

Essay Standards

Although each essay will be considered individually, the following are some outlines to let you know what is expected of papers in each grade range.

- A: The “A” mark is generally awarded to assignments that are superior in all areas. It will have a comprehensive, well-organized, coherent, and persuasive argument. It will make comprehensive use of the sources required for the assignment. It will be stylistically pleasing to read (i.e., it will use clear, concise and vigorous sentences, and will vary sentence length and structure to prevent stilted prose). Grammatical and spelling errors will be non-existent (or almost non-existent). Most importantly, it will contain rigorous analysis and originality of thought. A paper may remain mechanically sound and not achieve a letter grade of “A.”
- B: Essays in the “B” range will also contain a coherent, well-organized argument, although they might have some minor problems, such as a lack of concluding sentences to their paragraphs, or weak topic sentences. They will have very few grammatical errors (no more than one per 250-word page). Such papers might suffer from some stylistic problems (wordiness or overuse of the passive voice). Although “B” essays will have a clear and precise thesis, they might not display the originality of thought that characterizes an “A” paper. It should be noted that one of these problems could be enough to move a paper into the “B” range, and a number of them will reduce the grade further.
- C: Essays in the “C” range will have a clear thesis, but this thesis might not be precise enough, or not proven adequately. They may suffer from problems in organization, such as not having clear transitions between paragraphs, or not having topic sentences. A failure to stick to the topic might also move a paper into the “C” range. They might have more grammatical errors than a “B” paper (2-3 per page), and their style might be awkward, unclear, wordy, and overuse the passive voice. Such essays might also rely too heavily on summary or description, and not engage in enough analysis of the text or topic.
- D: Essays in the “D” range might not have a clear thesis. They might also suffer from many of the problems of the “C” paper, but to a greater extent. Their prose might be so awkward that the meaning of the sentences is obscured, or they might have major problems with syntax. They might consist exclusively of summary with no analysis, or might make general assertions without backing them up with direct reference to documentary sources. They might have serious grammatical problems (4-5 per page). Such papers might also lack an introduction or a conclusion, or might have no clear paragraphing whatsoever. Such papers might also reproduce the ideas of a single secondary source, without contributing their own analysis.

F: A failing paper might not answer the question asked. If it does answer the question, it will usually suffer from major grammatical problems, or lack any sense of organization. It might not have a thesis at all, or its prose might be so convoluted that the meaning is lost. Failing papers might, by making numerous factual errors, indicate that their author has either not researched the topic, not read the texts, or not understood them. All plagiarized papers will receive a mark of zero, and the authors might be subject to more severe academic penalties.

A NOTE ON PLAGIARISM

Plagiarism is the unacknowledged use of the words or the ideas of another person, and the representation of such words and ideas as your own. It is, quite literally, theft, and is a serious crime in the academic community. When you use secondary sources (including the course notes), you must acknowledge them. If you quote the text directly, make sure you place the passage in quotation marks (this includes apt turns of phrase, as well as complete sentences). Even if you paraphrase the text, rather than citing it directly, you must acknowledge the source of the ideas, facts, or information. You do not need to acknowledge facts that are common knowledge, such as the dates for women's suffrage, but if you are ever in doubt, it is better to err on the side of caution and give credit to your source.