

USM Standards for Evaluating Student Writing

These grading standards establish four major criteria for evaluation at each grade level: rhetorical situation, content and/or reasoning, organization, and expression. Since papers may have some characteristics of “B” and others of “C,” the final grade depends on the weight the evaluator gives each criterion. Further, a paper that successfully meets several of these criteria may still receive a low grade if it grossly deficient in one area.

The “A” Paper

The “A” paper has an excellent sense of the rhetorical situation. Its aim is clear and consistent throughout. It attends to the needs of its audience, reflected in attempts throughout to fit the subject and its presentation to a selected set of readers. The topic itself is appropriately narrow and clearly defined.

The content is appropriately developed for the assignment and rhetorical situation. The supporting details or evidence is well chosen and convincingly presented. The reasoning is valid and shows an awareness of the complexities of the subject. If secondary sources are used, they are appropriately selected and cited.

The organization demonstrates a clear, well considered plan throughout that effectively supports the aims of the paper and the assignment. The beginning of the paper clearly and effectively sets up the discussion to follow, and the ending brings the paper to an appropriate close. Paragraphs are coherent, well developed, appropriately divided, and clearly related to other parts of the essay.

The expression is very clear, accessible, concrete -- at times even eloquent. It displays ease with idiom and a broad range of diction. It shows facility with a great variety of sentence options and the punctuation and subordinate structures that these require. It has few errors, none of which seriously undermine the effectiveness of the paper for its intended readers.

The “B” Paper

The “B” paper has a good sense of the rhetorical situation. It shows sensitivity to audience and an awareness of purpose. Its topic has been clearly defined.

The content is well developed for the assignment and rhetorical situation, and the reasoning usually valid and convincing. Evidence and supporting details are adequate for the audience and purpose.

The organization is clear and easy to follow: the beginning and ending are effective, and transitions within and between paragraphs are clearly signaled.

The expression is competent. The paper has few errors, especially serious sentence errors. Sentences show some variety in length, structure, and complexity; diction is precise and varied. Punctuation, grammar and spelling conform to the conventions of edited American English.

The “C” Paper

The “C” paper has an adequate sense of the rhetorical situation. Its purpose is clear, and focuses on a central idea. The topic may be unoriginal, but the assignment has been followed, if not fulfilled.

The content is adequately developed. The major points are supported, and paragraphs are appropriately divided, with enough specific details to make the ideas clear. The reasoning is valid.

The organization is clear and easy to follow. The introduction and conclusion are adequate; transitions are mechanical but appropriate. Paragraphs may not be in their best order.

The expression is generally correct, although it may show little competence with sentence variety (in length and structure) and emphasis. The paper is generally free of major sentence and grammar errors and indicates a mastery of most conventions of edited American English.

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The “D” Paper

The “D” paper has a limited sense of the rhetorical situation. Its purpose may not be clear, its topic may not be interesting to or appropriate for its audience, and it makes few accommodations to its audience.

The content is inadequately developed given the rhetorical situation and assignment. The evidence is insufficient, and supporting details or examples are absent or irrelevant. The reasoning is flawed.

Organization is deficient. Beginnings or endings are not clearly marked or functional. Paragraphs are not coherently developed or linked to each other. The arrangement of material within paragraphs may be confusing.

Expression demonstrates an awareness of a very limited range of stylistic options. It is marred by numerous errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation. The syntax or diction is flawed in places so that comprehension is difficult.

The “F” Paper

There is no sense of the rhetorical situation. There is no clear purpose for the paper and no central point. It is not accommodated to any audience.

The content is insufficiently developed and does not go beyond the obvious. The reasoning is deeply flawed.

The organization is very difficult to follow. Sentences may not be appropriately grouped into paragraphs, or paragraphs may not be arranged logically. Transitions are not present or are inappropriate.

The number and seriousness of errors -- in grammar, spelling, punctuation, diction or syntax -- obstruct comprehension.