PHILOSOPHY OF GRADING

There are two ways to approach the problem of defining grades. One is to take them linearly—
to begin, for example, with A, define what an A grade is, and then move on to B, C, D, and
F, showing how each falls short of the grade just before it. This is probably the most common
system, the one students and teachers are both most accustomed to. But this system has one
important disadvantage: the danger of presenting A as a norm, a standard from which work
receiving other grades has not just deviated, but has fallen short. The problem with this
approach is that A is not a standard in that sense; that is, work that merits A is not "normal"
work, but rather work that is striking in its excellence, work that is superior in all respects. A-
quality work is both exceptional and rare.

There is, however, another approach, one that more accurately reflects basic divisions
between levels of quality. In this approach, we begin by thinking first about the most basic
division—that between satisfactory work and unsatisfactory work. We start therefore by
defining C work. This division serves as a more accurate guide to the assignment of grades,
in that it makes it clear that C, B, and A represent different levels of achievement, given the
basic stricture that the task was completed satisfactorily to begin with. D and F likewise repre-
sent different levels of falling short of fulfilling the assignment.

Note that both presentations, the linear sequence, and the organization that starts with a
division between satisfactory and unsatisfactory work, say essentially the same things. Examining
both should give a clear picture of what level a paper must achieve to receive a specific grade.

GRADING STANDARDS

To get a grade of C, an essay must be adequate in each of the following four areas.

1. Content. The C paper fulfills the assignment. It meets all specified requirements as to
length, subject, pattern of organization, etc. Moreover, it presents a sound central idea sup-
ported by relevant material. The central idea may be lacking in originality, and the sup-
port may achieve nothing greater than sufficiency, but everything is there and in place.

2. Evidence and reasoning. The argument is appropriately supported with evidence, and
the reasoning used in the argument is clear and makes sense. Possibly the reasoning is
predictable, or the evidence may occasionally be on the obvious side, but both are sound
and clear. The paper shows awareness of other points of view.

These grading standards have been adapted by permission from the standards used in the Hood College,
Maryland, English Department.
3. Organization. The paper has a discernable and logical plan. The entire essay is unified in support of the central idea; individual paragraphs are similarly unified in support of subordinate points. The train of thought is generally clear. Failure to provide an effective introduction and conclusion, or, alternatively, to provide adequate transitions may occasionally make the organization seem a bit disjointed. (Note that if both of these occur, we are likely no longer dealing with a satisfactory paper—the reader will have to work too hard to make sense of it.) In contrast, the organization may be artificial, forced and labored. Essentially, however, logical order prevails, to the benefit of the intended audience.

4. Expression and literacy. Although the style need not be distinguished, the C paper is written in clear English. The C paper may commit a few of the errors listed below, but such lapses must not be serious enough or frequent enough to interfere significantly with the communication of ideas: loosely strung out sentences; choppy sentences; poor parallelism; illogical word order or subordination; unnecessary shifts in subject or verb; awkward use of the passive voice; wordiness; vague, trite or inappropriate diction; dangling or misplaced modifiers; subject-verb disagreements; pronoun-antecedent disagreements; unclear or problematic pronoun reference; incorrect verb forms; mixed constructions or any other ungrammatical constructions; run-on sentences; comma splices; sentence fragments; any misuse or omission of punctuation marks; misspellings; errors in capitalization and in hyphenation or compounding of words.

The C paper, then, is satisfactory. It may not display special competency, but it gets the job done.

The B paper goes beyond adequacy to excellence. The thesis may be more original or interesting, and the paper shows full awareness of its intended audience. The evidence is detailed and fully persuasive. The reasoning is thoughtful and shows clear awareness of other points of view. The organization is clear, and the presentation flows naturally from point to point—no misplaced paragraphs, no loose ends left dangling. The overall structure of the paper is well thought out and is appropriate to its audience and purpose. Sentence structure and diction are effective, requiring only minor improvements. There are at most only infrequent and minor errors in grammar, punctuation and spelling.

The A paper has all the virtues of the B paper, but in fuller measure and to an exceptional degree. It is particularly marked by originality in thought and elegance of style. The best evidence is used, and used effectively. The organization is carefully crafted to give a sense of the necessary flow of the argument. Audience accommodation is adeptly managed.

Work that falls below the C standard is inadequate in at least one of the four areas.

The D essay fulfills the assignment overall, but to an inadequate degree. A few, but not all, of the following problems may occur. The paper does not appeal to the intended audience or does not satisfactorily fulfill its stated purpose. Sometimes, the purpose cannot be discerned without some work on the reader's part. Evidence may be inappropriately obvious, out of order, or irrelevant; in some cases, important evidence may simply be missing. The reasoning is flawed or inadequately supported. It is difficult to keep track of the organizational structure. The paper may suffer from significant or numerous errors in grammar or mechanics, and the diction may be awkward or problematic for the intended audience.
The F paper shows more than one or two of the problems mentioned as typical of the D paper; or it is off the assignment or falls seriously short of length requirements (which almost invariably means insufficient depth of analysis or discussion); or the thesis is unclear; or evidence is missing or has been inappropriately attributed; or the organization is haphazard; or there are numerous and consistent errors in grammar, mechanics and diction.