

HALLMARKS OF A, B, C, AND FAILING ESSAYS

From guidelines for marking essays distributed to teaching assistants at Queen's

An "A" essay: The hallmarks of a first-class essay are polished style, sound judgement, effective organization, and an argument of substance. A first-class paper often has a special flair, a something extra which distinguishes it from a competent B-plus paper: for example, originality or profundity, a special way with words, exceptionally sound research. Do not give first-class marks lightly; they should be reserved for exceptional efforts.

Some authorities maintain that the primary characteristic of the first-class paper is its rich content: it is "meaty," "dense," "packed." A reader has the sense of being significantly taught by the author, sentence after sentence, paragraph after paragraph. Stylistic finesse is another keynote: the title and opening paragraph are engaging; the transitions are artful; the phrasing is tight, fresh, and highly specific. Finally, an "A" essay, because of its careful organization and development, imparts a feeling of wholeness and unusual clarity.

A "B" essay: The middle-B essay is typically competent but undistinguished: although basically sound in content, style, and organization, it lacks the stylistic finesse and richness of content characteristic of first-class work. You can expect it, though, to express sound ideas, and impart substantial information that is by no means devoid of interest. It will state a reasonably clear thesis or organizing principle early in the argument: subsequent points will support that thesis or principle, and be ordered logically. Diction will be much more concise and precise than that of the "C" essay, and the text will be relatively free of grammatical and stylistic errors. In fundamental respects, then, the middle-B paper is sound enough to win one's respect, but not one's unstinted admiration.

A "C" essay: The middle-C essay will exhibit distinct lapses in style, organization, and content. One way and another the essay will have shortcomings which suggest that although it has something to say it has not fully come to terms with its subject or expressed its insights clearly enough. A number of papers fit the middle-C classification: those in which the ideas and information, though present, seem thin and commonplace; those in which the writing style falls clearly short of reasonable expectations; those that stray from the assigned topic; those which deal with the topic, but are too perfunctory; those that are rambling and disorganized; those that involve a good deal of padding; and so on. In essence, a middle-C paper leaves you feeling that it falls short of the requirements, but still does enough to merit a passing mark.

An "F" essay: In failing essays the faults in style, organization, and content will be considerable. There may be glimmerings of an argument, but these will be obscured by faulty logic, garbled prose, frequent mechanical errors, and lack any discernible principle of organization. Papers that require the marker to guess at the meaning behind the writer's words belong in the failing category. So do papers which, although they may make sense of some kind, bear little or no relation to the topic. Other possibilities: slapdash papers which may make one or two points but are obviously superficial efforts with no serious thought behind them; papers which do little more than string quotations together with a few lines of introduction. Do not be afraid to fail papers of this kind—students should receive prompt warning that their work is not up to standard.