



## Grading Criteria for College Writing at the University of Southern Maine

### The "A" Paper

- The principal characteristic of the "A" paper is its rich content. The information is presented in such a way that the reader feels significantly taught by the author. The writer sustains a thoughtful, analytic argument, looking at ideas from more than one point of view, asking difficult questions and following them up with analysis. Sometimes a paper achieves an A because a student develops a thoughtful and well-defined interpretive approach and an awareness of his or her own position in relation to the positions in the assigned readings.
- An A paper must demonstrate the writer making substantial interpretive connections between the ideas of two or more texts.
- It is also marked by stylistic finesse: the title and opening paragraph are engaging; the transitions are substantive rather than superficial; the phrasing is tight, fresh, and highly specific; the sentence structure is varied; and the tone contributes to the meaning of the paper. Sentence-level error must be minimal.
- Often an A paper has one or two "B" or even "C" moments, but they do not significantly detract from the overall force of the paper.
- Finally the "A" paper leaves the reader with a sense of having read—and being eager to reread—a complete, satisfying piece of work.

### The "B" Paper

- The "B" paper is significantly more than competent. It delivers substantial information—substantial in both quality and interest. The paper does everything a C essay does but offers a sustained and meaningful structure and a project that is more complex than what one finds in a C-range paper. The paper might tackle a significant contradiction, problem, or moment of connection in the readings and develop it in a sustained way.
- The paper shows the student beginning to take interpretive risks, responding to the assignment and to the readings in thoughtful and distinctive ways.
- The use of words in the "B" paper is more precise and concise than in the "C" paper.
- The paper demonstrates coherence in its overall presentation: the relationships between the paper's parts are clear. The transitions between paragraphs are for the most part smooth, and the sentence structure is skillfully varied.
- B papers may include "C" moments in otherwise well-reasoned and well-developed analyses.
- Sentence-level error must be minimal. Sentence structure is varied, with competent use of subordination.



### The “C” Paper

- The "C" paper is competent: it meets the assignment, has few mechanical errors, and is reasonably well organized and developed. C papers demonstrate the student's ability to work with more than one reading and to create meaningful connections between assigned readings.
- C papers comment on and use the ideas in the readings rather than just summarizing them.
- Papers often achieve a passing grade by demonstrating one outstanding or two significant moments of analysis in an otherwise flawed or undistinguished performance.
- C papers often create coherent relationships between paragraphs even if they have not developed a larger organizational structure.
- In a C paper there is evidence of an emerging project—something the student wants the paper to accomplish.
- A C paper has sentence-level errors under control. Although errors may appear on each page, they do not significantly impede the meaning of the essay. Sentence structure is somewhat varied and there is some use of subordination. There are fewer than three of the following kinds of errors per page: mixed construction, fragments, and verb endings.

### The “D” Paper

- This paper resembles a rough draft. It may reveal some organization, but what is presented is neither clear nor effective. It may contain the germ of some good ideas, but these are not well developed or unified.
- A D paper may do one thing really well and another not at all—for instance, it may be full of interesting ideas but entirely without formal control. Or it may be very correct and neat but present no original ideas at all.
- A D paper may over generalize about the reading or depend largely on undirected summary. Or it may depend on uncritical personal response in order to avoid dealing with the reading directly.
- It is unable to make a meaningful connection between two of the assigned readings. It might place quotes or other key conceptual terms from the two works side by side, implying but never analyzing or explaining the connection. It might include summaries of two or three works followed by some analysis of individual works but never sustains the analysis or shows connections between the works. Alternatively, these papers sometimes attempt a series of connections that do not make much sense.
- A D paper often has a significant pattern of sentence-level error, especially with sentence boundaries, verbs, and mixed construction.



### The “F” Paper

- An F paper does not engage with the assigned readings and does not work effectively with quotations.
- An F paper demonstrates a serious lack of basic reading comprehension or an inability to grasp the outline of an author's argument.
- It has no coherent sense of project, little sense of the connections between paragraphs, and/or no organizational structure.
- It has significant sentence-level error that makes the essay difficult to follow. A paper should not pass if the following kinds of errors occur more than once or twice a page: fragments, mixed constructions, incorrect verb endings.
- It does not meet the assignment's minimum page-length (4.5 pages for most papers in College Writing).

*These criteria were adapted from grading criteria used at Wake Forest University and Rutgers University.*