

Criteria for Composition Grading
Adapted from criteria used by the USM English Department
December 2003

A

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.

In an A paper the writer makes substantial interpretive connections between the ideas of two or more concepts.

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.

B

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 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.

C

The "C" paper is competent: it meets the assignment, has few mechanical errors, and is reasonably well organized and developed.

C papers comment on and use ideas 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. There are fewer than three of the following kinds of errors per page: mixed construction, fragments, verb endings.

D

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.

A D paper may over generalize or depend largely on undirected summary. It may depend on uncritical personal response in order to avoid dealing with the subject matter directly.

It is unable to make a meaningful connection between two facts or concepts.

A D paper often has a significant pattern of sentence-level error, especially with sentence boundaries, verbs, and mixed construction.

F

An F paper does not engage with the assignment.

An F paper demonstrates a serious lack of comprehension or an inability to grasp the essence of the topic.

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.