A rubric for essay writing: free, printable, with a middle school band

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A free essay rubric in three grade bands: thesis, evidence and analysis, organization, style and conventions for grades 6–8, and simpler versions for K–2 and 3–5.

A rubric for an essay should score the main idea, the support for it, the organization, the word choice and the conventions, with the main idea counting most. Peabody Teach's free essay rubric does that in three grade bands; for grades 6–8 it becomes thesis (counting twice), evidence and analysis, organization, style and audience, and conventions, for 24 points. You can print a band landscape, print it as an "I can" checklist for students, copy it into Google Docs as a table, or open it in the rubric maker to change any cell. Peabody is free through the end of 2026.

This post shows what each band asks, with most of the space on middle school, where the jump from "a main idea" to "a thesis the whole essay proves" happens. The rubric was written for Peabody, not taken from a district or a publisher, and it uses no standards codes.

The three bands at a glance

- What it scores · K–2: A few sentences about one topic · 3–5: A multi-paragraph essay · 6–8: A multi-paragraph essay with evidence
- Levels · K–2: Wow! / Yes / Not yet · 3–5: Exceeds / Meets / Approaching / Beginning · 6–8: Exceeds / Meets / Approaching / Beginning
- Rows · K–2: One topic, Telling more, Start and finish, Capitals and periods · 3–5: Main idea (×2), Support, Organization, Word choice, Conventions · 6–8: Thesis (×2), Evidence and analysis, Organization, Style and audience, Conventions
- Most points · K–2: Not scored by default · 3–5: 24 · 6–8: 24

Grades 6–8: the essay rubric for middle school

Thesis (counts twice). The top cell asks for "a precise, arguable thesis that previews the main points, and every paragraph advances it." Meets is a clear thesis the body paragraphs support. Approaching is vague, too broad or only loosely supported. Beginning is no thesis, or an essay that drifts away from it. Because it counts twice, a strong thesis is worth 8 of the 24 points.

Evidence and analysis. Exceeds has "well-chosen, cited evidence in every body paragraph, each followed by analysis that explains its meaning." Meets has relevant evidence with some explanation of how it connects. Approaching is evidence that is thin or general, or "dropped in without explanation." Beginning has points that rest on opinion alone.

Organization. The top level has topic sentences, purposeful transitions, and a conclusion that "extends the thesis rather than repeats it." Meets has a clear introduction, body and conclusion with topic sentences and transitions. Approaching has paragraphs but a weak order or missing transitions.

Style and audience. Exceeds holds a consistent formal tone with precise vocabulary and varied sentences. Meets is mostly formal. Approaching slips into casual language or vague words, and Beginning doesn't suit an academic reader.

Conventions. From nearly error-free, including correct citations and punctuation in complex sentences, down to frequent errors that make the essay hard to follow. Citation format is part of this row in 6–8 only.

Each row has an "I can" line a student can check a draft against, for example "I can support each point with evidence and explain how it proves my thesis."

Grades 3–5: the same shape in plainer words

The 3–5 band scores the same five ideas at a younger level.

- Main idea (counts twice): one clear main idea in the introduction, and every paragraph connects back to it. Approaching is a main idea that is hard to find or changes partway through.
- Support: each body paragraph has a clear point with three or more strong details or examples at the top level, two at Meets.
- Organization: a hook, body paragraphs in a logical order with transitions, and a conclusion that sums up.
- Word choice: "specific, lively words and varied sentences" at the top; repeated words and sentence starts at Approaching.
- Conventions: spelling, capitals and punctuation, from almost no errors to many errors that make it hard to read.

The difference from 6–8 is what each row asks for. A 3–5 writer gives details and examples; a 6–8 writer gives cited evidence and explains it. A 3–5 conclusion sums up; a 6–8 conclusion extends the thesis.

K–2: an essay becomes a few sentences

In K–2 the rubric scores a few sentences about one topic, in three levels with no points, and the cells are short enough to read aloud to a child. "One topic" runs from "All my sentences are about one topic, and I name it at the start" to "My sentences are about many different things." The other rows are telling three or more things about the topic, a first and a last sentence, and capitals and periods.

Try it tonight

1. Open the 6–8 band and hand it out with the prompt. The page's own advice to students: write your main idea in one sentence before anything else, give every body paragraph one point and the details that prove it, and read the essay out loud once.
2. Run a revision day on one row. Students highlight the cell that matches their draft, then fix one row before they turn it in. Evidence and analysis is a good first choice, since "dropped in without explanation" is easy to spot and to fix.
3. Change the weight for the assignment. For a timed writing you might count organization twice. Press "Open in the maker" under the band you teach, set the weight, and the total updates.
4. Use it as a single-point rubric for drafts. In the maker, switch to Single-point and the "I can" lines become the standards, with room on each side for your comments.
5. Paste it into your feedback document. "Copy for Google Docs" pastes the band as a table with borders.

If your students write about what they read, Peabody's free stories for kids are short enough for a quick response essay in the younger grades. The presentation rubric is built the same way, and the free rubric maker post covers the tool itself.

Questions

What should an essay rubric for middle school include?

A thesis, evidence with analysis, organization, style for the audience, and conventions including citations. Peabody's grades 6–8 essay rubric scores those five on four levels, with the thesis counting twice, for 24 points.

Does it work for a five-paragraph essay?

Yes. The rubric is written for any multi-paragraph essay, including a five-paragraph essay, a response to a prompt, an end-of-unit essay or a timed writing. Nothing in it requires exactly five paragraphs.

Can I change the rubric?

Yes. "Open in the maker" loads any band into the rubric maker, where you can reword cells, change levels and points, set a weight on any row or switch to a single-point rubric. You can also paste it into Google Docs and edit it there.

Is the essay rubric free?

Yes. It needs no sign-in and shows no ads, you can print, copy and change it, and Peabody is free through the end of 2026.