

## Essay Grading Rubric

I have provided here a detailed grading rubric to help you understand the criteria used for grading your essays and papers. However, it is important to take it with a grain of salt, because one cannot really reduce the process of assessing an essay to a checklist of factors that can be ‘objectively’ graded. Instead, it is a qualitative process that relies on making many judgment calls. For example, an essay might contain the germ of a promising idea, but its execution in terms of supporting argument and writing might be quite weak. Another essay might be very well executed in organization and writing, but lack an incisive, perceptive argument. In some cases an essay of the first type might receive the higher grade, while in other cases an essay of the second type would come out better. Much would depend on just how good the first type of essay’s ‘promising’ ideas are, or just how weak the second type of essay’s ideas are. Making these kinds of judgment depends on experience and comparison among students’ papers over the years; it is not a scientific process! The excellent rubric below is borrowed from Prof. Stephen Kantrowitz, of the UW-Madison History Department (see, with additional explanations: <http://writing.wisc.edu/wac/node/88>).

### **The Superior Paper (A)**

**Structure:** Your thesis is clear, insightful, original, sophisticated, even exciting. All ideas in the paper flow logically; your argument is identifiable, reasonable, and sound. You have excellent transitions. Your paragraphs have solid topic sentences, and each sentence clearly relates to that topic sentence. Your conclusion is persuasive.

**Analysis:** You support every point with at least one example from your primary sources. You integrate quoted material into your sentences well. Your analysis is fresh and exciting, posing new ways to think of the material.

**Style:** Your sentence structure, grammar, spelling, and citations are excellent. You have NO run-on sentences or comma splices. Your writing style is lively, active, and interesting. You use active verbs, and do not use the passive voice. You are not wordy or redundant.

**Originality:** Your arguments show a great deal of independent insight and originality.

### **The Very Good Paper (AB)**

**Structure:** Your thesis is clear, insightful, and original. Your argument flows logically and is sound. You may have a few unclear transitions. You end with a strong conclusion.

**Analysis:** You give examples to support most points, and you integrate quotations into sentences. Your analysis is clear and logical, and even makes sense.

**Style:** Your sentences structure, grammar, spelling, and citations are good. You have no more than one run-on sentence or comma-splice. Your writing style is solid and clear. You use active verbs and do not use the passive voice. You are not wordy or redundant.

**Originality:** Your arguments show independent thought.

### **The Good Paper (B)**

**Structure:** Your thesis is clear, but may not be insightful, original, or easily identified. Your argument is generally clear and appropriate, although it may wander occasionally. You may have a few unclear transitions, or paragraphs without strong topic sentences. You may end without much of a conclusion.

**Analysis:** You give evidence to support most points, but some evidence may appear where inappropriate. Your argument usually makes sense, although some gaps in logic may exist.

**Style:** Your writing style is clear, but not always lively, active, or interesting. You sometimes use the passive voice. You may become wordy or redundant. Your sentence structure, grammar, and spelling are strong despite occasional lapses.

**Originality:** You do a solid job of synthesizing course material but do not develop your own insights or conclusions.

### **The Borderline Paper (BC)**

**Structure:** Your thesis may be unclear, vague, or unoriginal, and it may provide little structure for the paper. Your paper may wander, with few transitions, few topic sentences, and little logic. Your paragraphs may not be organized coherently.

**Analysis:** You give examples to support some but not all points. Your points often lack supporting evidence, or else you use evidence inappropriately, often because there may be no clear point. Your quotations may be poorly integrated into sentences. You may give a quote, but then fail to analyze it or show how it supports your argument. Your logic may fail, or your argument may be unclear. Your end may dwindle off without a conclusion.

**Style:** Your writing style is not always clear, active, or interesting. You use the passive voice, or become wordy or redundant. You have repeated problems in sentence structure, grammar, punctuation, citation style, or spelling. You may have several run-on sentences or comma splices.

**Originality:** You do a fair job of synthesizing course material but do not develop your own insights or conclusions.

### **The “Needs Help” Paper (C)**

**Structure:** Your thesis is difficult to identify, or it may be a bland restatement of an obvious point. Your structure may be unclear, often because your thesis is weak or non-existent. Your transitions are confusing and unclear. Your paragraphs show little structure. The paper is a loose collection of statements, rather than a cohesive argument.

**Analysis:** Your examples are few or weak. You fail to support statements, and the evidence you give is poorly analyzed, poorly integrated into the paper, or simply incorrect. Your argument may be impossible to identify. Ideas may not flow at all, often because there is no argument to support.

**Style:** Your writing style has problems in sentence structure, grammar, and diction. You have frequent major errors in citation style, punctuation, and spelling. You may have many run-on sentences and comma splices.

**Originality:** You do a confusing or poor job synthesizing material presented in lectures and sections, and you do not develop your own insights or conclusions.

**The Bad Paper (D or F)**

A bad paper shows minimal lack of effort or comprehension. The arguments are very difficult to understand owing to major problems with mechanics, structure, and analysis. The paper has no identifiable thesis, or an incompetent thesis. It's difficult to tell that you've come to class.