

General Criteria for Essay Grades

A paper: Perhaps the principal characteristic of the A paper is its rich content; the information it delivers makes the reader feel significantly taught by the author, sentence after sentence, paragraph after paragraph. The A paper is also marked by stylistic finesse: the title and opening paragraph are engaging; the transitions are artful; the phrasing is tight, fresh, and highly specific; the sentence structure is varied; the tone enhances the paper's purposes. Finally, the A paper, because of its careful organization and full development, imparts a feeling of wholeness and unusual clarity. Not surprisingly, then, it leaves the reader feeling bright, thoroughly satisfied, and eager to reread the piece.

B paper: It is significantly more than competent. Besides being almost free of mechanical errors, the B paper delivers substantial information--that is, substantial in both quantity and interest. Its specific points are logically ordered, well developed, and unified around a clear organizing principle that is apparent early in the paper. The opening paragraph draws the reader in; the closing paragraph is both conclusive and thematically related to the opening. The transitions between paragraphs are for the most part smooth, the sentence structures pleasingly varied. The diction of the B paper is typically much more concise and precise than that found in the C paper. Occasionally, it even shows distinctiveness--that is, finesse and memorableness. On the whole, then, a B paper makes the reading experience pleasant, for it offers substantial information with few distractions.

C paper: It is generally competent--it meets the assignment, has few mechanical errors, and is reasonably well organized and developed. The actual information it delivers, however, seems thin and commonplace. One reason for that impression is that the ideas are typically cast in the form of vague generalities--generalities that prompt the confused reader to ask marginally: "In every case?" "Exactly how large?" "Why?" "But how many?" "What is the evidence that supports this claim?" Stylistically the C paper has other shortcomings as well: the opening paragraph does little to draw the reader in; the final paragraph offers only a perfunctory wrap-up; the transitions between paragraphs are often bumpy; the sentences, besides being a bit choppy, tend to follow a predictable and thus monotonous subject-verb-object pattern; and the diction is occasionally marred by unconscious repetitions, redundancy, and imprecision. The C paper, then, while it gets the job done, lacks both imagination and intellectual rigor, and thus does not invite a rereading.

D paper: Its treatment and development of the subject are as yet only rudimentary. While organization is present, it is neither clear nor effective. Sentences are frequently awkward, ambiguous, and marred by serious mechanical errors. Evidence of careful revision and proofreading is scanty or nonexistent. The whole piece, in fact, often gives the impression of having been conceived and written in haste.

F paper: Its treatment of its subject is superficial; its theme lacks discernible organization; its prose is garbled or stylistically primitive. Mechanical errors are frequent. In short, the ideas, organization, and style fall far below what is acceptable college writing.