

# Grade Characteristics and Criteria

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## Criteria according to which your essay will be evaluated (in order of priority):

**Richness/originality of ideas or synthesis.** Nobody wants to write—or read—about the same thing everyone else has to say. It may seem contradictory, but often the most interesting ideas come from narrowing your focus, rather than trying to write about huge, general ideas. The big ideas may be a part of your focus, but try to rein them in by applying them to a particular situation, or by talking about one particular aspect of them.

**Thesis and topic focus.** Essays typically have a thesis statement, usually in their opening paragraph, although in relatively informal essays, the thesis may be more effectively located elsewhere. A thesis statement articulates the one most important idea the writer wants to get across. It isn't a factual statement—it *needs* to be debated—and it shouldn't be a statement nobody would argue against.

**Development of reasoning.** An essay is based on analytical reasoning, backed by clear logic and persuasive supporting evidence. It's wise to anticipate potential objections or counter-arguments, too; if you can answer questions before they're asked, you'll demonstrate not only that you're thinking your own thoughts but that you're able to think along with your readers, too.

**Organization and coherence.** The order of presentation is important. Give some thought to what readers need to know first, so that they can follow your train of reasoning. And please make sure that your paragraphs lead into each other, so that readers can follow you from one point to the next, without having to solve mental puzzles about why you went from point 1 to point 2. Within paragraphs, please be sure that everything you talk about relates to the subject of your topic sentence.

**Expression.** In an essay (as in most writing), it's usually best to aim for clarity and directness, rather than to try for an elaborated style. Clear sentences (preferably with some variety of structure) are usually the best policy for academic prose. Essays are analytical, so stylistic flourishes which are there for their own sake are only distractions. Good essay style may involve brief stylistic ornaments, such as a good metaphor or simile, or a brief illustration or example, but these ornaments should help to underscore or clarify the essay's argument. Try for the most precise word choices, and the style will often fall into place.

**Correctness.** Grammar, punctuation, spelling, general proofreading—these are important primarily to keep readers' attention on the ideas they're reading about. Frequent errors become an annoying distraction, like gnats. They also send an unstated message to your readers: "I didn't care enough about this paper (or about you) to make the paper easy to read." If you didn't care about your paper, why should your readers?

## Grade characteristics

	Content:	Rhetorical/Logical Development	Sentence-Level Clarity/Style	Diction
A	Significant argument clearly defined, supported with concrete, substantial, and relevant detail.; fulfills the assignment. Thesis statement is debatable and is appropriately framed and focused for the length of the assignment. Essay makes a fresh and mature argument. Reasoning is valid and clear, and information is accurate and adequate for the argument.	Paper planned so that it progresses clearly; paragraphs are coherent, unified, and well-developed, without unrelated material in them. Explicit and effective transitions between paragraphs. Argument progresses with deliberate order and catches necessary stages; proportion and emphasis are appropriate. Organization is appropriate to purpose. Conclusion moves beyond introduction; offers commentary on significance of topic.	Sent. skillfully constructed; clear and efficient expression, variety of structures. Avoids obfuscation and wordiness. Lively voice; sustains appropriate variation among levels of formality. Few errors in grammar and mechanics. Appropriate variation of sentence and paragraph lengths and structures.	Precise, fresh economical concrete.
B	Follows assignment. Significant argument clearly defined, supported with concrete, substantial, and relevant detail. Thesis statement is debatable and is fairly well framed and focused for the length of the assignment; it might benefit from sharper focus. Reasoning is valid and clear, information is accurate and adequate.	Paper planned so that it progresses clearly; paragraphs are coherent, unified, and well-developed, without unrelated material in them. Explicit and effective transitions between paragraphs. Argument progresses with deliberate order and catches necessary stages; proportion and emphasis are appropriate.	Sent. skillfully constructed; clear and efficient expression, variety of structures. Avoids obfuscation and wordiness. Good voice.	Precise, concrete.
C	Central idea is present but too general or unfocused; some concrete detail by way of support, but may be repetitious, irrelevant, or sketchy	Some plan of organization is present, but not consistently carried out; proportion and emphasis may be irregular; paragraphs should be unified and coherent, but transitions may be abrupt, mechanical, or monotonous	Sentences correctly constructed but perhaps choppy, some run-ons, fragments. Clarity and effectiveness flawed by grammar, spelling, punctuation difficulties	clear and idiomatic
D-F	Central thesis missing or inaccurate  adequately supported with concrete detail. May entail improper use of sources and documentation. May not match well with the assignment.	Plan and purpose of paper confused; argument not  multiple theses; development of argument inconsistent, unsequenced, incoherent; paragraphs disunified; paragraph transitions missing or unclear. Little awareness of audience or occasion.	Sentences incoherent, not apparent; may have fused, incomplete, or monotonous; often wordy; frequent departures from appropriate level of formality; obscurity of communication. May have frequent errors in spelling, grammar, or punctuation.	vague