## How to Assess EFL Narrative Creative Writing

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### Abstract

Rubrics are one of the most effective ways of assessing creative writing. However, narrative creative writing is often not properly assessed. The reason is that assessing creativity is difficult. The workshop model is usually the most basic component of the creative writing class, where poetry and fiction are shared for peer feedback. Narrative writing is often scored as an 'A' if the assignment is turned in on time. Here, a discussion follows on how the author has graded his creative writing class using analytical rubrics which increased student motivation to write stories. There were two classes and a total of 25 students of CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) level B1 to B2. The literature is lacking in research on how rubrics are used in EFL (English as a foreign language) creative writing contexts. Rubrics allow for feedback to be given to students in a very transparent manner. For example, in this study, the teacher explained the rubric and received feedback on the students' perceptions of the rubric via a Google Form. Rubrics are an exemplary tool for writing assessments. In addition, this paper introduces alternative ways to assess creative writing beyond rubrics. Thus, this paper presents varied ways of grading creative writing, a genre that has traditionally been difficult to assess.

### How to Assess EFL Creative Writing

The creative writing workshop dates to 1936 (Bennett, 2015, p. 16). The workshop is the basic assessment model of the creative writing class. Students sit in a circle and discuss one of their peers' works of art while the writer is silent and the teacher guides the discussion. This model has its critics (Bennet, 2015; Chavez, 2021; Salesses, 2021). Teachers of creative writing desperately need a better approach to assessment. The reason is that assessing creative writing is hard, and often it will not be graded appropriately (Davenport, 2017); at least in this author's own MFA (Master of Fine Arts) program, instructors handed out 'As' as long as the work was turned in on time. Why is assessing creative writing so difficult for teachers? This is perhaps because many teachers do not know how to do it. Before going into assessment, the question of what is good creative writing must be asked. Writing is, in fact, a process, not a destination. According to Nauman et al. (2011), good writing has the following features: "ideas, organization, voice, word choice, sentence fluency, conventions, and presentation" (p. 319). And according to Kohls and Casanave (2023), "everyone seems to agree that good writing is readable, engaging, and accessible, even if the language is complex and even if it deals with complex ideas, and that it is free of gratuitous jargon" (p. xiii). Creative writing, which is the type of writing discussed here, can be seen as different from standard writing. What qualities constitute good creative writing? According to Burroway (2007), "all writing is imaginative" (xxii). Coming back to assessment, what is imagination anyway and can it be quantified? Young (2009) quotes the Oxford English Dictionary, to explain that

imagination is the 'faculty or action of forming ideas or images in the mind; the power of framing new and striking intellectual conceptions; the ability of the mind to be creative or resourceful; poetic genius.' How does the average English teacher measure poetic genius? (p. 74)

Young's question brings up a good point. Is imagination, as poetic genius, ever measurable? This is likely why assessing creative writing, the most imaginative of any writing, is so difficult.

Rodriguez (2008) states that "if creative writing is to be taught at institutions of higher learning, then it must be a specialised field of knowledge with appropriate assessment processes" (p. 167). Such reasoning makes sense as creative writing has existed as a field in limbo between composition studies and English studies for quite some time. But what are these "processes" and which of them are best for EFL students in creative writing? In this paper, a brief overview of rubrics and some of the current assessment practices in creative writing are provided. In addition, the author presents findings from his own classroom regarding the use of rubrics as a formative assessment tool.

## Literature review

## Good Writing for Creative Writing

Nauman et al. (2011) provides three perspectives in approaching whether writing is good or bad. They state that good writing is either (a) "good thinking and communicating," (b) good "structure and clarity;" and (c) good "purpose, voice, and correctness" (pp. 322-324). The best definition of writing this paper's author has found comes from Barnet and Cain's (2012) *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature*, which states that good writing is "getting on to paper some coherent thoughts that are good enough to share with a reader" (p. 2). It is as simple as that. If only grading good writing could be as easy. Good creative writing also requires craft elements, for example an application of characterization through dialogue, action, thought, and description. In addition, a firm sense of setting is needed. Plot is important but it is basically an outcome of good characterization. Characters who have obstacles to achieving their goal make for good stories. Thus, good creative writing will focus on elements of craft as well as being coherent enough to keep the pages turning.

## Creativity

Some scholars believe that creative writing cannot be adequately assessed unless first defining what creativity is (Tung, 2015). Such an endeavor is attempted here: Creativity is about making things better. As the late, preeminent biologist E.O. Wilson (2017) stated that, without creativity in language, literature, and artistic endeavors, "[s]cience and technology would consist of the sharpening of spear points, the knapping of stone axes, and perhaps the piercing of snail shells to thread for necklaces" (p. 181). Thus, creativity is interwoven into everything artistic we do and hope to aspire to as humans.

## **Rubrics**

Rubrics for creative writing are difficult to define and their use is mostly missing in the literature. Rubrics, in general, have taken on some criticism for their use. Some authors believe that rubrics are prone to bias. Bennett (2016) states that "there is no standard definition of assessment or scoring rubrics. Different authors tend to emphasise different aspects depending on the problems they are investigating or the qualities they wish to promote" (p. 52). Segal's (2008) take is more concrete, as she defines "a rubric as an itemized 'assessment tool' designed to measure a student's prowess in completing particular academic tasks" (p. B28). Bennett quotes Jonsson and Svingby (2007) in order to "define educational rubrics as 'a scoring tool for qualitative rating of authentic or complex student work" (p. 131). Bennett's work is highly critical of rubrics in higher education because they can often be too subjective. Some of his arguments are very insightful. For example, regarding markers of rubrics, he quotes Sadler (2009, p. 165) when stating that

markers are not usually concerned with how students performed on individual criteria but on 'how the work comes together as a whole'. They tend to assess individual criteria 'retrospectively and, in many cases, creatively'. Indeed, if performed literally, marking to the rubric would be extremely labour-intensive and time-consuming. (Bennett, 2016, p. 55)

Bennett's comments seem to make all rubrics invalid, at least removing some of the objectivity that drives why we use rubrics in the first place. Much of Bennett's article on rubrics is damning, and as a final word from him, we see how he gets straight to the point: "Rubrics reduce and simplify complex processes for the purpose of evaluation, and in doing so trade richness, complexity and difference for efficiency, consistency and convenience" (p. 57). As Bennett sees it, rubrics are too simplistic an assessment tool for a field such as creative writing.

Another study is critical of rubrics. D'Souza (2021) conducted an analysis of 1,796 papers between 2000 and 2020 on the assessment of creativity in narrative writing. He found several important features of how rubrics have been used in grading creative writing. In many studies, rubrics are flawed in the following ways: they give "equal emphasis" to criteria where "nuances" abound; they are "highly influenced by political agendas;" "few studies have identified characteristics for creativity in writing." They conclude that more research is needed before a framework of assessment can be developed(p. 8). Although creative writing rubrics are abundant, there has been little progress in their refinement and development as creative writing program numbers have surged in the past few decades. However, the majority of the research points to rubrics as an essential assessment option for creative writing.

Young (2009) asks if "imagination [is] just an ephemeral wind that blows through the classroom and the minds of our students at will, or can teachers identify components and teach imaginative and creative thought processes?" (p. 74). Young states that yes, we can. She also brings up an important point of why rubrics are necessary in the creative writing classroom. They make what is expected creatively apparent to the student. She goes on:

The purpose of using a rubric and criteria is not to put imagination and creativity in a box but to create a framework so that students and teachers can discuss, explore, and discover the limitless possibilities inherent in creatively imagining. The paradoxical nature of using rubrics to assess that which is admittedly often not assessable speaks to the complexity of the teaching/learning experience. (p. 76)

Thus, for creative writing teachers, rubrics can be seen as a necessary evil to judge what cannot be judged for the sake of judgment alone. But judgment is needed. Young's (2009) most important contribution to how to use rubrics in creative writing is about developing criteria and creating rubrics for creativity (see Appendix A). However, it is difficult to apply this rubric to EFL students in the creative writing class, so the author of this paper has modified it for his teaching contexts, as will be discussed later. Lastly, Young states that "developing rubrics that provide growth in creative thinking may more effectively align problem-solving activities, imaginative research projects, performance events, and artistic representation with state standards and higher-order thinking" (p. 79). Young's take on rubrics is at direct odds with Bennett's, and more in line with the opinion of this paper's author. Others have attempted rubrics for creative writing.

Carey et al. (2021) developed a creative writing rubric (see Appendix B) and evaluated it compared to an Australian writing assessment standard (NAPLAN). Their 10-week project was quite scientific and used statistical analyses to find strong reliability and validity in the rubric. Student writing improved when using the rubric for creative writing, which privileged craft-based approaches to imaginative writing. In addition, Rodriguez (2008) developed a creative writing rubric (not shown) composed of 10 questions, for example, "Is the plot open or closed? ... If it's open, is there an epiphany, even if it's ambiguous?" (p. 174). Such specific questions allow the teacher to explicitly state what the students need to know when writing their stories. Furthermore, Vaezi and Rezaei (2019) created a rubric for creative writing (not shown) with nine

criteria. It was also tested for interrater and intrarater reliability. Regarding the use of rubrics and the reasoning behind creating their own, they state that such

rubrics, if designed properly, can also pay major contributions to objective, valid, and reliable assessment of students' creative works. Clarifying grading criteria minimises the subjectivity involved in the assessment of creativity, reduces the marking time, increases the transparency of assessment, and improves the consistency with which students' writings are evaluated. Students will also accept the fairness of their teachers' judgments and become less critical of their scores when they are informed that all of the students'

creative artefacts are measured equitably against a common set of standards. (p. 311) Rubrics are an important part of assessment, and there are numerous benefits. The fact that students can accept the "fairness" of them and that rubrics clarify grading for students, makes them indispensable. Feldman (2019) explains how rubrics make a "grade transparent and understandable.... Every student can know her grade at any time and know exactly how to get the grade she wants" (p. 192). This is empowering to students. Therefore, rubrics are the obvious solution when it comes to the question of how to assess creative writing. However, this study also briefly discusses other forms of assessment that may be applicable to creative writing, as described below.

## Storyboard task

Storyboards are images of action in a film in a particular sequence. Taylor etal. (2020) "assess creative writing using the storyboard task, a new assessment approach designed to elicit a narrative structure based on the integration of visual information, mirroring the way that narratives are constructed in daily life" (p. 478). They found that there is a correlation between effort, defined as time on task, and creativity. Although their study was quite scientific involving several statistical analyses, the method in how they carried out the tasks can be illustrative to EFL creative writing teachers seeking alternative assessment practices, as "perseverance" is known as one of the "contributing factors for successful creative writing" (Taylor et al., p. 476). *Creative Narrative Assessment* 

Bailey and Bizarro (2017) show how an alternative approach to assessment using creative narratives themselves as assessment data. They conducted a study with 57 participants and analyzed 57 creative pieces for identification, metaphors and images. They then created characters for a novel from the data set as representations of a more "aesthetic approach that uses

the students' creative efforts in the researchers' artistic process" (p. 82). Furthermore, they argue "that reports of data in aesthetic forms—that is, aesthetic renderings of/responses to findings are a legitimate mode of research, especially in creative writing" (p. 93). This approach is similar to some Ph.D. creative writing programs which require a creative work of art and a corresponding thesis highlighting how the creative piece exhibits various qualities. Although the study as is would not be feasible for EFL students, using students' work in a portfolio-style rendering of data would be an alternative way to assess creative writing.

### Think-aloud protocol

Beck et al. (2015) describes a method long used in composition research as an alternative method of writing assessment. The think-aloud protocol (TAP) requires students to "think aloud" while they write for thirty minutes. "As the student writes, the teacher listens to what the student says aloud, observes the student's composing process, and takes notes on a record-keeping sheet that prompts him or her to attend to certain features of writing in general" (Beck et al., 2015, p. 671). In Beck et al.'s study, participants were high school students. The TAP Assessment was found to

help teachers attend to characteristics of students as writers in precise ways not clouded by their holistic impressions of students as learners or speakers of English or by the degree to which they perceive students as intelligent, persistent or well-behaved. (p. 675)

Beck et al.'s study did not measure university students nor in a creative writing context; however, as an alternative to rubrics, it is an interesting assessment method worth investigating further in creative writing contexts because attention is paid to the writer's thought processes when trying to incorporate elements of craft characterization, such as dialogue, action, and thought.

## **Teaching context**

The author of this paper works in a major foreign language university in central Japan. The students were, according to the author's own evaluation, at a CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference) level B1 to B2, which is at an intermediate level of English. This study consisted of 25 students in an Advanced Writing course, which is a third-year writing course offered in various genres. None of the students had had creative writing classes previously. However, all of the students had taken two years of academic English writing courses by the time they enrolled. The various genres offered to students included business writing, thesis writing, journalism, and general topic writing; the authortaught creative writing. The lessons were 90 minutes each, and there were 15 lessons per semester. For the 2023-2024 school year,

the focus of this study, creative nonfiction was taught first semester and fiction writing was taught second semester.

## Method and survey results

The goal of the study was to assess the rubrics and other assessments being used in the second semester of 2023-2024 in order to find weaknesses and flaws and to fix them. This was facilitated by student input. Before explaining the assessments, some background is provided here. The class was divided into 15 weeks and was based on Janet Burroway's *Writing Fiction* (2015) text (see Table 1). During weeks 8 and 15, short stories were due. A short critical essay was due week 15. The two short stories and the critical essay were the major assignments for the class. Google Classroom was the lesson management system. Figure 1 shows the assignment for a short story.

## Table 1: 15-week course schedule

Week	Lesson topic
1	Orientation
2	What is fiction?
3	Showing and telling
4	Characterization: Description
5	Characterization: Dialogue
6	Characterization: Action
7	Characterization: Thought
8	Workshop 1
9	Setting
10	Point of view
11	Conflict

12	Plot
13	Workshop 2

- 14 Theme
- 15 Course reflection

Figure 1:Assignment for one of the short stories

E Short Story 1	Draft
<ul> <li>Due Nov 9</li> <li>Write a short story that is at least 800 words</li> <li>Focus on the Gotham Writer's Character questionnaire to develop your character</li> <li>Use what we learned in class about Show and Tell and Characterization</li> <li>Be sure to write at least two in-class drafts of your story to show me (separate assignments)</li> <li>Proofread your story to check for any misspellings or grammar mistakes</li> </ul>	
Rubric: 6 criteria • 30 pts	

The purpose of this study, already briefly described, was to revise the past rubrics and create new rubrics based on the findings in the research. Participants of the study were asked to examine the rubrics and decide if there was anything that they would like to change. Finally, Young's (2009) rubric on measuring creative thinking (see Appendix A) was modified for this study (see Table 2).

Table 2. A modified version of Young's (2009) rubric for creative thinking.

Short Story Rubric							
	Using effectively	Developing	Emerging				

	5 points	4 points	3 points	
Craft				
Does the author show				
awareness of craft				
elements?				
Characterization				
Is there character				
development?				
Originality				
Is the story novel				
(new)?				
Word count and				
timeliness				
Is the story at least				
800 words? Was it				
submitted on time?				
Drafts				
Were in-class drafts				
completed?				
Workshop				
Does the author				
discuss their work in				
the workshop?				

The revised rubric was handed out to students and each criterion was explained. Students were then instructed to go to a Google Form and participate in the study by answering the questions (see Appendix C). Twenty-five of 30 students agreed to participate in this study. The first questions asked whether the students understood the criteria. Results were between 76% and

96%. The next section asked if the students agreed with the points assigned to the rubric and the minimum word count. A Likert scale was used and the results were 96% and 80% in favor (=5), respectively. The following section asked students if they thought they would work harder after having knowledge of the rubric. 91.7% of the students said that they would now work harder on the story compared to 8.3% saying "I'm not sure." Students who said they would work harder mentioned that knowing what was clearly expected of them gave them more motivation to complete the assignments. None said that they would not work as hard. Then, students were asked about their opinion on having a rubric for a short story. One student wrote that

I would say having a rubric is more fair than using a different way like teacher's original grading way since the second one have a possibility to occur a serious problem which teachers change grades depending on their mood that day and on the pupil's likes and dislikes. (original quote, unedited)

Another wrote that "It makes easier to write my short story as I can know what I should include." Writing stories is difficult, especially in one's L2, so anything that makes it easier for the student is invaluable in the creative writing classroom.

They were then asked if they thought the rubric was fair and, based on their answer, to explain. 20% of students gave it a 4 (1 to 5 scale) and 80% of students gave it a 5. Their explanations were similar to the earlier question on their opinion of rubrics. Mainly, the judging with the rubric was fair and easy to understand.

#### Discussion

There are many ways to assess creative writing, but the best way to do so is with rubrics. In essence, they are fair and simple. The results of this study show that rubrics, when clearly explained to students, can inspire them to work harder. By using rubrics we can improve student motivation. Another important part of assessment is grade transparency. In this study, nearly all of the students stated in the survey that they could understand the criteria. Therefore, each student knew how to get the grade they wanted.

One of the more interesting parts of the rubric was that the minimal score to be achieved was a 'B'. This is in part to extend equity to students who may have difficulty writing a story from scratch. Even though students were required to create three drafts, some students felt uncomfortable being graded on their first story. Letting the students rest assured that the lowest

score they would achieve on their paper would be a 'B' could have helped them focus on the task at hand, which was writing.

Based on the feedback of the surveys, the rubric was slightly edited (see Appendix D). More specific information was put into the rubric for each of the criteria since a couple of the questions regarding comprehension of rubric criteria had results not as high as the others.

In conclusion, rubrics of the type described here should be used in EFL creative writing classes. The reason is that they are based on quality research and can be clearly explained to students, resulting in grade transparency and increased student motivation.

## Limitations and future considerations

The literature review for creative writing assessment was quite limited due to the dearth of research in EFL creative writing assessment. A more thorough study on rubrics in EFL with a larger participation should be conducted to look more closely at student motivation. A future study comparing analytic and holistic rubrics in EFL creative writing should be conducted since there are no studies in this area. Finally, it is the hope of this author that future research will focus on the area of creative writing in EFL since it is a growing area of instruction in Japan and worldwide.

## **BIO DATA:**

Camilo Villanueva is an EFL lecturer at the Nagoya University of Foreign Studies. He has a BA in Anthropology from Emory, and MFA in Creative Writing from Concordia-St.Paul and a DA in English Pedagogy in progress at Murray State.

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Appendix A:Rubric for Creative Thinking; from Young (2009, p. 78).

Attributes to Stimulate Creativity	Using Attribute Effectively	Developing Attribute	Emerging Attribute
<ul> <li><u>Intellectual Skills:</u></li> <li>Using conventional and nonconventional modes of thinking</li> <li>In-depth analysis evident</li> <li>Recognizes ideas worth pursuing</li> </ul>			
<ul> <li>Knowledge:</li> <li>Gaining knowledge and understanding of subject</li> <li>Effectively interprets information</li> <li>Innovative use</li> </ul>			
<ul> <li><u>Thinking Styles:</u></li> <li>Recognizes important questions and topics</li> <li>Good use of new ideas or a new approach</li> <li>Questions and analyzes assumptions</li> </ul>			
<ul> <li><u>Creative Functioning:</u></li> <li>Working to overcome obstacles</li> <li>Tolerates ambiguity</li> <li>Taking reasonable risks</li> <li>Taking responsibility for ups and</li> </ul>			

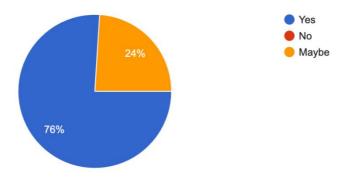
downs in process		
<ul> <li><u>Motivation:</u></li> <li>Focus on purpose of project rather than grade</li> <li>Demonstrating interest in project/process developing personal angle for project</li> <li>Working to "sell" conclusions and ideas</li> </ul>		
<ul> <li><u>Use of Resources:</u></li> <li>Using a variety of resources</li> <li>Collaborates, discusses ideas with teachers/peers</li> <li>Uses feedback both positive and negative</li> </ul>		

Appendix B:Creative writing rubric task criteria by Carey et al. (2022, p. 45).

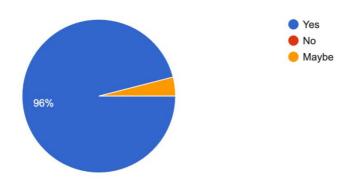
- 1. Moving through time and space—reflects an evaluation of how the narrative holds together and how overall plot logic unfolds, taking into account the use of conflict to hook readers and whether the piece is a good fit for its target audience.
- Words, sentences, and voice—reflects an assessment of vocabulary choice and "voice" of the writer. Consideration is given to the use of metaphors and symbolism as well as whether the author is conscious of aspects of unintentional overwriting or lazy writing. It considers whether aspects of elision and silence are used effectively.
- 3. Those who speak: characters and context—reflects the way the author uses setting to support/reflect underlying themes, whether dialogue serves to reveal characters and relationships and to move the plot along, as well as how point of view is used.
- 4. Creativity/innovation/research—reflects a response to the new or innovative in the piece—to techniques or ideas that "hook" the reader.
- 5. Structural elements and presentation—reflects the control of structural elements such as spelling, grammar, punctuation, paragraphing, and formatting.

Appendix C:Results of questionnaire to students about revised rubric.

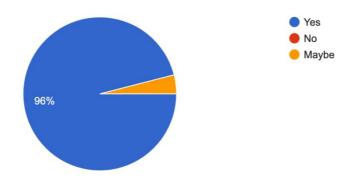
Do you understand what is expected of you in the 'Craft' section? <sup>25</sup> responses



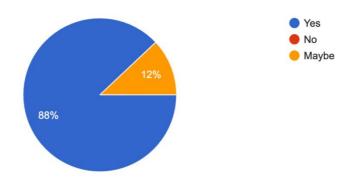
Do you understand what is expected of you in the 'Characterization' section? <sup>25</sup> responses



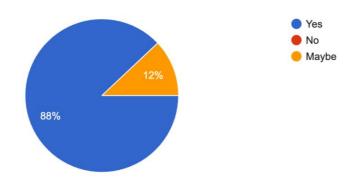
Do you understand what is expected of you in the 'Originality' section? <sup>25</sup> responses



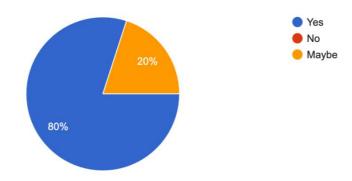
Do you understand what is expected of you in the 'Word count and Timeliness' section? <sup>25</sup> responses



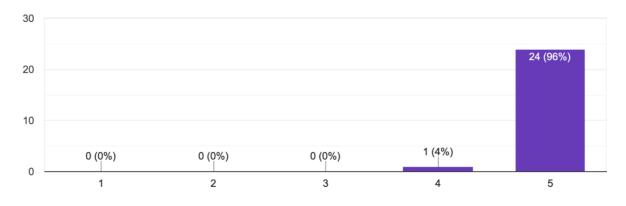
Do you understand what is expected of you in the 'Drafts' section? <sup>25</sup> responses



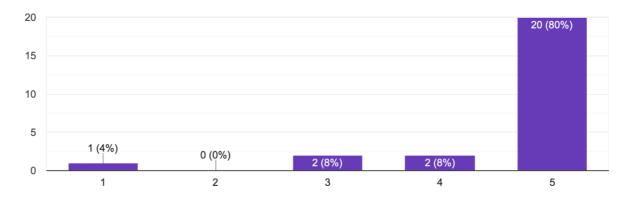
Do you understand what is expected of you in the 'Workshop' section? <sup>25</sup> responses



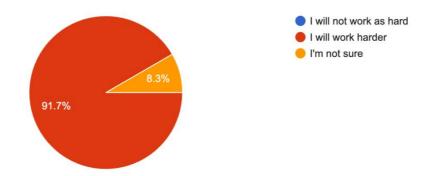
# Do you agree with the points assigned? 25 responses



Do you agree with the word count assigned? <sup>25</sup> responses



Do you think that now you will work harder on your story? 24 responses



What is your opinion on having a rubric for your short story? Would you prefer the teacher grades a different way?

18 responses

I prefer having a rubric for my story.

Good ways.

I think the rubric is good, so I wouldn't want to change the grades.

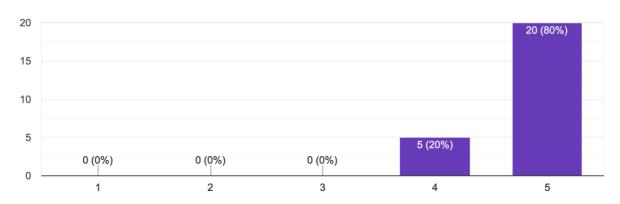
I think this is necessary to create a good short story.

I would say having a rubric is more fair than using a different way like teacher's original grading way since the second one have a possibility to occur a serious problem which teachers change grades depending on their mood that day and on the pupil's likes and dislikes.

I think this is the way to go.

It makes easier to write my short story as I can know what I should include.

I think the rubric can help me understand what I have to do when I write a story. I don't think I want different way, cause this rubric doesn't judge the story or the idea and give lots of freedom to writer.



## Do you think this rubric is fair? 25 responses

## Why or why not?

#### 21 responses

There is deadline that makes fair for everyone.

Because all classmate learned characterization, so our knowledge of making story is mostly same I think.

I thought it was a reasonable scoring standard.

I think no problem

Because we all have the same rubric.

Because I've never felt unfair in this evaluation before.

I can understand where is my good points or bad points in my story.

Easy to understand

Because it's clearly tell us the standard.

## Appendix D:Revised rubric for assessing creative writing

## Craft

Does the author show awareness of craft elements?

A+	5 pts	А	4 pts	В	3.5 pts
Using effective don't tell" and "description" we throughout the	ere used	story exhib don't tell" a		the story e don't tell"	few if any of exhibited "show nor utilized re" elements

## Characterization

Is there character development?

A+	5 pts	А	4 pts	В	3.5 pts
Using effectively; t "Gotham Writer's Character Question completed for at le one character; cha shows a diverse ra characteristics.	nnaire" east racter	for at least character s		Writer's C Question complete does not	; "Gotham haracter naire" was not d; character show a diverse characteristics.

## Originality

Is the story novel (new)?

A+	5 pts	Α	4 pts	В	3.5 pts
Using effectively story shows muc originality; there beginning, a mid an end.	ch is a	Developing; shows som there is a be middle, and	e originality; eginning, a	not show originality scene, wit	; it may just be a

## Word count and Timeliness

Is the story at least 800 words? Was it submitted on time?

A+	5 pts	А	4 pts	В	3.5 pts
Using effective at least 800 wo		Developing; least 500 w	-	Emerging; s than 500 w	story is less ords.

## Drafts

Were in-class drafts completed?

A+	5 pts	А	4 pts	В	3.5 pts
Using effective drafts were co		Developing completed	; one draft was	Emerging complete	; no drafts were d.

## Workshop

Does the author discuss their work in the workshop?

A+	5 pts	А	4 pts	В	3.5 pts
Using effective is able to discu story in detail.			j; author gives ils, but remains nt.	Emerging silent.	; author remains