooms.

their teachers as negative. In a focus group conducted as part of the study, students indicated they felt as though they got feedback that the language they were using was incorrect, though it would have been viewed as acceptable in other contexts. In response to a question about teacher feedback on writing (and not multilingualism), one student said he felt that teachers would really just prefer if they all only spoke English, and another agreed that teachers did not view multilingualism as a strength. It is not clear whether their teachers actually felt this way, and, in fact, they likely would say they did not. However, students seemed to have received a message about the value of language diversity, regardless of teacher intent, leading to key questions about more explicitly conveying value for linguistic diversity.

Additionally, Christina's recent study of college undergraduates' recollections of writing in K–12 schooling and their transition to higher education revealed that multidialectal and multilingual students reported feeling negatively about their language resources due to feedback they received from teachers. One student said she felt "ashamed of my Black English" because a teacher once commented aloud that "it was never going to get me anywhere." Our values about language diversity might translate into particular instructional approaches, but our values may not always be evident in our assessments. Reflecting on this research caused us to consider rubrics and how they often send clear messages about what sort of value teachers place on particular uses of language.

LINGUISTICALLY RESPONSIVE RUBRICS

We have developed, with teachers in professional learning spaces and with preservice teachers in our courses, a framework of questions to use when creating rubrics that emphasize the value of students' language resources and that provide growth-oriented feedback. We suggest that users ask these questions about their writing curricula and revise rubric language to support the students in their classrooms. The aim of the set of questions is to help teachers create rubrics that humanize student writers and convey a belief in their ability to grow.

QUESTION ONE: *DOES THE RUBRIC'S SCALE OF VALUES FOR JUDGING RESPONSES SUGGEST THAT STUDENTS HAVE ROOM TO GROW?*

The scale of values used to organize groups of students across holistic or analytic rubrics sometimes uses a range of terms to label the work of student writers. Those pieces that do not meet teachers' expectations are commonly labelled with negative terms, such as "unsatisfactory," "below basic," "unacceptable," or "insufficient." Students might read these terms as a statement about their writing potential or, even worse, as broader distinctions about their language.

For example, a student from the study referenced in the opening paragraph reported that he had written a persuasive essay about removing Confederate monuments using African American English, which he termed "his authentic voice," and received a poor score on the rubric that had a column titled "Unsatisfactory" and described the weakest category of conventions as follows: "student has limited control of writing conventions." The student described this feedback as embarrassing and interpreted it as a critique of his stylistic choice rather than his use of conventions, saying that he knew he had used "slang," but that he had done so intentionally. He concluded that his teacher must think his "language was bad, and that it probably was," though he had chosen particular syntax purposefully for the voice he hoped to convey. This conclusion from a student could have been avoided.

It is easy to rephrase category descriptors to focus on development that is connected to audience expectations, rather than on correctness, by choosing rubric terms that demonstrate the potential for continued growth. Consider using terms such as "still developing" or "area for growth" as category markers to communicate room for growth. Given that the student writing about the monuments interpreted negative feedback about conventions as a broader critique of his language, growth language might have led the student to draw different conclusions. Using growth language could transmit some of the wise feedback that we know helps students.

A first step in revising writing rubrics may be to examine the current language used to identify decontextualized language of correctness and then to ask, *Does the language of the rubric communicate an arbitrary threshold of correctness or room for growth?* When encountering the former, we replace the term with language that encourages room to grow (see Figure 3).

QUESTION TWO: *DO THE TOOLS EMPHASIZE DEVELOPMENT AND PURPOSE WHEN IT COMES TO LANGUAGE USE?*

A second step is to ensure that growth language also connects to purpose and audience expectations, rather than characterizing the language students use

	Focused on Correctness	Focused on Growth
Characterizing writing from growth perspective	Advanced Proficient Needs Improvement Unsatisfactory	This piece of writing is highly effective. This piece of writing is effective. This piece of writing is sometimes effective. This piece of writing has room to grow.
Emphasizing development and purpose in writing	The main idea is not clear. There is a seemingly random collection of information. Main idea is somewhat clear. Sentences lack structure and appear incomplete or rambling. Writer makes many mistakes in grammar, showing little command of language.	The main idea is not clear. The connections between various pieces of information could be made clearer to the reader. The main idea is somewhat clear, but there is a need to add more supporting information. Relationships between ideas in sentences are unclear, so they do not communicate clearly with the reader. The grammar in the piece is unusual or unexpected, making it challenging for the reader to understand.
Connecting language to audience	Many details are not in a logical or expected order. There is little sense that the writing is organized. Writer uses a limited vocabulary that does not communicate strongly or capture the reader's interest. Jargon or cliches may be present and detract from the meaning. Writer demonstrates limited or no control over conventions and grammar.	Writer presents information in a way that is confusing to the reader or that does not follow the way a piece in this genre is typically organized. Writer uses vocabulary that does not communicate clearly with the reader or help the reader understand the piece. Writer's grammar and conventions are unclear to the reader, either because they use language resources the reader is unfamiliar with or they are challenging to understand.
Encouraging agency in writing decisions	The writer does not attempt to make the reader care about the topic. The writer attempts to make the reader care about the topic but is not really successful. The writer successfully uses one or two reasons/appeals to try to show why the reader should care or want to know more about the topic.	It is challenging to understand why the writer would like the reader to care about the topic. The writer tries to use their language resources to help the reader care about the topic, but they could be more successful. The writer successfully uses their language resources to present one or two reasons/appeals to help the reader care or want to know more about the topic.

FIGURE 3
In the language used for rubrics, "wise" feedback focuses on growth and purpose.

as negative or incorrect, especially on the "lower" end of writing scales. The question of correctness depends on an author's communicative goals, which may differ from an audience's expectations. It is important not to label dialect use as incorrect, even if it is an unexpected experience for the reader. Instead of describing a student's work as showing "limited control," we suggest more supportive phrasing that speaks to the author's agency and potential. We encourage teachers to review rubric feedback language and ask, *Does the rubric provide specific examples of how the piece of writing can further develop?* If not, we suggest adjusting the language to be more precise and developmentally oriented. Growth-oriented language more closely aligns with supportive feedback.

A missing component of writing feedback for many students is purpose, as frequently their work is described as right or wrong, rather than achieving or not achieving its communicative purpose. In our own work with high school students, we have asked them why particular conventions of language are used, and many have responded that they do not know why people are expected to use particular conventions or how they ensure that conventions demonstrate their purpose and achieve it. By connecting rubric language to purpose, we can help students understand why and how language choices are made and how they impact the reader. So the aforementioned writer might still receive feedback that his use of dialect in his piece was unexpected and that his rationale for doing so was not apparent, but this would be connected to purpose, rather than inaccurately labeling the choice incorrect.

QUESTION THREE: *DOES THE RUBRIC FEEDBACK CONNECT STUDENT LANGUAGE TO AUDIENCE?*

Rubrics may need to be recalibrated to connect to audiences and their expectations. For instance, we might say that a student's sentence use varies in an unexpected way or a student's choice of register aligns with or effectively challenges a potential audience's expectations for that genre. This connection to the relationship between a reader and writer might emphasize that language is a tool we use to communicate, rather than one we use solely to demonstrate arbitrary mastery of dialects and registers that have prestige. When reviewing the rubric feedback, we ask ourselves, *Does the rubric prompt the student to consider the purpose and audience?* The "connecting language to audience" section in Figure 3 provides examples of how we can support students in focusing on who the audience and readers are as a way to strengthen their writing.

QUESTION FOUR: *DOES THE TOOL EXPLICITLY ACKNOWLEDGE THAT STUDENTS HAVE AGENCY IN CHOOSING WHICH OF THEIR LANGUAGE RESOURCES TO USE?*

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, assessment tools should communicate to students that they are language users with agency and should treat their decision-making as such. It might be true, at times, that students use particular language features without developing command for those features, but we can still use language that respects their agency and acknowledges that they made decisions about the writing they produced.

A rubric that was more attuned to linguistic diversity could have resulted in a different experience for the student described above who used African American English intentionally. His feedback might have appreciated his choice to use particular dialectal resources and then have begun a discussion about why he felt his dialect choice was appropriate and how he might have made that rationale clearer to the reader. And the ensuing conversation about improving the work could have refined the student's goals for his writing voice, rather than implying that his choices about the voice in the writing were "incorrect." The following question can be helpful: *Does my rubric provide space to honor students' home language(s) and linguistic variation, and if not, how can I emphasize use of languages beyond standardized English?* We provide some examples of how to connect to the writer's agency in the "encouraging agency in writing decisions" section of Figure 3.

We use these questions in our teaching with teacher candidates and adolescent students to ensure

that we are fostering a growth- and agency-oriented stance toward writing and value for linguistic variation. We find we must consistently ask if the rubrics we create adhere to these values.

LINGUISTIC DIVERSITY, WRITER AGENCY, AND GROWTH-ORIENTED LANGUAGE

Embracing linguistic diversity as a principle of instruction and encouraging students to use and expand their repertoire of language resources requires the careful interrogation of the detailed ways we discuss student language, including in feedback on their writing. Teachers we have worked with in a range of schools have made adjustments to their rubrics, and they report that, as a result, students seem to approach talking about their writing choices in a way that reflects more agency. One teacher said she thinks students are more likely to spend time with feedback when it is framed around growth. In our teaching at the university level, these same principles seem to have led to more creative and risk-taking approaches to writing tasks and a much stronger sense of student voice in a range of types of writing.

In doing the work of interrogating our intended and unintended messaging, we can ensure that students do not internalize negative ideas of their language resources that cause them to think of themselves as nonwriters. We strive to offer feedback that shares our belief in their potential to develop their writing skills, to use their agency to make determinations about their own writing, and to reflect on their writing decisions. EJ

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READWRITETHINKCONNECTION   Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Because of their diverse literacy needs, students need us to differentiate the product, process, and content of learning according to their learning style, interest, and readiness. Yet recognizing student growth and literacy needs requires more than one voice and more than one snapshot. In this Strategy Guide, you'll learn about a number of specific methods that promote self-assessment and contribute to a richer understanding of student learning. https://bit.ly/3fEZGUe