

# READING, WRITING, *and* RUBRICS

**NORMING PROCESS GUIDES TEACHERS AS THEY EVALUATE  
STUDENT WORK**

**By Libby Baker, Naomi Cooperman, and Barbara Storandt**

**C**ommon Core State Standards are raising expectations nationwide about what teachers impart to their students and the depth of knowledge those students attain. The goal is for students to receive instruction that enables them to synthesize and creatively use what they have learned, thus equipping them for post-secondary school challenges. Quality curriculum and teaching are essential elements in this equation. Meaningful assessment is another critical component.

Well-designed and implemented assessments don't just verify success — they help achieve it. Common Core-aligned assessments are anticipated to go deeper than before, from tests that predominantly rely on short-answer “bubble” items to performance tasks that measure higher-order thinking. Beyond that, the best assessments are a feedback tool for teachers, supplying information needed for modifying instruction to more closely address student needs.

What does it take for teachers to make the most of





these new tests? In addition to needing skills for developing more in-depth assessments, teachers must know how to take advantage of the data they provide. This calls for the ability to analyze students' more complex work, which requires a mental model of multiple levels of student performance ranging from well below to well above the standard. This mental model is a foundation for establishing expectations and identifying learning gaps as well as gaps in instruction upon which the assessment is based.

#### **NORMING, SCORING, AND CALIBRATING**

The key to helping teachers grow in their ability to properly evaluate and respond to student work is through norming, scoring, and calibrating. The terms “norming,” “scoring,” and “calibrating” refer to developing a common understanding of what is expected in terms of student performance according to a common reference. That encompasses a uniform assignment, performance task, or test and a guide to what the student answer or performance should contain, otherwise known as a rubric.

Norming is when teachers align their scoring so that every member of the team applies the rubric consistently across students and teachers score consistently with one another.

Calibrating takes the process one step further by asking teachers to align their scoring with that of an expert. Anchor papers are the yardstick for scoring. They are scored in advance by expert educators and serve as models that clarify expectations and interpretation of the rubric.

Through this process, teachers establish a common understanding of the student work they are scoring as well as what the scores reveal. Having similar scoring and uniform expectations of student work is essential for teachers to make meaningful comparisons among students.

#### **PUTTING NORMS TO WORK**

One genre-based writing program for middle school offers important lessons for expanding teachers' assessment capabilities through professional learning. The program, called Writing Matters, is built around a clear road map of

rigorous lessons aligned with the Common Core.

The program was developed by Teaching Matters, a non-profit organization focused on increasing teacher effectiveness. Naomi Cooperman and Libby Baker are members of the Teaching Matters team that designed and piloted the curriculum and developed teacher institutes and scoring conferences. Barbara Storandt, an external evaluator responsible for measuring the program's effectiveness, also contributed to the design of the scoring conference and analyzed results.

Writing Matters was first introduced in about a dozen New York City middle schools in 2006, growing over the years to full implementation in about 65 schools per year. Schools ranged from small (fewer than 300 students) to large (more than 1,000 students). As is typical of urban schools, these sites are characterized by high numbers of students qualifying for free lunch, high proportions of English language learners, and high numbers of teachers with less than five years of experience.

As with any instruction, the road map can go only so far. In early iterations, student outcomes from exposure to the Common Core-aligned program didn't produce robust positive outcomes.

Teachers especially needed support with scoring student writing. Some teachers didn't respond to the work in as detailed and specific a way as necessary for students to attain the new standards. Their deficit might have been a knowledge gap because they didn't fully understand what they should have been looking for in student work, or their overall expectations were too low, or their scoring was on a relative basis, comparing peers instead of evaluating the work against a more universal standard. Other teachers weren't scoring the writing at all or as often as needed. That might have been a time management problem or a lack of commitment.

With this in mind, Teaching Matters refined the program, combining a cohesive, research-based curriculum with a detailed assessment and coaching regime. As a result, teachers got better information from students' work and were able to adjust instruction accordingly. A 2011-12 evaluation showed that students in Writing Matters schools made substantial gains in their writing, matching those of comparison students in schools with

fewer challenges. In contrast, students with similar baseline performance levels in comparison schools declined at some schools and made similar gains overall, even though these schools had fewer challenges.

### WHAT NORMING LOOKS LIKE

To develop a protocol for norming and scoring, Teaching Matters followed the lead of national organizations such as the National Writing Project (P. LeMahieu, personal communication, June 16, 2010; Swain & LeMahieu, 2012) and Educational Testing Service (C. McClellan, personal communication, February 23, 2011).

Required materials for a norming session include:

- Anchor papers (recommended).
- Practice papers.
- Additional copies of blank rubrics for participants to score on.

### The norming and scoring process has seven steps.

1. **Review the process.**
  - Discuss the value of norming and scoring.
  - Emphasize that measurement is only useful if scoring is consistent.
2. **Discuss the prompt.**
  - Read the prompt or discuss the task that students were assigned.
3. **Review the rubric.**
  - Review dimension definitions.
  - Identify components within each dimension.
4. **Review the anchor papers.**
  - Read anchor papers.
  - Review commentary on anchor papers in order to fully understand scoring.
5. **Score practice papers.**
  - Read a practice paper.
  - Score paper independently using rubric.
6. **Compare scores and discuss.**
  - Discuss impressions of student work.
  - Compare teacher scores.
7. **Compare scores to expert.**
  - Compare teacher scores to expert scores.
  - If discrepant, refer to rubric and anchor papers for insight.
  - Repeat scoring practice papers and comparing scores until high level of agreement is reached.

### TEACHER LEARNING AND SUPPORT

Norming and scoring of student work serves two purposes. In addition to evaluating student mastery, it serves as a valuable form of professional learning. Teachers deepen their understanding of the characteristics of good writing as expressed in the Common Core State Standards and how students' mastery

### NORMING TIP

It is important to revisit the norming process frequently. Norming brings teachers' scoring into calibration, but the passage of time can gradually bring teachers out of calibration. To ensure calibration, insert scored anchor papers into the pile of work to be scored. Teachers rate these papers without knowing that they are there. By comparing teachers' scores to the expert scores, it is possible check for ongoing calibration to assure reliability (C. McClellan, 2010, personal communication, February 23, 2011).

evolves over time. Equally important, they develop shared vocabulary and expectations (Swain & LeMahieu, 2012; P. LeMahieu, personal communication, June 16, 2010). Calibration provides much-needed feedback that allows the team to plan additional teacher support.

One teacher in the Writing Matters program reported: “We really appreciated having a coach to walk us through the scoring and assessment process using an analytic rubric since we had never really used one before. That gave me more confidence in using the rubric because I had a better understanding of what the dimensions meant and what evidence could be used to support each dimension.”

A teacher from the school with the highest writing gains said: “Norming and calibration really enhanced my understanding of the rubrics and the process of getting the data we looked at together in our groups.”

An independent external evaluation of Writing Matters showed that norming and scoring helped teachers overcome typical assessment challenges such as understanding the value of assessment, inconsistent scoring, and resistance to data (Datnow, Park, & Kennedy-Lewis, 2012).

#### Key outcomes include:

- Teachers who participated in norming and scoring became more consistent assessors.
- Teachers became more insightful as diagnosticians and instructional decision makers. Data resulting from the analysis of student work informed teachers’ next-step conversations in their English language arts teams.
- Teachers developed a richer common vocabulary about data and assessment as a result of participation in norming, scoring, and calibration. Through scoring in groups, teachers learned how to evaluate, discuss, and grade student work. Teachers in one school had never used analytic rubrics before Writing Matters coaching.
- Scoring the work increased teacher buy-in of assessment data. Norming and scoring were especially important for revealing how teachers, especially those who may not have completely bought into the process, could more accurately and systematically view student work and sustain these changes. One teacher reported: “I feel like the teachers in my group reflected more honestly about what’s going on in the classroom because everything was transparent up until that point. We were all using the same lessons, assessments, and rubrics. There was less guessing and hoping because we were more systematic and aware of what was actually being done. By talking about data, we stayed more focused on what we were doing and why.”
- Overall, alignment within the program — materials, assessments and scoring procedures — facilitated discussion

about instructional action focused on expectations related to Common Core. One teacher said: “It was so much easier to manage individual student progress when we used common assessments, the same rubric, and trackers to follow students. In our team meetings, we knew everyone would be on the same page, and we could take it further to talk about which kids were struggling and why and what we could do about it.”

#### ROLE IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Norming and scoring need to be foundational elements of schoolwide and districtwide professional learning plans. These practices facilitate teacher reflection and collaboration around learning and teaching, both of which are key to improving instruction regardless of the subject area being taught.

Norming and scoring also increase teachers’ data literacy — a necessary but assumed competency with the Common Core transition. Since most teachers typically don’t receive preparation, training, or support in this area, job-embedded norming and scoring fill a critical gap.

A consistent and feasible system for incorporating this process in schools is needed, but many schools aren’t yet ready to take up this additional demand. Successful implementation requires significant teacher training as well as structures and time to do this work. It can be done, however, by starting small and using existing models as a start. The results in terms of habits of mind, practice, and student success are worth the effort.

#### REFERENCES

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For more information on Writing Matters, visit [www.teachingmatters.org](http://www.teachingmatters.org).