

## **STEPS TO CREATE A SCORING RUBRIC FOR ASSESSING BUSINESS CORRESPONDENCE WRITING**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Scoring rubrics have been used widely in English Language Teaching and Learning. They are invaluable tools that teachers use to communicate expectations, provide focused feedback, grade learners' writing products, and also design the lesson plans. Students also find scoring rubrics helpful because they give a clear picture of what qualities students' work should have. However, creating a great rubric is more than just slapping some expectations on a paper, assigning some percentage points, and calling it a day. A good rubric needs to be designed with care and meticulousness to ensure the reliability and validity of the assessment. In addition, the procedure of creating a scoring rubric consists of a number of steps which should be tailored to the purpose and subject of the rubric. Developing rubrics for the assessment in ESP writing is therefore in some ways different from developing rubrics for the assessment in general English writing, which is because ESP writing is characterized by distinctive features, e.g. different genres' features. This paper will report the whole procedure of creating a scoring rubric that has been being used to assess business correspondence such as letters, emails, or reports, which are written by students of Business English. The paper is for teachers, students or anyone who are interested in developing or evaluating rubrics for ESP writing classes.

**Key words:** assessing writing; scoring rubrics; business correspondence; ESP

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Business Correspondence is a written form of communication in daily business activities and consists of different kinds such as emails, letters, reports, and so on (Ashley, 2003). It has distinctive features, which distinguishes it with other kinds of writing, and therefore enforces certain requirements from students' writing. At English for Specific Purposes (ESP) Department – University of Foreign Language Studies – the University of Danang – our school, Business Correspondence is included as a compulsory module for third-year students of Business English. However, there has not been an appropriate rubric to assess our students' business writing skill although there exists a rubric to grade students' general writing. This paper is aimed at designing a rubric which can assess students' writing skill in business correspondence to ensure fair and detailed marking. In addition to the function of an assessment tool, the desired rubric also acts as not only a communication tool between teachers and students but an approach to enhance students' self-study skills.

## **2. FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE BUSINESS CORRESPONDENCE**

Prior to designing a rubric to assess students' business correspondence, it is essential for the designer to master what an effective letter, email or report looks like.

### ***2.1. Organisation***

First of all, an effective business letter or email must be well-organized no matter what specific purpose or task it addresses. Whether it is a request for information, a response to an inquiry or submission of a proposal, the organisation of the letter must be consistent (Guidoccio, 2017). For example, in a business letter, the first paragraph should mention the purpose of the letter while the remaining paragraphs support this purpose with different points, e.g. qualifications, attributes, features and the last paragraph restates this purpose and clearly outlines the writer's expectations.

### ***2.2. Informativeness, Comprehensiveness and Conciseness***

It is also generally agreed that a good business letter, email or report provides all relevant and accurate information in a clear and concise manner. This is an obvious requirement considering the fact that the reader may have only a few minutes to read. An informative but brief letter will help save readers' time and achieve business goals (Guidoccio, 2017).

### **2.3. *Courtesy***

Again, this will help to achieve business goals and gain readers' sympathy. The tone and language should be appropriate to show respect and honor to the reader.

### **2.4. *Simple but efficient language***

According to Guidoccio (2017), in order for the readers to easily comprehend the message, the letters should be kept simple without ambiguous, stilted expressions, wordy phrases or too many complex sentences. Furthermore, the length of sentences is also pertinent, neither too long or rambling with excessive details nor too short and choppy.

### **2.5. *Appropriate Layout***

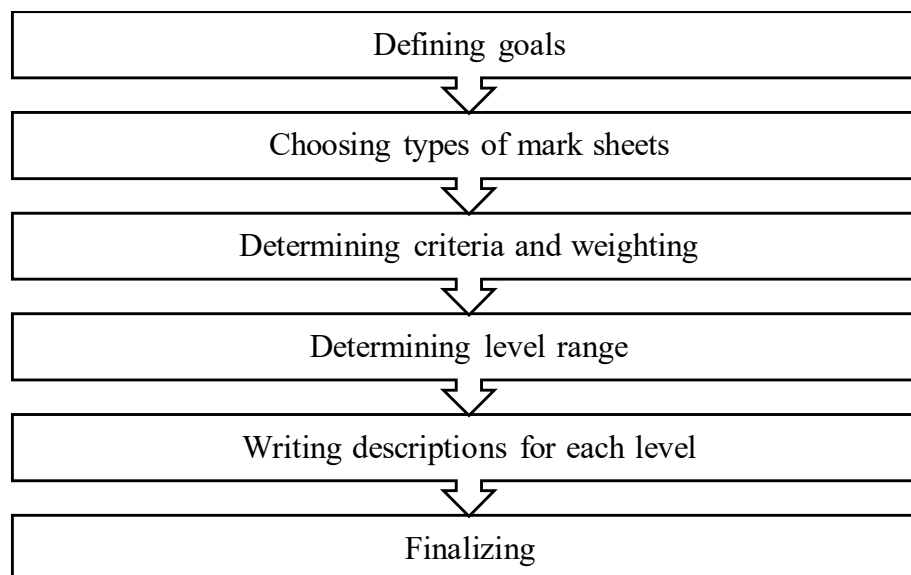
Each business letter, email or report follows the company's format and font requirements. For example, in a block format, the entire letter is left justified and single-spaced, except for a double space between paragraphs, and most business letters include: the date, inside address, salutation, subject line, complimentary closing, signature, enclosures or attachments.

### **2.6. *Accuracy***

Before sending out any business correspondence, the writer needs to proofread it. This useful way helps eliminate any awkward or unnatural language as well as spelling, grammar and punctuation mistakes. The more careful the writer appears, the more appealing the letter is. (Guidoccio 2017)

### **3. STEPS TO DESIGN A RUBRIC TO ASSESS STUDENTS' BUSINESS WRITING**

*Table 1. Steps to create a rubric*



Above is a model to create a rubric which is adapted from Brookhart (2013) and Weigle (2002). This model is employed to create a rubric for the purpose of this paper and the procedure is reported as follows.

#### **3.1. Defining goals**

Prior to creating a rubric, we need to determine its purposes; in other words, who are going to be the users of the rubric and what are they going to use it for? The answers to these questions will regulate what we should include the next steps. In this case, the users will be both teachers and students. Teachers will use the rubric to mark students' work, to provide focused feedback or just to communicate their expectations to students. Students will also use it for their self and peer assessment. Considering this, the rubric that we create needs to be explicit, interpretable, and user-friendly, as suggested by Race (2013, p.38) and Weigle (2002, p.122).

#### **3.2. Choosing the type of mark sheets**

According to Weigle (2002, p.109), the first step in designing a mark sheet is to decide what types of mark sheets will be employed. Based on whether the mark sheet is designed for a specific single writing task or a

group of similar tasks, there are two types of mark sheets namely 'task-specific' (or 'primary trait') and 'general' mark sheets (Weigle 2002, p.109; Brookhart 2013, p. 6-9). Under these two categories, there are two sub-types namely 'holistic' and 'analytic' mark sheets based on whether the script is given a single or multiple scores (Weigle, 2002, p.109; Brookhart 2013, p.6-9). The differences as well as the advantages and disadvantages of each of these types will not be elaborated here due to the space limit. However, in short, a general mark sheet is more preferred than a specific one since it saves time and labor, and it can encourage students to think about how to build general knowledge and skills rather than focusing on finishing individual assignments (Weigle 2002, p.109-110; Brookhart 2013, p.9). As well as this, the analytic approach is more favored than the holistic approach in marking mainly because it provides more useful information about test takers' performance on different aspects of writing, which is helpful for both teachers and learners (Weigle 2002, p.109-110; Klapper 2006, p.267; Brookhart 2013, p.6). As mentioned by Gravestock et al. (2000, p.88), the primary purpose of assessment is to identify students' areas of strength and areas of weakness; in this sense, an analytic approach seems to be more appropriate. Furthermore, an analytic mark sheet is also more reliable and more suitable for inexperienced raters than a holistic one (Weigle 2002, p.109-110; Brookhart 2013, p.6). Therefore, for the purpose of this paper, a general analytic mark sheet will be designed.

### **3.3. Determining criteria and weighting**

After deciding on the type of mark sheet, the next step is to determine the criteria i.e., the aspects of writing to be assessed and how they are weighted. In this paper, these will be conducted with reference to the learning outcomes of the module and the features of business correspondence to ensure the validity of the marking (Race 2013, p.19; Brookhart 2013, p.24). Brookhart (2013, p.24-25) suggests that when choosing criteria for a scoring rubric, the designer need to ask themselves what features of students' work will prove their learning of knowledge or skills stated in the learning outcomes. She also emphasizes that the criteria in a scoring rubric need to be 'appropriate', 'definable', 'observable', 'distinct from each other', 'complete' and 'able to support descriptions' along the cline (Brookhart 2013, p.24-25). For the module of Business correspondence, its main learning outcome is that students should be able to write appropriate different kinds of business correspondence. This

means that genre features should be the main guide for choosing criteria. Considering the mentioned-above features of an effective business correspondence, it can be seen that the main requirement of any business correspondence is the understandability or the ease of reading – which should be attributed to appropriate format and good organization, appropriate contents, and good use of language. Moreover, it should be pointed out that the requirements on the complexity of lexical and grammatical use are not as demanding as those for essay writing considering the target readers. This is because the main purpose of any business correspondence is to provide information in an easy-to-read way, not to show off language ability.

The current rubric will consist of four components namely Appearance, Content, Organization, and Language Use. Under each component there will be different elements to look for in the writing, which are shown in Table 2. Again, these elements are compiled with reference to features of an effective business correspondence and also, to features of an effective writing product in general as exemplified in other rubrics mainly the CEFR scales for writing (Council of Europe: 2001).

With regard to how these components and elements are weighted, for practical reasons these components as well as elements in each component will be weighted equally.

**Table 2. Components of the rubric**

	<b>Components</b>	<b>Subcomponents</b>
1	<b>Appearance</b>	Length
		Layout
		Typography (typefaces, line spacing, letter spacing, use of colors)
2	<b>Contents</b>	
3	<b>Organization</b>	Sequencing of ideas and Use of cohesive devices
		Paragraphing
4	<b>Language Use</b>	Lexical and Grammatical Accuracy

	<b>Components</b>	<b>Subcomponents</b>
		Lexical and Grammatical Range
		Tone

### **3.4. Determining level range**

After deciding on the components of the rubric, the next thing is to determine the range of points of level. This should be decided based on the institution's policy and in our case; therefore, in this case, there will be 10 levels from 0 to 10.

### **3.5. Writing descriptions for each level**

Descriptions for each level will start from the top level and then the other levels along the continuum, as suggested by Brookhart (2013, p.26-27). In most cases, the differences in the levels for each criterion will be about the quantity from complete to none. This can be seen in the example for the criterion 'Content', which is given in Table 3.

*Table 3. Example of performance descriptions for different levels*

0	No submission									
1	Totally irrelevant ideas									
2	Few ideas presented but most ideas irrelevant									
3	A tendency to focus on details									
4	Some ideas presented but not relevant or accurate									
5	Main ideas presented but most ideas not relevant or accurate									
6	Main ideas presented but one or two ideas not relevant or accurate									
7	Main ideas presented but one or two ideas not relevant or accurate									
8	Main ideas presented with relevant and accurate details									
9	Sufficiently developed with accurate information									
10	Fully developed with all accurate information									



As can be seen from Table 3, the main requirements of contents of any business letters, emails or reports include the development of ideas and communicative purposes and the accuracy and relevance of information, which are derived from common features of effective writing product in general and of effective business correspondence in particular. The differences between levels lie in the difference in quantity of irrelevant and inaccurate details (ranging from one or two, a few, some etc.) and in how fully ideas are developed and how clear communicative purposes are presented.

### **3.6. Finalizing**

In this step, drafts will be revised until we have a satisfying version. The policy for overlong answers and plagiarism should also be decided on. It can be observed that in some other rubrics for writing, there is no policy for overlong answers; however, this should be a must in a rubric to assess business correspondence so that students can be fully aware of the importance of the conciseness in writing.

It is decided that mark reduction policy for overlong answer is as follows: 0%-10% - None; 11%-20% - Mark reduced by 10%; 21%-40% - Mark reduced by 20%; >41% - Mark reduced by 30%. Regarding plagiarism, it is suggested that this is based on the institution's policy. In our case, 1 mark will be deducted for every 10% plagiarism.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

This paper has attempted to design a general analytic scoring rubric for business writing tasks which could be used by both teachers and students. The rubric is designed using a model adapted from Brookhart (2013) and Weigle (2002). It includes 4 main components namely Appearance, Content, Organization, and Language Use. It is hoped that this rubric can be of some help for those who are interested in developing or evaluating rubrics for ESP writing classes.

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