

Grades¹

These are the standards I adhere to when I grade essays. Pluses and minuses represent shades of difference, as do split grades (e.g., B/B+). I assign grades on the evidence of the essay submitted, not on effort or time spent.

A Excellent in every way (this is not the same as perfect). This is an ambitious, perceptive essay that grapples with interesting, complex ideas; responds discerningly to counter-arguments; and explores well-chosen evidence revealingly. The discussion enhances, rather than underscores, the reader's and writer's knowledge (it doesn't simply repeat what has been taught). There is a context for all the ideas; someone outside the class would be enriched, not confused, by reading the essay. Its beginning opens up rather than flatly announcing its thesis. Its end is something more than a summary. The language is clean, precise, often elegant. As a reader I feel surprised, delighted, changed by the essay. There's something new here for me, something only the essay's writer could have written and explored in this particular way. The writer's stake in the material is obvious.

B A piece of writing that reaches high and achieves many of its aims. The ideas are solid and progressively explored but some thin patches require more and/or some stray thoughts don't fit in. The language is generally clear and precise but occasionally not. The evidence is relevant, but there may be too little; the context for the evidence may not be sufficiently explored, so that I have to make some connections that the writer should have made clear for me.

OR a piece of writing that reaches less high than an A essay but thoroughly achieves its aims. This is a solid essay whose reasoning and argument may nonetheless be rather routine. (In this case the limitation is conceptual.)

C A piece of writing that has real problems in one of these areas: conception (there's at least one main idea but it's fuzzy and hard to get to); structure (confusing); use of evidence (weak or non-existent—the connections among the ideas and evidence are not made and/or are presented without context, or add up to platitudes and generalizations); language (the sentences are often awkward, dependent on unexplained abstractions, sometimes contradict each other). The essay may not move forward but rather repeat its main points, or it may touch upon many (and apparently unrelated) ideas without exploring any of them in sufficient depth. Punctuation, spelling, grammar, paragraphing, and transitions may be a problem.

OR an essay that is largely plot summary or description or "interpretive summary" of the text (i.e., it has no real thesis), but is written without major problems.

OR an essay that is chiefly a personal reaction to something. Well-written, but scant intellectual content—mostly opinion or impression.

D and F These are efforts that are wildly shorter than they ought to be to grapple with serious ideas.

OR those that are extremely problematic in many of the areas mentioned above: aims, structure, use of evidence, language, etc.

OR those that do not come close to addressing the expectations of the essay assignment.

¹ This rubric was developed by Maxine Rodburg at the Harvard Writing Center.

GRADING CRITERIA

C	B	A
Proposes a better-than-truistic thesis; focuses on main point; answers "So What?"	Thesis is interesting or surprising and worth exploring; avoids the easy way out; fully accounts for what follows.	Thesis grapples with a genuinely complex, even perplexing issue.
Has adequate coherence, relates all subtopics to the thesis, perhaps misses a transition or two.	Has clear development of argument, subtopics connected clearly both to each other and to the thesis, has consistent transitions.	Mounts a strikingly complex argument, ensconced in an especially effective organizational plan; supplies graceful transitions.
Has adequate support, some specificity.	Presents varied evidence, summarizes precisely and succinctly, answers counter arguments, shows a consistently fair-mind.	Presents persuasive evidence, deftly answers the skeptical reader, blazes a compelling route to what's most deeply at issue, hews to what is complexly fair.
Quotes sources accurately and incorporates quotations correctly.	Orchestrates an appropriate balance of summary, paraphrase, quotation, analysis, synthesis; adequately contextualizes quotation	Does what a B asks for, but all quotations are strikingly apt and nuanced.
Possesses clear paragraphs, with a few gaps in coherence and unity.	Crafts clear and cohesive paragraphs, aware of their place in the essay's unfolding.	Artfully frames the connections between and among related ideas.
Marred by several errors in usage, grammar, and punctuation; a bit clogged with repetition.	Employs varied syntax; rarely commits technical or stylistic errors; steers clear of repetition.	Greatly varies sentence structure, skillfully deploys subordination and parallelism, uses fresh language, and is virtually error free.
Paginates, has a title, is in general control of diction and economy of statement; meets requirements of assignment length; crafts a somewhat distinctive voice; might stutter but does not stultify.	Leads off with an accurate, precise, if not inspired, title; maintains its own voice evident; convincing.	Sports a telling title that touches the argument's essence; employs a variety of voices or "registers"; likely includes deft irony, metaphor, and humor; maintains an ethically subtle outlook; powerfully yet humbly convinces anyone with an open mind.