

Some Grading Criteria for Papers & Essays

An A-Range (3.5-4.0) Essay typically has the following qualities:

- This essay rocks! Embarrassingly enough, you realize that you could not have written a better paper yourself. It was a pleasure to read and made you do some real thinking. Once you've verified that it isn't plagiarized, this paper becomes the "key".
- Has a substantive thesis, addresses the assigned topic, is cogently and creatively argued, and concise.
- Balanced between providing convincing evidence and analysis, or makes use of the evidence in a novel way.
- Uses proper citation formats and makes skillful use of quotations, paraphrases, etc.
- Has a sophisticated style whilst lacking prolixity.
- Refrains from ostentatious vocabulary, cliché, and pomposity (i.e. using words like "whilst" and "prolixity.")
- Has only minor errors of grammar and syntax.

A B-Range (2.5-3.4) Essay typically has the following qualities:

- Has a clear thesis that addresses the assigned topic, but not completely (i.e. the thesis lacks some critical support or employed somewhat dubious evidence).
- Shows some depth and complexity, and it follows a solid line of reasoning, but you can't help but think that the student could have done better.
- Has some weaknesses of style and a few annoying but forgivable grammatical/spelling errors (such as, misspelling words like "mispeeling", or, my personal favorite, conflating the meanings of words like "imperial" and "empirical").
- Has complexity of style – i.e. variation in sentence patterns, cogent structure, appropriate diction, etc.
- Uses proper citation formats and well-balanced in analysis, but you happen to notice a few weak points.

A C-Range (1.5-2.4) Essay typically has the following qualities:

- The classic mediocrity. Forgettable, but not regrettable.
- You think things like, "Was that a thesis I just read? Well, sort of:... But was that really the assignment??"
- This sort of paper is a bit simplistic. The student has flung enough evidence at the assignment that you can justify a mediocre grade. Sadly, this sort of paper constitutes the bulk of what you will read.
- Written in passable, but "just barely goodly English". (Note: the grammar checker on my computer failed to notice the double adverb I put here, so many students wouldn't bother to fix it if they rely on their computer to proof-read for them. While "goodly" is, in fact, a real word, and thus the spell-checker ignores it, it clearly doesn't belong here).
- The citation format would have you drummed out of the academy were you to try it in seminar. Moreover, the evidence cited is pretty sketchy and is dropped in with little analysis – or, worse, an analysis that is laughable. On second thought, the laughable ones can break the monotony, so their usually more fun to read and share with your friends.

(OVER)

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A D-Range (0.7-1.4) Essay typically has the following qualities:

- This paper blows, but the student is clinging, leech-like, to a passing grade.
- Was there a thesis here at all. OK, well there was, but it was buried on page three, or was so obtuse that it took several readings to discern it.
- The diction and grammar are abysmal, with a tendency to drone on and on without proper punctuation or a bunch of conjunctions strung together in a barrage of run-on sentences that bother you immensely but what can you do exactly send them all to the writing center and even if you did would it help probably not.
- The citations (or lack thereof) will drive you mad. Sometimes they'll have the authors name, sometimes not. Maybe there'll be page numbers. Maybe not. Moreover, some of the evidence is employed haphazardly and does not appear to advance an argument.
- Often these papers are "researched" entirely on the web and bear all the marks of the hasty, all-nighter effort. Beware of plagiarism on these. We often think that it is the mediocre or uncharacteristically good papers that are plagiarized, but there's a lot of crap on the web, and students often use some of these lousy sources to cobble together a "D" paper at the last minute just to pass the course.

An F-Range (0.0) Essay typically has the following qualities:

- Actually, there is no range here at all. It is a zero. This paper is not worthy of the efforts you've made to read it, let alone the paper and toner that were sacrificed to produce it. There is no thesis, no argument, no evidence, nada.
- These papers display the telltale signs of the deranged (or more likely, disinterested) mind, for they are utterly incoherent, riddled with major (and often amusing) grammatical and syntactical errors. In any case, if there was an argument here, you'll never find it.
- The citations are absent, though for the most part the student didn't bother to use the sources anyway. These papers can sometimes border on plagiarism, but usually the student has simply attempted to answer the essay question without doing a lick of reading.
- There are also papers that fall into this category that might be brilliantly written and well argued, but seem to deliberately avoid the topic assigned – or show no real understanding of the issues addressed by the topic. These are tricky and usually are the result of the student misunderstanding the assignment, or, it could represent an effort by the student to use a single paper to cover the writing assignments from multiple classes.

Web-Links of Interest

<http://depts.washington.edu/grading/> - this is an excellent overall resource.

<http://depts.washington.edu/cidrweb/GradingTools.htm> - CIDR's resource on grading issues.

http://www.washington.edu/students/genocat/front/Grading_Sys.html - lists the UW Grade scale and other useful information about grading practices (especially the appeals process).