



Rethinking Rubrics in Writing Assessment

Maja Wilson , Alfie Kohn (Foreword by)

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The conventional wisdom in English education is that rubrics are the best and easiest tools for assessment. But sometimes it's better to be unconventional. In *Rethinking Rubrics in Writing Assessment*, Maja Wilson offers a new perspective on rubrics and argues for a better, more responsive way to think about assessing writers' progress.

Though you may sense a disconnect between student-centered teaching and rubric-based assessment, you may still use rubrics for convenience or for want of better alternatives. *Rethinking Rubrics in Writing Assessment* gives you the impetus to make a change, demonstrating how rubrics can hurt kids and replace professional decision making with an inauthentic pigeonholing that stamps standardization onto a notably nonstandard process. With an emphasis on thoughtful planning and teaching, Wilson shows you how to reconsider writing assessment so that it aligns more closely with high-quality instruction and avoids the potentially damaging effects of rubrics.

Stop listening to the conventional wisdom, and turn instead to a compelling new voice to find out why rubrics are often replaceable. Open *Rethinking Rubrics in Writing Assessment* and let Maja Wilson start you down the path to more sensitive, authentic style of writing assessment.

Rethinking Rubrics in Writing Assessment Details

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Dan says

Rethinking Rubrics by Maja Wilson is a testament to the power of conversation, with students at the heart of an authentic writing curriculum.

Dona says

I really liked this book. I especially liked how Wilson pointed out that when professional writers' works were scored using a rubric, they scored lower than the students who also responded to the prompt. She gives the sad, biased history of the origin of multiple choice tests in America in a chapter called "There is a Cow in Our Classroom: How Rubrics Became Writing Assessments Sacred Cow." And how about this insight, which can be applied to more than just the teaching of writing, "Factors in a complex system "swirl together" chaotically rather than build on each other in a linear, deterministic pattern of cause and effect."

Steve says

Given all the madness in education these days, this book spoke to me and I've been recommending it to all my teaching colleagues. Wilson writes engaging prose yet manages to pack a lot of history, scholarship, experience, and good pedagogy into a compact book that you could read in a day or a week with no trouble. But then you should ask others to read it and talk about it with you. Anyone who teaches writing will find this compelling and thought-provoking, but other educators, pre-service teachers, concerned parents, school board members, superintendents, and education policy makers should read it and consider its implications for the course we are on. It not only skewers standardized assessment but also offers a hopeful, humane alternative.

Brian Kelley says

I came to know about Maja Wilson's Rethinking Rubrics during an exchange on the English Companion Ning. Wilson replied to some of my discussion topics about assessment and the use of portfolios. Her thoughtful and balanced replies made a lot of sense and I made myself a note to find her book and read it.

I'm heading into my 4th week of a summer workshop with the National Writing Project. My reading over the past few weeks has brought me back to the exchange I encountered with many teachers on the Ning. More specifically it brought me back to rubrics and grading--so much so, that it is now the subject of my inquiry project as I move forward into the upcoming school year.

I read Wilson's book this morning and again found that I appreciated her well-supported candor. Most interesting to me was Wilson's research into the history of assessment in our country. American colleges needed a ranking system for high school students, standard modes such as multiple-choice testing and rubrics

were born out of that need.

Wilson questions if something like a rubric, which actually brought writing back into our schools, serves the purpose it promises. She explores what rubrics offer and what rubrics exclude and deny.

Read this book and you won't look at rubrics the same way again.

Mary says

I always love reading a professional book where some of my instincts are affirmed. Rubrics (IMHO) can lead to stultifying language. Others have complained that Wilson does not offer an alternative to rubrics. But I think she's clear. Teachers must honor the rhetorical purpose of each writing and respond first to the ideas and the convincing (or not) nature of the writing. Rubrics don't allow for that. Respond as a reader first in writing or in conference.

Stuart Macalpine says

Thought provoking and good to explore a voice arguing against the use of rubrics in writing. Lots of the content is based on strawman-arguments, but a few points ring true and there is definitely a position that needs expression.

Mr. Caudillo says

Maja's work is revelatory. After reading her book, you'll discover that rubrics are so much more an apparatus born of social dilemmas than you ever thought. It's not a pretty history, how writing assessments took on their modern form. The journey is marked by discrimination and an obsession to rank students.

Rethinking is more than a story of how we got to where we are; Maja offers practical instructional strategies that honor writing for its rhetorical purpose over petty issues that rubrics emphasize. Beware, these strategies challenge the status quo. How do we preserve fidelity for writing that is vulnerable, authentic, and truly unique? How do you assess a student based on their ability to "move" you with their writing? Moreover, how does one teach students to "move" their reader? Maja explores these questions and provides useful insight that any teacher of writing can employ in their class.

If you teach writing in any capacity, add this book to your to-read list; move it up near the top, in fact.

Dominic says

This is an effective treatise on a radical way of assessing student writing, but it shouldn't be as radical as it is. I'm not certain it will be as persuasive as Wilson may hope it will be amongst teachers who have never felt

uncomfortable with using a rubric or grading student writing. And the lack of practical take-aways will frustrate some readers desperate for an answer. And under 100 pages?

And yet...I found the book a wonderful example of teacher-research, an engaging blend of theory and personal reflection, and exactly the sort of thing I need to tie up the loose ends of my thinking around the Writing Workshop approach at the high school level (so beautifully articulated by Penny Kittle) and the inherent joy and meaningfulness of portfolio assessment. Only now does Linda Christensen's no-grading approach to teaching writing (which she discusses in *Teaching for Joy and Justice*) seem actually possible! This argument is a missing piece in so many great teaching texts which try to sidestep around the issue of assessment altogether, or if they do address it, tack on a chapter (usually an uninspired one) at the end of the book.

Even while Wilson never gives us a step-by-step guide to renovating our classrooms, she wrestles with the question in a collaborative way with the reader. Her revelations may ultimately be few, but they are HUGE ahas for me: shifting responsibility in the assessment process to students; oral feedback and assessments during the writing process *in class!* are way more important than anything we tell them after the process is over; the significance of students actually finding what they write meaningful and an investment in the rhetorical purpose and audience and how this is crucial in resisting the need for assessments that rank student work.

Near the end of her book, she writes: "Unless we begin experimenting in our classes with assessment in ways that honor our values about the complexities of the writing and responding process, we will never be in a position to call for the kind of paradigm shift that [...] is possible." Here here for subversive teaching and for experimentation in education. I'm impressed by Wilson, stimulated by these ideas, and ready to see what happens in my own classroom this year.

Christina Bouwens says

A scathing historical perspective on where and why standardized writing/testing arose, but the book only goes so far as the title implies. The suggestions or 'alternatives' to using rubrics as a tool with which to read, grade, and respond to student writing are next-to-nonexistent in this tome; the book, essentially, helps its reader to rethink why we use rubrics, how we might use them better (if at all!), and what we're more likely reading and grading a student on when it comes to the use of rubrics. Some useful questions addressed here and Wilson has a good wit, but overall, the problem to which she seems to have attempted to find a solution still remains: what, then, do we do instead when we still must submit grades?

Meg Petersen says

I honestly didn't think I had much to learn from this book, but I was wrong. Very smart, well researched and readable treatment of not only rubrics but all aspects of assessment. Highly recommended.

Matt says

An essential literacy resource that should be read by all educators, PreK-12.

I wrote a longer review on my blog: <https://readingbyexample.com/2017/06/...>

Caron says

Overall, Maja Wilson's book, *Rethinking Rubrics in Writing Assessment*, is thoughtful and insightful as she challenges the nature of rubrics that attempt to standardize students' writing. Like Wilson, I think rubrics are a tool to evaluate student work quickly and efficiently to meet the demands of a modern society that requires teachers to grade large quantities of student papers. Rubrics though, need to be utilized cautiously as a student's final work product is often valued more than the initial creative process of writing, revising, and editing. She reminded me that teachers often marginalize the "worth" of student papers by issuing one numeric grade with little personal response or feedback. Students are human and crave more than corrective feedback to fix errors - a teacher's job is more than responding to students' mistakes - and deserve more constructive responses that encourage "new insights" and reactions to pieces that reflect their toil, triumphs, and tribulations. As an adult writer, Wilson states, "I pay more attention to the [reviewers] comments...and to what I know about the reviewer." She encourages writing teachers to continue to engage in valuable discussions about writing that do not stop within the reductive constructs of a rubric's categorical boxes. In her world, she prefers to assess student work through several conferences and conversations. In my world of the "43 minute English period," the conference and portfolio process becomes a major struggle due to time constraints. "Thank you for coming, would you like comments with that piece of work? Oops, sorry, we're out of time..." At the end of the book, she offers suggestions on how to grade and evaluate student work without the burden of always feeling compelled to rank order student writing. My one criticism of the book - I wish Wilson would offer more practical suggestions on how to evaluate students' process and progress in the classroom. Her ideas sometimes feel like theoretical musings rather than concrete ideas to implement in the "real classroom." Perhaps, this idea will become the foundation of her next book...

Kris says

I can't believe it took me so long to start reading this book - because once I did, I couldn't stop. Fascinating. Fabulous.

Jason says

This book confirmed the feelings I was having about using rubrics to "grade" student writing. Wilson provides an interesting history on the development of different methods of writing assessment and places rubrics in their context. I appreciate her personal stories of experiences with students in the classroom. She also provides some good alternatives to rubrics, but this section of the book could have been expanded. I'd also like to have some research on how Wilson's methods panned out after time. Did her students perform just as well as other students on the state writing test (which uses a rubric!) or the ACT/SAT? Just curious.

Skylar Primm says

It's going to take me a bit to fully process a "review" for this book. Suffice it to say that it's amazing. I wish I'd read it years ago, but I'm glad I read it now.
