

Grading Criteria

Different papers have different strengths and problems. When grading, I can't simply sit down with a checklist of elements, do some math at the end, and come up with a magic number (or, in this case, letter). I do, however, ask myself certain questions about each essay, which I have listed here more or less in order of importance:

- How well does the paper fulfill the terms of the assignment? If expected to compare or contrast two or more texts, does it do so? If expected to base an argument on research, are the sources appropriate, analyzed and summarized where necessary, and well-integrated into the paper?
- How effectively does the paper make an argument? Does it articulate and defend a debatable claim rather than merely stating the obvious or summarizing other work?
- How fully does the paper provide evidence for its claims and, through analysis of that evidence, show how the evidence supports those claims?
- How thoroughly does the paper define terms or concepts where those terms might be subject to conflicting interpretation? Do these definitions reflect an understanding of course readings?
- Is the paper organized around the writer's claims or does it merely report other people's claims?
- Is the paper organized in such a way that the main claim is apparent early on, sections develop logically, and individual paragraphs are clearly related to the essay's argument?
- Where appropriate, does the paper consider possible counter-arguments or alternative interpretations of evidence and defend its own claim against them?
- Does the paper discuss the implications of its own argument, tying that argument to larger course concepts?
- Are the diction, style and tone of the paper appropriate to an academic rhetorical situation, neither simple-minded nor pretentious?
- Is the paper's clarity and readability improved or impeded by grammar, word choice, punctuation, and other mechanical elements?

An F indicates that the paper has failed to fulfill the assignment. A C means that the paper fulfills the assignment adequately; it indicates that a paper does a solid but not impressive job of making and supporting an argument, that it fulfills the terms of the assignment, and that the organization and sentence construction are fairly clear. Grades higher than C indicate that the paper addresses the assignment in more complicated and interesting ways, and that it has met the criteria listed above with an increased degree of thoroughness, sophistication, and intellectual rigor; broadly speaking, a B indicates a good paper and an A indicates an excellent paper.

Here are some typical paper characteristics that tend to result in particular grades:

F papers: fail to address and/or complete the assignment; summarize inaccurately or reveal significant misunderstanding of course readings or concepts; may suffer from significant problems of sentence-level clarity.

D papers: complete the assignment only partially; reveal minor misunderstandings of course readings or concepts *or* demonstrate understanding but make no argument (“these two essays are similar yet different”) *or* significantly contradict the stated argument elsewhere in the paper; summarize too much and/or with only partial accuracy; may suffer from significant problems of sentence-level clarity.

C papers: summarize accurately but too much; make and support banal or obvious claims *or* articulate potentially insightful claims but offer little support; may include specific examples in support of a claim but do not sufficiently explain those examples *or* do not adequately account for evidence that might contradict the claim; construct a solid argument in the body of the paper that is not adequately introduced near the beginning of the paper; bury topic sentences in the middle of paragraphs; in comparison papers, often articulate a connecting thesis but do not explore those connections thoroughly in the body of the paper.

C+ / B- papers: include and analyze examples but often digress to explain points that don’t connect back to the big picture; *or* grasp the big picture but lack specific support.

B papers: provide specific examples and analyze them closely (often with careful attention to language); often make a complex and interesting argument only at the paper’s end.

B+ / A- papers: make and support sophisticated arguments but are hampered by problems of organization or linguistic clarity, *or* are insightful and stylistically sophisticated but do not convey the argument’s complexity in the introduction and/or do not address the argument’s implications in the conclusion.

A papers: not only make a complex and well-supported analytical argument but consider the further implications of that argument; make insightful connections between concepts or ideas that are not obviously related; in comparison papers, often (though not always) analyze the texts under discussion in light of a concept drawn from other course material; are clearly and elegantly written.