



## Using Rubrics to Guide Reflective Writing in Nursing Education

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### Abstract

*Nursing faculty face challenges to use creative learning strategies to help students develop clinical judgment. Reflective writing, with a well-developed descriptive rubric, can enhance students' thinking. Rubrics serve as a guide for both students and faculty for expectations of the written reflection. Reflective writing assignments with specific prompts provide a guided platform for students' thinking regarding clinical experiences. Rubrics used with reflective writing assignments can help faculty provide meaningful feedback. Faculty communication with students, through formative feedback, promotes further clinical judgment growth. Reflective writing rubrics have the potential to provide guidance and faculty feedback for student clinical judgment development.*

**Keywords:** rubrics, reflective writing, nursing education

Reflection, as a learning strategy in higher education, helps students stimulate their thinking. Higher education uses reflective writing to develop critical thinking skills. Nursing faculty frequently use reflective writing post-clinical to assess students' thinking. However, as an assessment of critical thinking, grading reflective writing can be time consuming for educators. Using properly developed rubrics for grading and feedback can help ease this burden but still encourage critical thinking development required for professional students.

In nursing, clinical judgment, similar to critical thinking is as an essential skill for practicing nurses. The National Council of State Boards of Nursing (NCSBN) identifies clinical judgment as the model for learning and encourages nurse educators to incorporate the clinical judgment process in learning activities [1]. Teaching clinical judgment makes the students' thinking processes visible.<sup>1</sup> With use of clinical judgment exercises, faculty are able to respond to the students' thought process. Repeated reflective writing can help nursing students improve clinical judgment and promote professional growth [2].

Best practices of reflective writing include educators using specific instructions, providing guiding questions for focused reflection, and rubrics for feedback [3]. As writing assignments are time consuming for faculty to assess, nurse educators are seeking strategies for feedback facilitation to promote students' deep thinking. Grading reflective writing by faculty requires close reading and conceptual analysis.

Properly developed rubrics with reflective writing can guide students, provide valuable feedback, and develop clinical judgment. As rubrics vary in purpose, creation of reflective writing rubrics requires specific design to achieve the goal of student clinical judgment development. The purpose of this article is to provide nursing faculty best practices for reflective writing assignments and rubric development to enhance students' clinical judgment.

### Best Practices of Rubric Design

Rubrics to assess assignments have been standard educational practice for years. However, not all faculty use rubrics correctly especially when designed to facilitate creative thinking. Rubric design is key in creating a useful student and faculty guide for thinking assessment.

A rubric is a coherent set of criteria for students' work that includes descriptions of levels of performance based on criteria [4]. Rubrics are different from rating scales, which have no performance level descriptions. Rubrics are valuable to students and faculty as they provide structure, feedback, consistency, and fairness. When shared with students, rubrics facilitate self-assessment and help guide work improvement. Using rubrics improves student performance by increasing transparency, reducing anxiety, providing feedback, and supporting self-assessment.

Rubrics are useful for faculty as they clarify performance expectations and provide feedback regarding the

submission for quality improvement [5]. When rubrics are detailed, they provide a reliable assessment of complex performances. The purpose and objectives of the assignment should guide rubric development. Since validity is dependent on the purpose of the assignment, educators should clearly state what they hope to learn and how the students will display these proficiencies. The assignment should have a clear purpose statement and background for the assignment in the instructions. An example of an assignment background and purpose statement are included below:

**Background/Purpose Statement of Guided Reflective Writing Post-Clinical Assignment:** Written reflection provides learners the opportunity to think about experiences, solve problems, and consider alternatives. Clinical judgment is the “interpretation or conclusion about a patient’s needs, concerns, or health problems, and/or the decision to take action (or not), use or modify standard approaches, or improvise new ones as deemed appropriate by the patient’s response” [6]. The purpose of this reflective writing activity is for you as the learner to recap your clinical experience and provide deep insight regarding your interpretation. Detailed examples of reflection are outlined in the accompanying rubric.

Assignment explanation should include examples of good and poor assignment submissions. A quality assignment and rubric are essential for providing the framework for student evaluation. Faculty feedback given on the assignment completes the assignment evaluation and provides students individualized responses.

### Evaluation of Writing with Rubrics

The rubric serves as an instructional tool. In assessment of writing, the rubric provides students with informative feedback about their strengths and improvement opportunities. Writing rubrics should contain varying levels of thinking expectations based on the objectives of the assignment. Rubrics also enrich student learning through self, peer, and faculty assessment.<sup>4</sup> The rubric should concentrate on knowledge acquisition that encourages the students’ involvement in the learning environment. When using a rubric, students should be improving their learning process by evaluating their own learning.

Used as a guide for student writing, the rubric can also guide students and faculty to identify areas of improvement. Rubrics are useful for learning assessment because they contain detailed qualitative descriptions of performance criteria that work well within the process of formative evaluation [3]. In reflective writing assessment, performance criteria should be broad learning targets rather than features of a particular task to allow for greater universality of the rubric’s application. The criteria descriptions should focus on the overall purpose of the assignment as exhibited by students’ thinking versus quantitative matters such as number of sentences, grammar, or punctuation.

As a guide for student writing, rubrics enhance communication between faculty and student regarding assignment expectations and feedback. Rubrics are a way

to provide regular formative feedback [7]. Using the rubric is only the start for providing feedback. Specific comments along with the rubric are useful for continued reflectivity development. The reciprocal written dialogue between faculty and student offers mutual reflection and growth.

### Reflective Writing Assignments in Nursing

The purpose of reflective writing in nursing is to help students organize their thoughts, think about the experiences, and stimulate clinical judgment growth. Reflection allows students to better understand their patients’ problems and prepare themselves for future patient encounters. Reflective writing requires students to generate seemingly higher levels of reflection versus basic journaling.

Specific design for reflective writing assignments are needed to meet course outcomes and promote the students’ ability to think critically about patient care [8]. Frequent reflective writing allows experiences to become part of the learning process. Repetitive reflective writing helps students recognize how they are building a knowledge base on which to base future actions [7]. Assignments must be purposeful with instruction yet avoid a structure that is too formulaic compromising writing authenticity.

Guided prompts, as part of the assignment design, encourage students to deepen their reflection beyond simply reporting the experience. Prompts are specific questions related to the clinical experience that make the students’ thinking visible.<sup>1</sup> Prompt examples in clinical reflection include:

1. Describe what you noticed about your patient immediately.
2. What was the priority of care?
3. How did you support therapeutic communication with your patient?
4. What are other possibilities for supporting this patient?

Providing guidance is important for development of good reflection. Nielsen, Stragnell, & Jester [9] used reflective writing prompts post clinical to assist students in recognizing and developing their clinical judgment. Using repetitive prompts for each writing experience allows the student to develop their reflection and improve their cognitive reasoning in future clinical situations.

Reflective writing guidance by skilled nursing faculty is necessary to support these activities. Faculty foster the growth and development of learners by serving as role models and mentors of nursing practice [7]. Faculty supervising reflection activities need good listening skills, ability to articulate positive expectations, and willingness to share ideas. Faculty should strive to create an environment where learners feel safe to engage in deep reflection, explore new ideas, and expand their thinking. This intentionality is interpreted by the student as genuine

respect, attention, and acceptance. For students to learn from reflection, the activity should be safe, organized, and structured.

## Reflective Writing Rubrics in Nursing

Reflective writing rubrics are learning tools for the student. If used inappropriately, a rubric has the potential to turn a qualitative piece of work into a quantitative analysis. As a quantitative analysis, the focus of the assignment is on items that can be counted or analyzed, such as the number of sentences or APA formatting. With quantitative analysis, there is an overemphasis on content and under emphasis of thinking. Reflective writing rubrics, if truly used as a qualitative assessment, have the potential to be subjective but encourage the thinking process. Recommendations for faculty include not formally grading the reflective writing but reviewing the submission for increasing thought development [8].

Prior to initiating reflective writing assignments, faculty should be trained in the theory, use, and evaluation of reflective writing [9]. Training should include the purpose of the assignment, review of the rubric, and guidelines for grading and feedback. Faculty should be encouraged to use the reflective writing rubric for student learning. In addition, faculty should seek improvement of the rubric for clarity. See Appendix A for faculty guidelines.

Use of rubrics to assess reflective writing after clinical can help the student develop their thinking and conceptualize their experience. Reviewing students' reflective writing allows faculty the opportunity to view students' thinking. Formative evaluation promotes students' self-awareness of performance and encourages self-directed learning. Using reflective writing rubrics to assess clinical judgment provides a realistic approach to guide students' thinking. With rubric use, students should be improving their learning process by evaluating their learning.

As faculty follow up student writing, their questions encourage deep thought about the clinical experience. Feedback from faculty should be prompt and formative. Quality feedback provides students guidance and mentoring.

Smith [10] has provided an example of a reflective writing rubric that focuses on clinical judgment development. The results of Smith's study indicated that using the reflective writing rubric helped the students focus their thought process and prioritize their clinical care. Faculty reported the rubric beneficial for providing clear and concise feedback.

When using reflective writing rubrics, the focus is on the thinking process. Rubrics used in this manner can help organize the students' thinking for clinical judgment development and provide a guide for faculty feedback. Reflective writing rubrics in nursing education have the potential to provide guidance and feedback to the student for clinical judgment development.

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## Appendix A

### Nursing Faculty Guidelines for Qualitative Rubric Development

1. Determine the purpose or objectives of the assignment.
2. Write the instructions for the assignment.
3. Label the content or sections of the rubric. (Ex: Noticing, Interpreting, etc.)
4. Label the proficiency levels of the rubric. (Ex: Exemplary, Accomplished, etc.)
5. Provide detailed examples of the different proficiency levels. Each level should indicate a difference in the assessment.
6. Practice reviewing sample submissions.
7. Compare with other faculty reviewing the same submissions to develop reliability.
8. When reviewing student submissions, provide detailed written feedback to encourage further thought regarding the clinical situation.
9. Seek feedback of two to three students who used the rubric.
10. Use student feedback to improve the rubric and strengthen faculty feedback examples.