

Essay Guidelines, Short Grading Rubric, & Corrections Guide

I. Essential Essay Guidelines

Argument: Do you have a thesis statement? Check the last sentence or two of your introduction – this is where your reader will look for a statement that summarizes your argument. The thesis should be arguable: neither a fact nor purely a matter of opinion. The thesis is an opinion that you can support with specific evidence and logical arguments. You should follow the thesis statement with a brief summary of your main points, which should correspond to your supporting paragraphs.

Introduction: keep it short and to the point. You can use the introduction to clarify the issues that your thesis will tackle, for example by defining key terms and providing some elements of the context. Above all, do not make absurdly broad statements unrelated to your argument (“Throughout history...”).

Supporting paragraphs: does each one develop a single point? A paragraph is a little version of the paper: it should begin with a statement that every following sentence explains or proves. The first sentence or two can provide a transition from the preceding paragraph, but the topic sentence should appear shortly thereafter. Each and every supporting paragraph should then focus on the analysis of specific textual evidence.

Evidence: You must cite appropriate textual evidence for all your claims about the text. But only quote what you will discuss. Keep quotes as short as possible and avoid long block quotations. It is often better to paraphrase and explain rather than to try to let quotes speak for themselves. The evidence cannot stand alone: you should follow or introduce each piece of evidence (quotation, paraphrase, summary, or any other reference to the text) with an explanation of how it contributes to your argument. Use plot summary or historical narrative very sparingly: rather than recapitulating the events, try to isolate the key details or ideas that support your point.

Style: Writing Counts! You should consult the detailed style guides on my website, under Teaching. Some of the most common mistakes to avoid include:

- Avoid the passive voice: “The ball was thrown by me” instead of “I threw the ball.” The first example is passive because it uses a form of “to be” and the past participle of the verb “to throw;” instead the agent – the person or entity doing the action – should be the subject of the sentence.
- Confusing “its” (“belonging to it”) and “it’s” (contraction of “it is”).
- Run-on sentences: linking two independent clauses with a comma alone (e.g. “She got in the car, she went to work”). An independent clause consists of a subject and a verb, and it can stand alone as a sentence. To put two such clauses together, you need both a conjunction (e.g., “and” or “but”) and a comma. Or use a semicolon: “She got in the car; she went to work.”
- Incomplete sentences: sentences without both a subject and a verb, e.g. “No way!” or “Which is why everybody respected her ideas about politics.” While sometimes acceptable in fiction and journalism, incomplete sentences are almost always bad in expository essays.
- Dangling modifiers: beginning the sentence with a participial phrase that doesn’t modify the subject, e.g. “Young and inexperienced, the task seemed easy to me.” Here, “the task,” not you, is the “young and inexperienced” subject.

II. Short Grading Rubric

While the grade you earn on an essay is based partly on your understanding of the course materials, it also depends heavily on how well you follow the above guidelines. The brief grading rubric below shows the numerical grade equivalents based on the standard UW grade scale. For more information, see also the detailed grading rubric on my website, under Teaching.

A, Excellent (93-100%): shows original thinking, summed up in a clear thesis statement; argument follows logical progression through all supporting paragraphs, with perceptive use of evidence; entire paper is clearly written and free of basic errors in grammar, punctuation, etc.

A/B, Very Good (88-92%): missing one of the components listed above.

B, Good (83-87%): has reasonably strong arguments, but lacks two or more components listed above.

B/C, Satisfactory (78-82%): weak or somewhat confused argument; several flaws regarding the components listed above.

C, Fair (70-77%): weak argument and numerous flaws regarding components listed above.

D, Poor (60-69%): major flaws in all areas.

F, Unacceptable (59% and below): incomplete, incomprehensible, or plagiarized.

III. Key to Some Common Corrections

awk (awkward): awkwardly constructed sentence

wc (word choice): poorly chosen word(s), or incorrect use of word(s)

cap: capitalize

cit (citation): missing or incorrect citation of a source

lc: lowercase

pv: passive voice

fragment: sentence fragment, incomplete sentence

transition: choppy transition between paragraphs or sentences

redundant: unnecessary repetition of point

source?: missing or incorrect source

^: insert suggested word