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Grading Standards for English Literature Papers

These standards for evaluating college literature papers follow three major criteria: purpose, content, and expression. In most cases the three criteria will work together. Rarely will severe problems with “expression” be found in a paper with very high quality content, for example. However, some papers will not fit neatly into one grade category. A paper may for instance, have some characteristics of a “B” paper and some of a “C,” and a grade will be issued that balances the two based on careful reflection of the paper’s particular strengths and weaknesses.

- For **purpose**, a paper is evaluated for its vision in responding to the assignment: How original and complex is the paper’s thesis? Is the paper’s vision maintained coherently throughout the whole piece?
- For **content**, a paper’s development and use of supporting evidence is considered. How accurate and responsible is the representation of examples? How sound is the logic of the ideas developing from paragraph to paragraph? Where would more reflection and analysis of the evidence help to advance the paper’s argument?
- For **expression**, a paper’s delivery of its ideas, its diction (word choice), its sentence structure, its paragraphing, and where appropriate its use of source citations is evaluated. Especially significant are problems that interfere with the reading and hinder the articulation of ideas.

“A” Papers:

Purpose: Not only fulfill the assignment, but also establish a striking, unusual, and perceptive interpretation founded on careful study of the literature.

Content: Articulate a precisely focused idea and provide convincing grounds of support. Demonstrate awareness of alternative possibilities and ambiguities in the reading. Reflection on the reading demonstrates close analysis of textual evidence understood in relevant and important contexts. An argument about the whole text is based on efficient selection of representative details. The organization is easy to follow from introduction through succeeding paragraphs, using clearly signaled transitions. The conclusion reflects on the whole and does more than merely summarize or restate the points of the body.

Expression: Language is chosen precisely. Word choice and sentence structure are varied, and complex sentence structures are used effectively to synthesize ideas. Not merely correct in their use of language, “A” papers demonstrate creative facility with choice and organization of words. An “A” paper contains very few if any errors, none of which seriously undermines the effectiveness of the paper for educated readers.

“B” Papers:

Purpose: Fulfill the assignment and make a good, convincing interpretation. The interpretation might not be as complex as the “A” paper, and perhaps could be a little more clearly developed or articulated.

Content: Demonstrate clear understanding of the literature. Provide sufficient supporting evidence, and not simply the most obvious or simplest evidence. Do not rest upon generalities, but work with relevant passages and episodes from the readings. Well organized and logical structure, efficiently signaled transitions. Demonstrate some awareness of complex issues but could use more reflection, perhaps a closer reading of a difficult passage, for example. A clear and reasonable thesis is developed and

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supported throughout the paper. The introduction and/or conclusion is sound, but may be improved with additional reflection and development.

Expression: Generally correct and accurate choice of words. Competent and correct sentences, well ordered paragraphs. It would be surprising to find serious problems with run-on sentences or fragments in a “B” paper. Usually clear and technically correct, but not as admirable as the “A” paper.

“C” Papers:

Purpose: Follow the assignment and present a basically satisfactory, broad or general interpretation. The paper’s thesis may be simple or overly broad, but it is basically supported throughout the paper.

Content: Demonstrate a basic understanding of the literature, but may not take significant complexities into account. Provide evidence from the reading but in a generalized way, perhaps lacking attention to relevant details. May present significant errors in interpretation, but not as serious as those in a “D” paper. May be inconsistent or vague in its use of supporting evidence. May not provide clear transitions or may not be efficiently organized, but overall there are no serious flaws in reasoning threatening the coherence of the paper as a whole. Introduction and/or conclusion may be simplistic, overly broad, or underdeveloped.

Expression: Word choice may be vague, imprecise, limited, or repetitive. May contain simple and mechanical, short, choppy sentences. Or may demonstrate problems with convoluted, wordy and repetitive phrasing slowing the reading. May show some grammar and editing errors, such as run-on sentences or fragments. However the expression is generally satisfactory, and the writing is correct more often than incorrect.

“D” Papers:

Purpose: Attempt to follow the assignment, but are not satisfactory. Papers may be incoherent in developing ideas or may be based on significant errors in interpretation.

Content: Serious problems with providing evidence, whether in a lack of evidence or a misuse of it. Interpretation or evaluation of evidence is missing or incorrect. Reasoning and logic may be seriously flawed. Transitions from one idea to the next may be missing or incorrect. Necessary material may be missing from the paper to fully respond to the assignment. Introduction or conclusion is missing or incomplete.

Expression: Very serious problems with word choice and grammar, making much of the paper nearly incomprehensible. Could show serious problems with paragraph divisions. May lack support within paragraphs of a single main idea.

“F” Papers:

Purpose: Simply do not follow the assignment, even if they are correct and organized. Or lack any clear purpose, wandering in different directions. May fall seriously short of minimum length or source citation requirements. May be plagiarized: may be another person’s paper, or may lift material from other sources without appropriate documentation.

Content: Even more serious content or organization problems than described for “D” papers. Severe lack of coherence or complete misrepresentation of texts.

Expression: So many errors in word choice, grammar, spelling, or sentence structure as to be incomprehensible to the reader.