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Developing an Essay-Writing Rubric for Learners of Japanese

—Based on the Analysis of Writing Assessment by Japanese University Faculty—

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Abstract

For this project, we have researched how Japanese university faculty members assess student opinion essays, written in Japanese, using data gathered from the results of 5-point ranking scale values and assessment comments supplied by faculty members. In this report, first, I described the overall features of the assessment viewpoints that were extracted by encoding assessment comments according to concepts. Next, I executed a co-occurrence network analysis of the 5-point ranking scale values and assessment comments. Then, I reported on the writing rubric for Japanese learners that was developed based on the results of this analysis. The salient feature of this writing rubric was that the end product was based on the actual assessment data supplied by Japanese faculty members. For example, there are three essential elements in the rubric and I used a 5-point ranking scale as the “scale levels,” with codes extracted from the faculty assessment comments as “dimensions of the assignment” and the actual wording of the assessment comments as the basis of the “description of these dimensions.” For international students who plan to enter Japanese university, this writing rubric can serve as a metric of the sort of “writing ability” expected of them when they enter the university.

Keywords

Essay-Writing Rubric for Learners of Japanese, opinion essay,
Japanese university faculty, assessment comment

1. Introduction

Fostering writing skills is one of the most important issues among Japanese universities. According to the results of a survey conducted by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (in 2020), among the first-year educational programs at 679 universities (91%) have provided freshmen with “Writing methods: how to write reports and papers.” On the other hand, the survey shows that, while only 34 universities (5%) answered that they “clearly indicate assessment criteria using a rubric for all subjects,” 159 universities (21%) said that they “clearly indicate assessment criteria using a rubric only for some subjects.” The Association of American Colleges and Universities has started the Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education project in 2007 as part of the Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) initiative. As of 2010, it had already published fifteen Value Rubrics: Inquiry and Analysis, Critical Thinking, Creative Thinking, Written Communication, Oral Communication, Reading, Quantitative Literacy, Information Literacy, Teamwork, Problem Solving, Civic Engagement, Intercultural Knowledge and Competence, Ethical Reasoning, Foundations and Skills for Lifelong Learning, and Integrative Learning (Rhodes 2010)¹⁾, yet Japanese universities today are still at a trial-and-error stage with each university and class in a situation²⁾ where rubrics are not being widely used.

In this paper, for the purpose of indicating what level of “writing ability” should be attained by students who come from overseas and enroll in Japanese universities, I report on a writing rubric that was developed based on the analysis of assessment data on the writing abilities of university students supplied by faculty members.

2. Academic Writing Ability in Japanese

For those who wish to study at a university in Japan, the Examination for Japanese University Admission for International Students (EJU) is conducted twice every year³⁾. One of the subjects is “Japanese as a Foreign Language,” which measures the skills of “academic Japanese” required for studying at Japanese universities, consists of reading comprehension, listening, listening-reading comprehension, and writing. Score ratings from the “writing” section are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Score Rating of “Writing” Section for “Japanese as a Foreign Language”

Score	Rating
50	(Level S) An essay at this level <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • clearly addresses the topic with persuasive reasons • is well organized and developed • uses refined expressions in language
45	(Level A) An essay at this level <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • clearly addresses the topic with appropriate reasons • is well organized and developed • uses appropriate expressions in language
40	
35	(Level B) An essay at this level <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • addresses the topic with mostly appropriate reasons • is generally well organized, though it may have occasional problems • may use inappropriate expressions in language
30	
25	(Level C) An essay at this level <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • roughly addresses the topic with reasons, which may be inappropriate • may have problems in its organization • uses inappropriate expressions in language
20	
10	(Level D) An essay at this level <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • does not address the topic • is disorganized and underdeveloped • has serious errors in usage
0	(NA) An essay does not meet the rating conditions.

Each of the Levels A, B and C has two grades: higher and lower.

Note: Adapted from Japan Student Services Organization (JASSO) (2017)

According to Weigle (2002), “most rating scales can be classified as either holistic (a single score is given to each writing sample) or analytic (separate scores are given to different aspects of writing, such as content, organization, language use, and so on)” (p.72).

As the EJU has a holistic score rating system, and its description of ability statements are able to capture the breadth of characteristics at each level, the EJU, as a large-scale test, is appropriate for assessing the overall abilities of Japanese learners. However, in fact, an analytic scale is more reliable and “more appropriate for L2 writers as different aspects of writing ability develop at different rates” (Weigle, 2002, p.121). When we

examine what type of skills have already been obtained and what skills are still lacking in Japanese learners who are in the process of acquiring academic writing skills, a rubric is useful as an analytic assessment tool.

In this paper, I will illustrate a rubric that is appropriate for assessing opinion essays, which are similar to the type of writing found in the EJU. The style of writing used in the EJU, which is called the “opinion essay type,” as it appears in this paper, is material that is “written to express a writer’s point of view by stating the premise in a coherent and logical manner in accordance with the instructions indicated in an assigned theme” (*Nihongo “kijutsu” mondai ni-tsuite [About ‘Writing’ Section]*, by JASSO (2017) https://www.jasso.go.jp/ryugaku/study_j/eju/about/score/writing.html), and positioned as the gateway to academic writing, in other words, that which is required to enroll and study in Japanese universities.

3. Entire Design of Rubric Development

3.1 Definition of rubric

A rubric is defined as a “scoring tool that lays out the specific expectations for an assignment” (Stevens & Levi, 2013, p.3). According to Stevens & Levi (2013, pp.5-6), a rubric consists of a task description (the assignment); scale level (achievement level); dimensions of the assignment (a breakdown of the skills/knowledge involved in the assignment); and descriptions of what constitutes each level of performance (specific feedback). Generally, a rubric consists of five scale levels and six or seven dimensions of the assignment at maximum.

In this research, for the three elements indicated above, I am developing a rubric based on actual assessment data using the 5-point ranking scale values supplied by Japanese faculty members as the scale level, code extracted from assessment comments written by faculty members as explanations of the criteria, and descriptions of the assessment comments as descriptions of the criteria

3.2 Data

The data used for the research is assessment data of 30 opinion essays⁴⁾ gathered from 44 faculty members who have at least three years’ experience teaching in a Japanese university. The total of 44 faculty members consisted of 22 Japanese language faculty members and 22 faculty members in the humanities and social sciences fields.

We asked the faculty who agreed to assist with the research to holistically assess academic writing submitted by freshmen (including international students) using their

own standards. Firstly, they gave a 5-point ranking scale value (5: Excellent, 4: Good, 3: Average, 2: Below Average, 1: Needs Improvement) followed by assessment comments. In the assessment comments, they freely described what were “strong points” and what were “weak points” that were critical factors in determining the scale value. If they only had comments about either “strong points” or “weak points,” we asked them to write “N.A.,” making it a non-commented point.

3.3 The procedures of developing a rubric

The procedures of developing a rubric in this study are as follows:

- (i) For determining the assessment criteria, we encoded assessment comments according to concepts or semantic groups and conducted quantitative analysis on extracted codes. (The results are shown in 4.1)
- (ii) For considering how descriptions of the criteria should be stated for each scale of the rubric, I extracted three opinion essays that had a scale value of 5 points, 4 points, 3 points, 2 points, or 1 point, respectively, and executed a co-occurrence network analysis. (The results are shown in 4.2)
- (iii) Based on the analysis results from (i) and (ii), I developed a draft rubric and conducted calibration. “Calibration is a process in which those using a rubric or rubrics gather to achieve a common understanding of how the rubric was designed and how it ought to be applied” (Rhodes and Finley, 2013, p.33). In this research, three members of the project⁵⁾ actually conducted rubric assessment on six opinion essays and solved any problems that made it difficult to understand or led to misunderstanding of the description of the criteria. I repeated this process twice and completed the development of the rubric.

4. Results and Discussion

In this section, I show the results of the encoding of the assessment comments by concepts or semantic groups in 4.1 and the results of the co-occurrence network analysis among the scale values and the assessment comments in 4.2.

4.1 Results of the assessment criteria as they appeared in the assessment comments

Assessment comments provided by 44 faculty members consisted of 40,242 characters worth of “strong points,” and 64,815 characters worth of “weak points,” totaling 105,057 characters (65,088 words.) All these comments were interpreted according to the context and fragmented into concepts or semantic groups for encoding. If interpretation was

difficult, we also referred to the opinion essay that was subject to the assessment, itself, to generate a code. Then, we generated categories based on several codes. The above steps were repeated several times. Finally, 5,798 codes (gross) were generated (2,675 codes for “strong points” and 3,123 codes for “weak points”) that were categorized into 33 codes and 10 categories. (For details on encoding procedures, refer to Ijuin et al. 2018.)

Definition of all the codes and quantitative analysis of the codes appeared in the assessment comments (“strong points” and “weak points”) are shown in Table 2⁶).

Table 2

Coding definitions and appearance frequencies of comments by code and category

Code Category	Coding definition	Strong points	Weak points	Total
Content				
Theme	Focused on logic as to whether points made in the theme/argument are composed tightly, clearly, consistently and/or persuasively.	476	495	971
Standpoint	Focused on the writer’s thesis and standpoint (answers as to “the necessity of newspapers”) .	353	87	440
Premise	Focused on premises supporting the writer’s thesis and standpoint.	554	484	1038
Understanding of the situation	Focused on social situations and background information.	23	0	23
Concession	Focused on comments by the writer that indicate concessions (=information that offers the merits of a viewpoint not in agreement with the writer’s stated position) made.	49	29	78
Counterargument	Focused on counterarguments made against the concessions.	30	11	41
Issues raised	Focused on the issues raised.	10	5	15
“Content” Total		1,495	1,111	2,606
Language				
Expressiveness	Focused on the richness, complexity, and sophistication of the Japanese expressions.	115	180	295
Style	Focused on the appropriateness, as academic writing, with regard to the register and formality befitting an opinion essay.	18	241	259
Grammar	Focused on grammar.	38	140	178
Vocabulary	Focused on vocabulary.	43	176	219

Connection	Focused on connecting words/conjunctions and metalanguage.	54	42	96
Writing	Focused on writing (<i>kanji</i> and <i>hiragana</i>).	27	309	336
Misusage	Focused on misusage and inaccuracies in Japanese (not specified whether it is referring to “grammar,” “vocabulary,” or “writing,” etc.)	32	184	216
“Language” Total		327	1,272	1,599
Organization	*Not focused on the content (what the writer is trying to say), but focused on the content location, distribution (where the writing appears).			
Between the paragraphs	Focused on “structure and composition,” as well as, “introduction, main body and conclusion”.	306	78	384
Inside the paragraph	Focused on the consistency of the paragraph or completeness of the paragraph writing.	61	31	92
Balance	Focused on the balance and distribution and the amount or lack of structure.	7	62	69
Standpoint	Focused on the appearance, position or distribution of the viewpoint and theses.	61	65	126
Premise	Focused on the appearance, position or distribution of the premise.	10	22	32
Understanding of the situation	Focused on the appearance, position or distribution of social circumstances or background information.	6	4	10
Concession	Focused on the appearance, position or distribution of the concessions made.	1	13	14
Counterargument	Focused on the appearance, position or distribution of the counterargument made.	1	0	1
Issues raised	Focused on the appearance, position or distribution of the issues raised.	5	2	7
“Organization” Total		458	277	735
Format				
Word count	Focused on the word count.	44	75	119
<i>Genkōyōshi</i>	Focused on the usage of the <i>genkōyōshi</i> (Japanese manuscript paper).	0	48	48
Writing form	Focused on the readability of the handwriting form.	8	6	14
Punctuation mark	Focused on the manner in which punctuation marks are placed.	0	4	4
“Format” Total		52	133	185
Title	Focused on the title.	36	101	137
The writer	Focused on the determination, knowledge, and ability of the writer with regard to opinion writing.	26	13	39

Consciousness of the reader	Focused on consciousness of the reader, i.e., taking the reader's position into consideration and determining whether the essay is written to appeal to the reader.	8	17	25
Impression	Comments related to the overall impression, e.g., "Not careful." "Perfect." The exact part to which the comment refers (such as "logical expansion/structure/language") is not stated clearly.	57	25	82
Unclassifiable	Comments that cannot be interpreted as to the assessors' intentions.	12	10	22
N.A.	The comment indicates that there is "Nothing in particular" to comment.	204	164	368
Grand Total		2,675	3,123	5,798

As a result of the above coding, assessment criteria extracted from the assessment comments provided by the 44 faculty members are consistent with those assumed by the author based on educational experience. The results show that assessment focused on whether "content," "language use," "organization," and "format" are good or not good, and that the most important point is "content." "Content," "language use," and "organization" are also included in various existing assessment tables (Jacobs et al., 1981, Tanaka et al., 2009, etc.) and this proves that these are common and basic assessment criteria, regardless of whether it is Japanese composition or English composition.

As these four categories are the most frequent, they account for 88.4% of the total, it is reasonable to assume that they are the core of the rubric. On the other hand, as I cannot ignore comments pointing out a poor "title" or highly valuing the presence of the "writer's" will, these viewpoints should also be reflected in the rubric.

4.2 Analysis of the descriptions of the criteria by co-occurrence network

I extracted three opinion essays that have a scale value of 1-5 points, respectively. "KH Coder3" (<https://khcoder.net/dl3.html>) was used for the co-occurrence network analysis of scale values and assessment comments. (A total of 410 people, 18,680 characters and 740 sentences.)

Figure 1

Co-occurrence network of scale values and assessment comments

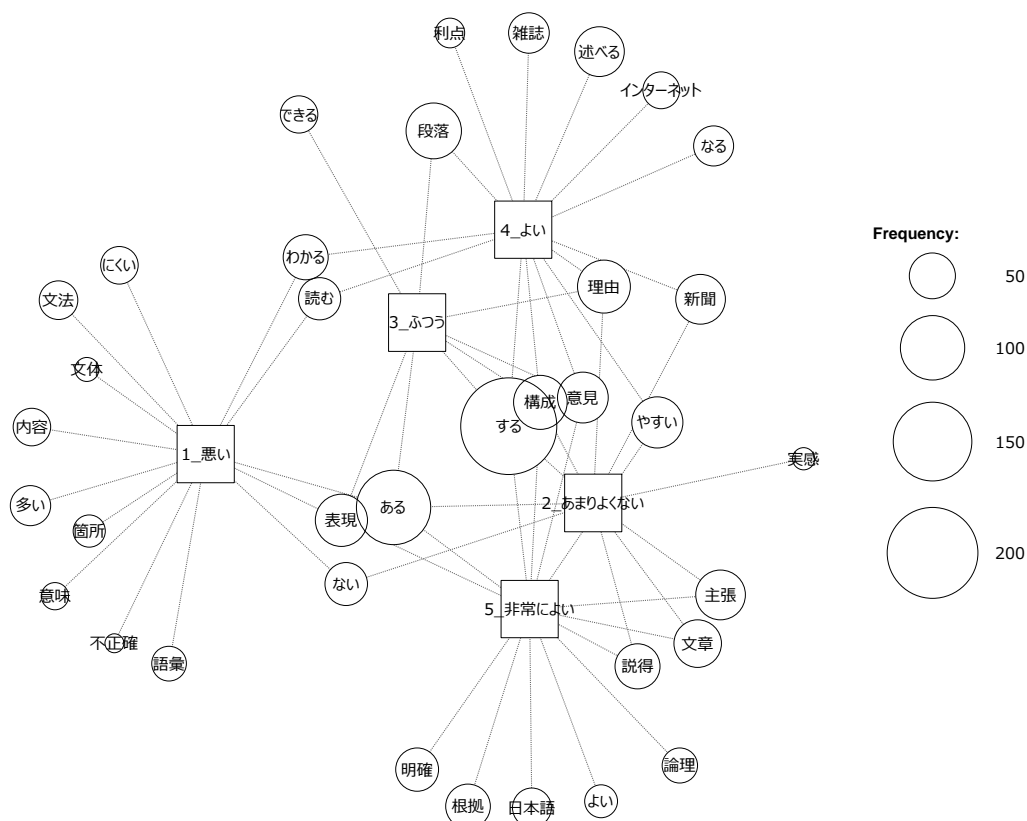


Figure 1 shows the co-occurrence network between scale values of opinion essays (1 = Needs Improvement, 2 = Below Average, 3 = Average, 4 = Good, 5 = Excellent) and content words (verb, noun, adjective). The following list illustrates examples of the assessment comments with scale values: underlined words appear in Figure 1. When developing a rubric, I believe that it is appropriate to prepare descriptions of the criteria based mainly on the underlined words. Although words within a square do not appear in the co-occurrence network, as these appear frequently, I believe that these are useful for developing the descriptions of the criteria for a rubric.

- Scale Value 5

- The premises of the writer's thesis are clear and persuasive.
- Both logical construction and expression of language are very good.
- I feel the writer's originality, as the writer pointed out the benefits of newspapers from a unique viewpoint.

- Scale Value 4

- The structure is easy-to-understand, and it was good that the writer pointed out three different reasons that are different in nature.
- The writer's own point of view, benefits of newspapers and magazines, weak points of the Internet, and the conclusions are clearly stated in an easy-to-understand manner. The content seems appropriate.

- Scale Value 3

- While it shows originality, the writer's thesis is somewhat subjective and employs fewer premises to persuade those of a different opinion.
- The length of the first premise and that of the second/third premises are imbalanced. The premise is emotional, not objective.
- Conjunctions are inappropriate in some cases that cause problems with cohesion in some parts.
- There are some grammatical errors and misuse of words is found in some places.

- Scale Value 2

- The writer's thoughts are facile and the premises of the thesis are not persuasive.
- The overall paragraph structure is vague and not easy-to-read.
- Some vocabulary and grammar is incorrect.
- The writer uses some spoken language; the literary style is inconsistent; the title is mediocre.

- Scale Value 1

- The writer's thesis is unclear.
- The writer repeats the same story and the structure needs improvement.
- Vocabulary, expressions, and grammar are incorrect. Premises are subjective and unreliable. The word count is too low.

When checking how the description of the criteria was stated for "Scale Value 3 (Average)" which is the median of the 5-point ranking scale in the rubric, as shown in the underlined words and the words within a square listed above, I found the words that limit the scope are characteristically used such as "in some parts," "in some cases," "in some points," or "some." Therefore, I decided that it was appropriate to use these expressions for stating descriptions of the criteria.

Regardless of the scale values, as expressions like “subjective/emotional vs. “objective,” and “originality” vs. “mediocrity” were widely found, thus these words were incorporated into the description of the criteria.

5. Conclusions

I developed a draft rubric by using the codes indicated in 4.1 as assessment criteria of the rubric, the 5-point ranking scale values indicated in 4.2 as the scale level of the rubric, and characteristic descriptions in assessment comments as description of the criteria in the rubric. However, as the rubric needs to be practical, it is not feasible to incorporate all the codes indicated in 4.1 and prepare a huge amount of description of the criteria. As Stevens & Levi (2013) also pointed out that we could have five scale levels, and six to seven assessment criteria at a maximum, I prepared a draft rubric based on the following policies:

- (i) Adopting “Premises” as assessment criteria, as this garnered the largest number of codes among the codes extracted in this research.
- (ii) Combining “Theme” and “Standpoint,” which have the second and third largest number of codes following “Premises” into one assessment criterion as “Thesis.”
- (iii) The lower codes in “Organization” are collectively regarded as the “Logical Construction” assessment criteria.
- (iv) “Language Use” is not set by each viewpoint, but roughly divided into two categories: “Accuracy” such as “grammar,” “vocabulary,” “notations of *kana* and *kanji*” and “Adequacy” such as “expressions” and “writing style.”
- (v) As the number of codes for “Format” is smaller than that for “Content,” “Language,” and “Organization,” it is not divided into several assessment criteria but regarded as one criterion altogether.
- (vi) Code, “Title” and “Writer’s (will)” are classified as “Others” and used as factors for adding or deducting points.
- (vii) Expressions like “originality” and “subjective” that are found here and there in the assessment comments are also included in descriptions of the criteria.

Three faculty members who are also the project member executed rubric calibration for six opinion essays using a rubric that was prepared based on the policies stated above, and completed the rubric shown in the Appendix at the end of this paper.

The salient feature of this writing rubric is that the final product was developed based

on practical research using the actual assessment data supplied by Japanese faculty members. As the rubric uses assessment data of opinion essays that were provided by 15 Japanese native speakers and 15 Japanese learners, it can be used as a rubric for Japanese native speakers if the description of the criteria for “Expression of Language” is adjusted. As a future study, I plan to publish the rubric with sample opinion essays attached after receiving verification by faculty members other than the project members.

Notes

- ¹⁾ Now, “Global Learning” has been added to these fifteen rubrics according to the website of the Association of American Colleges & Universities (<https://www.aacu.org/value-rubrics>).
- ²⁾ For rubric development initiatives conducted by Japanese higher educational institutions, please refer to “Rubric Bank” by Japan Association for Educational Development in Higher Education (<https://www.jaedweb.org/blank-3>). Other useful reference materials about practical writing rubrics include Wakita (2016) and a report on the practical use of rubrics in Japanese language education edited by University of Hawai'i (Kondo-Brown, K. et al. (2013).
- ³⁾ According to JASSO (2019), the number of people who took the examination was 56,624 in FY 2018, and 59,354 in FY 2019.
- ⁴⁾ Although it is the same type of “Writing” as the EJU, the essays used in this project contain approximately 800 characters while those used in the EJU contain 400 to 500 characters. This project uses a total of 30 opinion essays, consisting of 20 opinion essays from “The Database of Japanese Opinion Essays by University Students from Japan, Korea, and Taiwan” (<http://www.tufs.ac.jp/ts/personal/ijuin/terms.html>), five essays from “The Corpus of Multilingual Opinion Essays by College Students: MOECS” (<https://okugiri.wixsite.com/website/corpus-moees>), and an additional five essays for the purpose of diversifying the score level. Fifteen essays were written by Japanese native speakers, and the remaining 15 were written by Japanese learners (five essays each from Chinese, Korean, and English native speakers, respectively). All the conditions for writing an essay were the same, and the common task description was given to all the writers as follows:

Writing Assignment

Please read the sentences below and write your point of view freely in Japanese in approximately 800 Japanese characters.

Now, we can freely use the Internet all over the world. Some say that “We do not

need newspapers or magazines anymore, as we can read news articles on the Internet.” On the other hand, there are some people who insist, “We still need newspapers and magazines now and will in the future.”

What do you think about these opinions? Please write your point of view.

- ⁵⁾ Rubric calibration was conducted by three project members; Kazuko KOMORI (Meiji University), Aiko TAKANO (Daito University), and the author.
- ⁶⁾ Please refer to Ijuin et al. (2020) for the results of correspondent analysis among the upper four categories “Content,” “Language,” “Organization” and “Format,” shown in Table 2 and the attributes of the assessors, attributes of the writers, and the level of the essays. In Table 2, while the total weak point scores in “Language Use” is 1,272, it is rendered as 1,271 in Ijuin et al. (2020). This is due to the correction of an error in code expression that was found after precisely checking the raw data for this analysis.

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Appendix
Essay-Writing Rubric (for Learners of Japanese)

shorinbun (opinion essay): A written work, the object of which is to express a thesis (point of view, standpoint, proposal, etc.) by stating the premise(s) about the assigned theme in a coherent and logical manner.

Assessment criteria/ Explanation of the criteria		Excellent!	Good	Average	Below Average	Needs Improvement!
Content Structure	Thesis Is the writer's opinion (in terms of how it responds to the assigned theme) easy to follow?	The writer's thesis is clear and consistent; the piece is easy to understand, develops logically and reflects a deep insight about the subject matter.	The writer's thesis is clear and consistent; the piece is easy to understand and reflects an insight about the subject matter.	The writer's overall thesis regarding the assigned theme is not comprehensible on the first read, but parts of the content are not easily understood.	The writer's overall thesis regarding the assigned theme is not comprehensible on the first read, and/or parts of the content are not easily understood.	The assigned theme is not captured correctly <u>or</u> the writer's response to the assigned theme is not appropriate.
	Premises Are the premises supporting the writer's thesis persuasive?	The writer's objective, concrete premises are presented appropriately; counterarguments, as well, are conceivable and highly persuasive.	The writer's objective, concrete premises are presented appropriately; are conceivable and persuasive.	More than one premise is presented; however the piece is not so persuasive because it lacks objectivity and concreteness.	The piece fails to be persuasive because most of the premises are subjective or superficial and don't support the thesis.	The piece is not persuasive because the premises don't support the thesis.
	Logical Construction Is the piece clear enough, overall? Are the paragraphs presented and divided logically? Is the information included in each paragraph tight and well-organized?	The introduction, main body and conclusion of the piece are presented in a well-organized, well-balanced manner. The connection between points is clear.	The introduction, main body and conclusion of the piece are presented in a well-organized, well-balanced manner. The connection between points is almost clear.	The piece is properly divided into introduction, main body and conclusion; however, some parts are poorly balanced, or there are illogical leaps, or there is overlapping information.	The balance among the introduction, main body and conclusion is bad, <u>or</u> there are some content connection issues.	The balance among the introduction, main body and conclusion is bad, <u>and</u> there are big content connection issues.
Expression of Language	Accuracy Is there misuse of Japanese expressions (sentence patterns, grammar, vocabulary, notations of <i>kana</i> and <i>kanji</i>)?	Throughout the essay, Japanese expressions are used accurately.	Throughout the essay, Japanese expressions are used almost accurately.	Inaccurate Japanese expressions are found in some parts.	Inaccurate Japanese expressions are found in many parts.	Throughout the essay, Japanese expressions are inaccurate.
	Appropriateness Are the expressions appropriate for academic writing (variety of expressions, plain form, academic style) accurate?	Throughout the essay, expressions are appropriate for academic writing.	Throughout the essay, expressions are almost appropriate for academic writing.	Expressions are inappropriate for academic writing; simple or poor expressions, polite form, or casual style are found in some places.	Expressions are inappropriate for academic writing; simple or poor expressions, polite form, or casual style are found in many places.	Throughout the essay, expressions are not appropriate for academic writing.
Format	Written Format Does the essay's writing styles (format, word count, use of <i>genkoyoshi</i> , and so forth) follow the rules?	The writing styles follow the rules.	The writing styles almost follow the rules.	Deviations in the writing styles are found in some parts.	Great deviation in the format <u>or</u> many small deviations are found.	The writing styles don't follow the rules.
Other	Receives added points.	The writer's <i>will</i> and <i>creativity</i> are expressed. For example, it describes a unique point of view that attracts the readers' interest.				
	Has points deducted.					

Each essay is graded using the following method with a maximum of 30 points available.

- (1) "Content Structure," "Expression of Language" and "Format" are calculated using five evaluation categories: Excellent = 5 points, Good = 4 points, Average = 3 points, Below average = 2 points, Needs improvement = 1 point.
(2) In the category of "Other," a maximum of 5 points may be added or deducted. (If the total points exceed 30 points, adding points is not considered.)

