

# Ten tips on writing effective rubrics in your materials

**John Hughes** and **Lindsay Clandfield** offer advice on an important skill.

**W**hen using published materials with your students, you've become familiar with the instructions before each exercise that contain phrases such as *work in pairs*, *answer questions to 1 to 8*, *listen and check your answers*, *read the grammar summary on page 100*, *present your group's ideas to the rest of the class*. In materials, these are what writers refer to as the rubrics (also sometimes called 'direction lines'). They tell the teacher and the student what they have to do in order to complete the exercise.

When writing materials for your own lessons, you possibly don't bother

writing rubrics because you know how you are going to use the material in your own lesson. However, you'll need to write rubrics with exercises that students are going to do on their own for self-study, or with in-class materials that you expect other teachers will use.

Writing rubrics is not as straightforward as it might seem. A badly-worded rubric can cause unnecessary confusion and anxiety for your students and other teachers. Rubrics can easily become too long, too vague and too complex; in some cases, they can be more difficult to understand than the actual language being taught in the exercise! Here are

10 tips that will help you write rubrics quickly and effectively.

## 1 Be consistent

Certain types of rubric will be repeated throughout, so be consistent and repeat them. In other words, if you write 'Work in pairs' in one exercise, try to use the same rubric in later exercises rather than changing it to 'Work with another student' or 'Find a partner'. That way students will become used to what is being asked and not spend unnecessary time comprehending the rubric.

## 2 One action per sentence

As a general rule, each sentence should include one action or no more than two. So 'Work in pairs.' is one action. 'Work in pairs and ask each other the questions below' is safe because both actions are simple. However, a rubric like 'Work in pairs and ask each other the questions below and try to use all the words in the previous exercise' suddenly becomes confusing.

## 3 Avoid too many clauses

Following on from the previous tip, if you have a rubric with too many additional clauses, it's often an indication that it's too complex. So a rubric like 'Answer the questions below and then ask your partner any of the questions below which you think are useful to you' includes a





conjunction and a relative clause, and probably needs to be broken down into two separate rubrics.

#### 4 Imperatives in rubrics

Rubrics written for in-class materials are usually aimed at students and teachers so, typically, we write rubrics using imperative forms such as 'Answer the questions', 'Read the article', 'Listen to the interview'. It's quick and easy for the students to understand this style of writing. For certain types of tasks and at a higher level you might vary this approach, but as a general guideline, imperative forms work well.

#### 5 Personalising the rubric

You might vary the approach in the previous tip when writing for students using self-study materials without a teacher. Rubrics with this kind of material often include 'You' a lot more in the rubric to give a more personal and supportive 'voice'. For example, 'When you finish the questions, you can check your answers on page 000'. You might also use this friendlier tone when writing instructions for a teacher in a set of teacher's notes.

#### 6 Shorter than the exercise

When rubrics are longer than the exercise itself, you know something is wrong!

#### 7 Lower than the students' level

If you are writing material for a student at a pre-intermediate (A2) level, then the rubric needs to be written at a level which will not challenge the language level at all. Rubrics are not in the material to test the students' level but to move them quickly onto the main exercise.

#### 8 No more than three sentences

In general, clear rubrics tend to be one or two sentences. You might need to use three sentences for exercises such as role-play tasks rubrics or group work where the task is complex. Here's an example of such a rubric: *Work in groups of three. Plan a holiday using the items in exercise 4. Discuss what you need to take and why.* But this kind of length is the exception rather than the rule.

#### 9 When to write the next rubric

Following on from the previous tip, if you really feel you need four sentences (or even more) in your rubric, this suggests that the exercise needs to be broken down into more stages. For example, this rubric is too long because it's introducing too many stages at once: *Work in groups of three. Plan a holiday using the items in*

*exercise 4. Discuss what you need to take and why. Then present your ideas to another group and compare them.*

In this case, it would be better to introduce the final sentence in the rubric as a new and separate exercise.

#### 10 Pilot the rubric

Finally – and this is true for all materials writing – ask another teacher to check it. So when writing complex rubrics, always test your instructions by giving it to another teacher (or editor). If they don't instantly understand what is expected after reading it once, then rewrite it.



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