**Grading Standards for Composition Classes**

**At Shawnee State University**

*Approved via email vote June 2006*



These grading standards describe the typical characteristics of an essay at each grade level. Of course, some essays will not fit neatly into one grade category. Some essays, for example, may have a few strengths typically found in *A* papers but other characteristics more common to *C* papers. The final grade an essay receives will depend on the weight the instructor gives each criterion, how well the essay fulfills the requirements of the assignment, and whether the essay was turned in by the date due.

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**The *A* Essay**

*The A (exceptional) essay is characterized by these strengths:*

**Content and Development**

* The *A* essay meets or exceeds all of the requirements of the assignment in an innovative and scholarly manner.
* The essay effectively meets the needs of the rhetorical situation.
  + It establishes the writer’s ethos (credibility). The paper indicates that the author has good judgment and is aware of the complexities of the topic.
  + It is tailored to an appropriate audience. The essay demonstrates sensitivity to context and anticipates the readers’ points of view.
  + It has a controlling sense of purpose (e.g.: to explain, to express, or to persuade).
* The topic is focused. The thesis claim is clear and polished.
* Claims are supported with specific (and appropriate) evidence; detailed, concrete examples and explanations; and valid reasoning.

**Organization**

* The organization—chronological, spatial, or emphatic—is appropriate for the purpose and subject of the essay.
  + The introduction captures the readers’ attention and makes them want to read on.
  + Main body paragraphs are controlled by explicit or implicit topic sentences. Appropriate transitions indicate movement from one idea to the next.
  + The conclusion moves beyond a mere restatement of the introduction, perhaps by providing a call-for-action, perhaps by inspiring the readers to continue thinking about the topic, perhaps by offering implications for the significance of the topic beyond the paper. The conclusion must also leave the readers with a lasting impression.

**Style**

* The prose is clear and memorable.  The author’s voice is distinctive and contextually appropriate.
* The use of subordination helps readers understand how subtopics are related to one another. The sentences and paragraphs, varied in length, produce a striking rhetorical effect.
* The diction is thoughtful; the vocabulary is appropriate to the target audience.

**Mechanics**

* The paper is free fromsurface errors that undermine the overall effectiveness of the paper.

**Research and Documentation** *(Not all assignments require research and documentation. Disregard this category for such assignments.)*

* Secondary sources are used carefully and correctly.
  + The sources are appropriate to the assignment, indicating that the writer evaluated the sources carefully and discarded any that were unreliable or otherwise inappropriate.
  + The sources are cited in the prescribed format (typically MLA or APA).
* Paraphrases and quotations are carefully woven into the text.
* Primary and secondary sources are analyzed thoughtfully.

*Only papers that excel in all four (or, if researched, five) categories will be awarded with As***.**

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**The *B* Essay**

*The B (good) essay is marked by these characteristics:*

**Content and Development**

* The *B* essay fulfills all of the requirements of the assignment.
* The essay meets the needs of the rhetorical situation.
  + It establishes the writer’s stance.
  + It is accessible to the target audience. The essay demonstrates awareness of context and attempts to anticipate the readers’ points of view.
  + It is purposeful.
* The topic is focused. The thesis claim is clear.
* Claims are supported with relevant evidence, concrete examples, and valid reasoning.

**Organization**

* The order of information is logical.
  + The introduction captures the readers’ attention.
  + Paragraph divisions are logical. Transitions and explicit or implicit topic sentences help readers follow the paper.
  + The conclusion brings the paper to a graceful close.

**Style**

* + - The prose is clear and readable. The author’s voice is apparent.
    - Sentence structure is appropriate for educated readers. The author demonstrates a control of syntax, though the use of subordination may not be as striking as that in an *A* paper.The sentences are varied.
    - The modifiers are distinctive, and the diction is precise.

**Mechanics**

* Punctuation, usage, and spelling conform to the conventions of Standard American English.
* Almost no major sentence-level errors (comma splices, fragments, or fused sentences) appear.
* There are no stigmatized errors or patterns of error.

**Research and Documentation** *(Not all assignments require research and documentation. Disregard this category for such assignments.)*

* Secondary sources are used thoughtfully.
* The sources are appropriate to the assignment, suggesting that the writer evaluated the sources and discarded many that were unreliable or otherwise inappropriate.
* The sources are cited in the prescribed format (typically MLA or APA).
* Paraphrases and quotations are well-integrated.
* Primary and secondary sources are analyzed.

*Only papers that are excellent or above average in all four (or, if researched, five) categories will be awarded with Bs.*

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**The *C* Essay**

*The C (competent) essay exhibits some of these characteristics:*

**Content and Development**

* The paper meets the minimum requirements of the assignment but often does nothing more.
* The essay is generally purposeful, but it may be predictable. Writers of *C* papers rarely take chances. The *C* essay typically addresses the knowledge level and attitudes of peers, occasionally over- or underestimating other readers’ prior knowledge, assumptions, or beliefs.
  + - The topic may only be generally defined.There is a thesis statement, but it may be general (too vague) or unsophisticated (too blunt).
    - The supporting evidence is often obvious and easily accessible. There may be occasional minor lapses in reasoning.

**Organization**

* The *C* essay may exhibit minor imperfections or inconsistencies in organization, but it is generally clear.
  + There is an introduction, but it may not hook readers.
  + The essay is easy-to-follow, despite the occasional lack of topic sentences.Paragraphs have adequate development and are divided logically.Transitions may be mechanical, but they foster coherence.
  + The conclusion may simply restate the introduction.

**Style**

* The expression is competent, but it may lack vigor.
* The sentence structure is often relatively simple, relying primarily on simple and compound sentences.
* Word choice is technically correct. However, the vocabulary may be limited, or the diction may sometimes be too casual or too formal for the intended audience.

**Mechanics**

* Weaknesses in punctuation, spelling, and usage suggest that the writer is unfamiliar with certain conventions of Standard American English. However, the essay is generally free of sentence-level errors and stigmatized errors.

**Research and Documentation** *(Certain assignments may not require research and documentation. Disregard this category for such assignments.)*

* The prescribed number of sources is used.
  + The sources are generally appropriate to the assignment, suggesting that the writer discarded some that were unreliable.
  + The sources are cited in the prescribed format (typically MLA or APA), but there may be a few minor errors in documentation.
* Paraphrases and quotations may appear to have been pasted into the text without regard for the writer’s own tone and style. Consequently, readers may find these paraphrases and quotations disruptive.
* Paraphrases and quotations may be presented without introductory tags or other cues that help readers recognize the value of the source material.

*The C paper may be particularly strong in one or more category, but flawed in other areas. All papers submitted in a college-level class should be mechanically correct; mere absence of errors will not be awarded with a grade of C.*

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**The *D* Essay**

*The D (weak) essay is marked by some of these characteristics:*

**Content and Development**

* The *D* essay attempts to follow the assignment.
* The essay may demonstrate little awareness of the rhetorical situation.
  + The writer may appear naïve or unsophisticated.
  + The paper may be inappropriate for the target audience. In fact, the target audience may occasionally be offended or insulted by the prose because the writer over- or underestimates the audience’s prior knowledge, assumptions, or beliefs.
  + The sense of purpose may be unclear.
* The topic may be ill-defined or unfocused.The thesis may be flawed or nonexistent.
* The evidence may be inadequately interpreted.

**Organization**

* Organization is typically deficient.
  + The introduction may not be functional.
  + The paragraphs may be undeveloped or arranged randomly.Topic sentences are consistently missing, murky, or inappropriate, and transitions are missing or flawed.
  + The paper may come to an abrupt end.

**Style**

* There may be lapses in clarity.
* The sentence structure may be flawed.
* The vocabulary may be inappropriate for college-level writing.

**Mechanics**

* Errors in spelling, usage, and punctuation indicate that the writer is unfamiliar with the conventions of Standard American English.
  + The paper may be marked by sentence-level errors.
  + There may be some stigmatized errors or patterns of error.

**Research and Documentation** *(Certain assignments may not require research and documentation. Disregard this category for such assignments.)*

* The paper may not use as many secondary sources as required. Or the sources may be used carelessly.
* The writer may select sources that are wholly inappropriate, perhaps using information from a non-expert’s unsubstantiated personal homepage, rather than material gleaned from a reliable library database.
* Sources may not be fully cited. For example, the writer may include in-text citations but no bibliography (or vice versa). Or the sources may be cited in a format other than the one prescribed, perhaps suggesting that the author is recycling a paper from another class, a paper that might not be fully appropriate for the assignment.
* The paper may rely too heavily on evidence from published sources. Sections of the paper may be little more than “data dumps,” sets of quotations strung together with little or no explanation.
* The sources may be inadequately or incorrectly interpreted.

*All papers submitted in a college-level class should be mechanically correct. Originality and creativity cannot compensate for mechanical errors. A paper that is marked by stigmatized errors or patterns of error can receive no more than a D.*

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**The *F* Essay**

*The F (unacceptable) essay exhibits some of the weaknesses listed below.*

**Content and Development**

* The *F* essay may not follow the assignment.
* The *F* essay may ignore the rhetorical situation.
* The *F* essay may have no clear purpose or direction.
* The *F* essay is insufficiently developed and superficial. Typically, such problems occur only when an essay either falls seriously short of the minimum length requirements, or when the writer selects a topic that is not appropriate for the assignment.

**Organization**

* The paper may be so unorganized that it is difficult to follow.
  + The introduction may be inappropriate or non-functional.
  + The paragraphs may be undeveloped and arranged randomly.Topic sentences and transitions may be consistently missing.
  + The paper may come to an abrupt end.

**Style**

* The paper may be unclear.
* The sentence structure may be consistently flawed.
* The vocabulary may be offensive to the intended audience.

**Mechanics**

* The paper may be plagued with errors in spelling, usage, and punctuation.
  + There may be numerous sentence-level errors.
  + There may be stigmatized errors and patterns of error.

**Research and Documentation** *(Certain assignments may not require research and documentation. Disregard this category for such assignments.)*

* The paper may not use any sources, despite requirements in the assignment.
* The paper may be nothing more than a “data dump,” a set of quotations strung together with no explanation.
* The essay may be intentionally or unintentionally plagiarized.
  + The essay entire essay may be the work of someone other than the student.
  + Parts of the essay may have been written by someone other than the student.