

UMUC - The Graduate School (TGS) COMMUNICATION Rubric Overview (Written Only) Rubric

Learning Goal: You can communicate clearly, both orally and in writing, and meet expectations for content, organization, purpose, audience, and format.

This rubric is designed to assist you in understanding the *essentials of communication* in all of your studies. The rubric contains

- Seven to eight competencies, listed as headings, numbered 1, 2, 3 ... that are the knowledge and skills identified as critical to successful performance.
- Under each competency are descriptors, numbered as 1.1, 1.2, 2.1, 2.2, etc., which are the steps involved in achieving the competency.
- Presented with both competencies and descriptors are explanations of each and additional resources that you may reference to refresh or deepen your understanding of the concepts related to each.

The competencies presented in this rubric are the foundation for all effective writing and oral communication. Become familiar with the rubric and use it as a quick reference guide to assist you in your writing and oral communication assignments.

The rubric will also be used to evaluate communication in assignments for which the deliverable is largely written or oral in format. Examples of such assignments include, but are not limited to, essays, research papers, reports, memos, and speeches. As you advance through your studies, you may be required to explore different styles and other forms of writing and oral communication to broaden your experience. These advanced skills will be “additional layers” that will build upon the strong essentials presented in this rubric.

How the Rubric Works

The underlying premise in all graduate work is that strong communication skills are the means to having good ideas recognized, but they cannot compensate for poor ideas. High expectations are held **for both** communication skills and ideas.

This rubric may be used to evaluate communication alone or in combination with other criteria, most often discipline content or the issues or ideas that you’ve been asked to consider in your written or oral work. When evaluating work, your instructor will review each descriptor and indicate your level of progress. In addition to any comments annotated directly in your submissions, your instructor may also enter comments in the rubric next to a descriptor. This process of combining rubric notations and direct annotations provides you with feedback that you can apply to future work. Based on the instructor’s responses, the rubric will present a final Overall Score categorization of *Highly Proficient*, *Proficient* or *Low/No Proficiency*.

When the rubric is being used only to evaluate the essential communication competencies and *is not* being considered with other criteria or content, your instructor will “convert” the rubric Overall Score to a UMUC numeric grade for the class assignment according to the following table. This is the grade that will appear in the Gradebook.

Communications Score	TGS Grade Equivalent
Highly Proficient	90-100% (Excellent)
Proficient	80-89% (Good)
Low/No Proficiency	79% or below (Below Standards or Failure)

If the Overall Score for communications *is* being considered in combination with discipline content, as specified by your Instructor, the following guidelines apply. Your instructor will assign a grade to the Gradebook within the appropriate numerical range.

Communications Score	Content Score	Combined Overall Score	TGS Grade Equivalent
Highly Proficient	Highly Proficient	Highly Proficient	90-100% (Excellent)
Highly Proficient	Proficient	Proficient	80-89% (Good)
Highly Proficient	Low/No Proficiency	Low/No Proficiency	79% or below (Below Standards or Failure)
Proficient	Highly Proficient	Highly Proficient	90-100% (Excellent)
Proficient	Proficient	Proficient	80-89% (Good)
Proficient	Low/No Proficiency	Low/No Proficiency	79% or below (Below Standards or Failure)
Low/No Proficiency	Highly Proficient	Low/No Proficiency	
Low/No Proficiency	Proficient	Low/No Proficiency	
Low/No Proficiency	Low/No Proficiency	Low/No Proficiency	

Note that the table above illustrates the emphasis placed on good writing and good content – you must have both to succeed.

The Graduate School provides general tutoring in writing. If you cannot locate information about these services in your class, please contact Dr. Sarah Rothschild at sarah.rothschild@umuc.edu for more information.

UMUC THE GRADUATE SCHOOL (TGS) COMMUNICATIONS UBRIC

Communications Evaluation Criteria		Highly Proficient	Proficient	Low/ No Proficiency
1. <i>Organize</i> document or presentation clearly in a manner that promotes understanding. See: Organizing an Essay				
	1.1 <i>Present</i> material in clear and/or logical order appropriate to task. Explanation: The appropriate place for your statement of purpose or the thesis statement is toward the end of the introductory paragraph. If your thesis includes three points, you need to discuss those three points in the essay or speech in the order you've indicated. See: Organizing the Essay	☐	☐	☐
	1.2 <i>Articulate</i> thesis and purpose clearly. Explanation: Ideally, the statement of purpose/thesis contains a blueprint for the information or argument to come. That is to say, if you're going to present reasons in your essay or speech why cats make great pets, your thesis statement should read something like "Cats make great pets because they're hilarious, they're cuddly, and they're very low maintenance." See: Thesis Statements	☐	☐	☐

	1.3 Support thesis and purpose fully. Explanation: No portion of the thesis statement or statement of purpose should go unsupported; by the end of the document or presentation, you should have explained or argued each element of the thesis/statement of purpose. For example, if your thesis promises the three cat-supporting reasons above, you need to make sure you cover those reasons (and only those reasons) in your essay. If you discover as you're writing that you have a fourth reason, make sure to go back and include it in your thesis statement. See: The Body of Your Paper	☐	☐	☐
	1.4 Transition smoothly and develop connections from	☐	☐	☐
	point to point. Explanation: Paragraphs open; paragraphs close; paragraphs lead from one to the next. Transitions smooth the links between ideas. This can be as simple as a "In addition to morning cuddles, another reason cats make great pets is that they are low maintenance." Both the "in addition" and the "another" provide relationship links to the previous idea, which should have been contained in the previous paragraph. See: Transitions			

	1.5 Create coherent progress from introduction through conclusion. Explanation: Your document or presentation needs to hang together as one cohesive unit, even if it has many sections. One main theme, idea, or argument needs to run from the introduction through the body and into the conclusion. For instance, if your assignment were to argue whether cats make good pets, you wouldn't want to veer off into a discussion of your childhood dog, or compare cats to ferrets. Find your point, stay on topic, and present a convincing work. Your introduction and conclusion are your first and last opportunities to make the essay or speech hang together as one unit; they often mirror each other or come full circle in some way. See: Introductions & Conclusions	☐	☐	☐
	2. Develop coherent paragraphs or points so that each is internally unified and so that each functions as part of the whole document or presentation. See: Paragraphs & Topic Sentences			
	2.1 Create meaningful topic sentence for each paragraph or point. Explanation: Usually, the first sentence of the paragraph is the topic sentence. Topic sentences hold the main point of the paragraph. They usually link back to the thesis/statement of purpose in some way. In the cats-as-pets example, one paragraph's topic sentence might be "One reason cats make good pets is because they're hilarious." This clearly supports one part of the thesis statement, and it tells the audience what the whole paragraph will be about. See: Paragraphs & Topic Sentences	☐	☐	☐

	2.2 Develop each paragraph's single topic to the appropriate depth. Explanation: The "appropriate" depth is entirely dependent on the activity. Briefer works have shallower paragraph development; longer works' development is deeper. Try not to run on too long, belaboring your point, but beware of giving anything too short shrift. If the assignment is 500 words, the paragraphs will probably be shorter than if the assignment is 5,000 words. I hate to give a "how many sentences make a good paragraph" number, but in the cats-as-pets example, you could probably get away with 6 sentences. If you were researching the subject, your paragraphs would be longer because you'd have source material to work into them. See: Paragraphs	☐	☐	☐
	2.3 Supply relevant and original supporting detail. Explanation: Stay on point! Don't stray off-topic, even if your digression is interesting. If the topic is cats-as-pets, don't discuss dogs, and don't discuss your mom's allergies or how she hates white cat hair on black pants. Furthermore, if your first three ideas about cats-as-pets are "nice" "soft" and "good company," and if these three ideas occur to you the instant you get the assignment, STOP. These will be the same three ideas that occur to everyone. THINK FURTHER. Do some brainstorming and see if you can come up with other ideas and unique examples. "Cats are hilarious" is more original, and it has more potential for original, in-depth supporting examples, than does "Cats are soft." See: Check Relevance of Supporting Details	☐	☐	☐
	3. Provide sufficient, correctly cited support that substantiates the writer's ideas. See: Using Information			

	3.1 Use a variety of credible sources to support, extend, and inform an original thesis or idea, integrating source material smoothly. Explanation: Even research papers only use sources as support, not in lieu of original thought from you, the essay's author. Use sources that enhance your ideas, but don't let other people's work stand in for your own. If you're writing or presenting a research assignment, don't just assemble other people's ideas.	☐	☐	☐
	Think of your sources as your big brothers backing you up in a fight, but not going in the melee instead of you. You should connect what you're writing to the source material, and then explain the source material's relevance. Don't let a quote just hang there unexplained, and never end a paragraph on someone else's words. Always, always tie up a quote with your own words. If you cite Rothschild as writing, "One reason cats are hilarious is the juxtaposition of their innate sense of dignity and the ridiculous positions in which they find themselves," you MUST explain the quote, connect it to your idea of hilarious cats, and give your own examples demonstrating the quote's truth and applicability. See: Using Your Research in Writing; Integrating Sources			

	3.2 Summarize, paraphrase, and quote accurately. Explanation: You need to be fair and accurate, not taking quotes out of context and not spinning summaries to suit your own purposes. If the material you want to use doesn't <i>really</i> support your point, find other material that does. If the Rothschild quote above REALLY reads, "<i>People might say that one reason cats are hilarious is the juxtaposition of their innate sense of dignity and the ridiculous positions in which they find themselves, but these people are idiots,</i>" you must respect the intent of the sentence and not just use the middle part to support your point. Find those people Rothschild claims are idiots, and use them to support your point instead. See: Looking at Plagiarism	☐	☐	☐
	3.3 Cite sources properly. Explanation: TGS standard is APA documentation. Reference your sources appropriately and accurately (not by the source's first name, for instance, and not by only one name if it was a group project). If you don't know APA documentation, check your APA guide, or go to the UMUC Library, or go to the incredibly useful OWL at Purdue. (You might want to copy & paste OWL's models into your own Reference List to use as templates right where you need them. Just remember to delete them before submitting your work!) Many people find the idea of citing or of	☐	☐	☐
	using a particular format stressful, but it needn't be. It's finicky, and it's nit-picky, but it's really just following a template. If you can follow a recipe, you can follow these guidelines. See: APA General; APA Reference List: Basic Rules			
	4. Tailor communications to the audience. See: Tailoring Your Message			

	4.1 Identify target audience. Explanation: To whom are you speaking or writing? If you don't have a particular audience in mind, you will not know how technical, how formal, how persuasive you must be. Consider the ways your cats-as-pets assignment would change if the audience were comprised of parents, or children, or veterinarians, or cateaters. Every audience has different needs and interests, and you need to know to whom you're writing in order to address those needs and interests. See: Tailoring Your Message	☐	☐	☐
	4.2 Explain unfamiliar terms and material. Explanation: If it isn't common knowledge, explain. Ask yourself whether your target audience will understand what you're discussing. An audience of potential buyers will know less than an audience of designers. If your cats-as-pets presentation is for parents, you might want to explain particulars about allergens that you wouldn't need to explain to immunologists. See: Writing Definitions	☐	☐	☐
	4.3 Employ precise, appropriate language. Explanation: English has many, many words, which allow us to choose exactly the right one. Don't just hit the thesaurus button on your word processing program; use the dictionary as well to make sure that word means precisely what it should. Avoid vague language ("thing," "some"). See: How to Write Clearly	☐	☐	☐
	4.4 Use audience-appropriate, consistent tone. Explanation: You are an adult writing for adults, a professional writing for professionals. Your work should sound like that from start to finish. Don't use jargon unnecessarily; don't be too	☐	☐	☐
	colloquial. You should already know this, but no text-speak. B4, u, lol, r, gonna: these are not words and they should not appear in your written work. See: Style, Diction, Tone, and Voice			

	4.5 Avoid language which indicates bias regarding race, religion, color, creed, gender, gender identity or expression, marital status, age, national origin, ancestry, political affiliation, mental or physical disability, sexual orientation, or veteran status. Explanation: No off-color, racist or sexist jokes, please, even if you think they'll warm up your audience when giving a presentation. No arguments for or against groups of particular races, religions, genders, gender identity or expression, marital status, age, national origin, ancestry, political affiliation, mental or physical disability, sexual orientation, or veteran status. No stereotyping language, no gross generalizations, no criticism of particular groups. You are welcome to your opinions, but you are communicating with a worldwide audience. Do not offend your readers, your listeners, your colleagues, your classmates, professors or employers. Far better to err on the side of bland than on the side of offensive; once you've lost an audience because of crass or offensive statements, you will not convince them of your message. See: Avoid Stereotypes And Offensive Labeling	☐	☐	☐
	5. Use sentence structure appropriate to the task, message and audience. See: Smooth and Expressive Sentence Fluency			
	5.1 Demonstrate variation in sentence structure. Explanation: Sentences need varied length and complexity. Not every sentence should be a simple declarative; not every sentence need be long or complex. When you re-read your work, it should not sound like a children's book, with every sentence having the same rhythm. "Cats make good pets because they're cuddly. I like to cuddle my cats. My cats have soft fur. They are comforting to pet." It is difficult to express complex ideas in simple sentences, and many of your ideas will be complex. See: Building Sentences	☐	☐	☐

	5.2 Express ideas clearly and concisely. Explanation: Get to the point. Work should not be inflated by repetition, euphemisms, or sentences that are 20 words long when they could be 10. Avoid nominalizations (turning a perfectly good, strong verb into a noun) whenever possible. A nominalization looks like this: She <i>made the decision</i> to wash her cat. She <i>decided</i> to wash her cat. Verbs are stronger than nouns; using verbs instead of nouns makes your writing and speaking stronger as well. See: Writing Concisely	☐	☐	☐
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5.3 Eliminate sentence-level errors such as runons/comma splices and sentence fragments.

Explanation: This should be self-explanatory. A run-on is a sentence that has more than 1 idea without the proper punctuation separating the ideas. A comma splice is a run-on in which the author used a comma between ideas; a comma is not strong enough to connect two ideas. A sentence fragment is a "sentence" that is missing a subject, a verb, or both.

Run-on example: I kicked the cat she ran away. (Two ideas, no punctuation; the ideas just run together.)

Comma splice example: I kicked the cat, she ran away. (Two ideas, and a comma because your high school English teacher told you to put commas where you pause. Unfortunately, the comma is not strong enough to hold together two complete ideas.)

Mini lesson: To correctly punctuate between two complete ideas, you have three choices:

1. I kicked the cat. She ran away. (Separate the two complete ideas with a period and make each its own sentence.)
2. I kicked the cat; she ran away. (Separate but link the two complete ideas with a semicolon; this only works if the ideas are related to each other. You couldn't write "I kicked the cat; I like ice cream." Cat-kicking and dessert preferences are not related and cannot be linked by a semicolon.)
3. I kicked the cat, so she ran away. (Link the two complete ideas with a comma plus a conjunction. A



	comma+conjunction is as strong as a semicolon, which is as strong as a period.) Sentence fragment example: Kicked the cat. (Not quite an idea, because there's no subject. WHO kicked the cat?) See: Avoiding Run-on Sentences; Comma Slices; Sentence Fragments			
6. Follow conventions of Standard Written English. See: Edited Standard Written English				
	6.1 Adhere to standard usage rules of grammar and mechanics. Explanation: <i>Grammar</i> refers to the structure of the language, and it is important. Subject/verb agreement, pronoun/antecedent agreement, word order: these are the very basics of grammar. If you struggle with these, you must correct them. <i>Mechanics</i> refers to the conventions of written English, including capitalization and punctuation (including but not limited to commas, apostrophes, semicolons, and end punctuation). LINK: My very favorite website for basic grammar needs, this site provides lessons and self-correcting exercises (with explanations). Please just be aware that it is a British site, so there are a few British constructions we don't use (the extra "u" in color and DIY for "do it yourself projects" are two that come to mind). Improve Your Writing. Also See: Punctuation, Mechanics, Capitalization, and Spelling; Capitalization Rules	☐	☐	☐

	6.2 Adhere to standard usage rules of word choice. Explanation: Word choice in this instance (also known as “usage”) refers to the conventional ways words or phrases are used. You wouldn’t say, “He was a very high man” when you mean to say, “he’s tall.” Misusing words (good/well, less/fewer, among/between, its/it’s) falls under this category. Students also often fall into incorrect usage when they substitute what the thesaurus suggests as a synonym without checking the definition.	□	□	□
	If you’re going to use the thesaurus, please check the precise meaning of the word you’re considering in the dictionary. See: Word Choice			
	6.3 Adhere to standard usage rules of spelling. Explanation: This should be a no-brainer for students using computers with spellcheck, but many errors sneak into papers. Spellcheck sometimes suggests the wrong word; for instance, if you spell <i>definitely</i> “definatly,” spellcheck will suggest defiantly (I think that’s because of the incorrect “a”). If you simply accept the first spellcheck suggestion, there’s a good chance you will end up with the wrong word. I recommend using a dictionary along with spellcheck to make sure you’ve picked the word you think you’ve picked. Please also make sure you’ve spelled authors’ names correctly when referring to them or citing their work. See: Guide to English Spelling Rules	□	□	□
	7. Create and employ multimedia supports, visual aids and/or documents appropriate to the needs of the project, the message and the audience. See: Visual Aids			

	7.1 Create neat, clear, and professional document and/or multimedia aids. Explanation: It shouldn't need to be said, but the visual elements of the written work and the visual aids are important. Memos should look like memos; researched articles should look like researched articles; PowerPoint presentations don't usually need pictures of kitties (unless you're doing an oral presentation on cats-as-pets, but you won't be). This link is about creating teaching materials, but that's what you're doing: you're teaching your reader or audience about your topic: See: Using Instructional Aids	☐	☐	☐
	7.2 Demonstrate clear, relevant connection between visual/multimedia aids and speech, when appropriate. Explanation: Cool visuals are great, but are they relevant? If visual or multimedia aids are used in a paper or presentation,	☐	☐	☐
	you must make their relevance known by explicitly referencing them. Don't just put up a slide and assume it speaks for itself. Think of these aids in a presentation as you think of quotes in an essay: they support your ideas, but they don't stand in for them. See: Visual Aids			
	7.3 Provide accurate graphics that fairly depict the information, when appropriate. Explanation: When depicting information visually or via other multimedia avenues, the information contained must be fair and accurate. A pie chart that looks 50-50 but that is meant to be 60-40 is neither fair nor accurate. Think of your graphics as you think of your quotes: use them fairly and in the proper context. See: Creating Effective Visual Aids for Your Readers	☐	☐	☐

7.4 Format document and citations properly. Explanation: The APA guide discusses all of the necessary formatting elements, including margins, running headings, title pages, and PowerPoint presentations. Again, you might want to copy and paste pertinent portions from the OWL at Purdue into your document to use as a template; just don't forget to delete those portions before submitting your work. See: How to Format a MS Word Doc; APA Guidelines	☐	☐	☐
7.5 Select typeface, graphics, sound, and/or typeface appropriate to task. Explanation: No Comic Sans or handwriting fonts, no Random Capitalization or unnecessary "quotation marks" or lots of <u>underlining</u>, <i>italics</i> or bold or too! many! exclamation! points!! Allow your material to speak for itself, to be sophisticated, exciting or fun without the cheap trick of sophisticated, exciting or fun fonts. Professional, clean, and clear should be your mantra. See: How to Choose a Typeface; Word Choice	☐	☐	☐
OVERALL COMMUNICATIONS EVALUATION	Highly Proficient	Proficient	Low/ No Proficiency
	90-100% (Excellent)	80-89% (Good)	79% or below (Below Standards or Failure)
	☐	☐	☐

Faculty Comments and Class Assignment Grade: