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## **A SET OF CRITERIA FOR GRADING COLLEGE WRITING**

[I developed these criteria while teaching MCC and its predecessor, Writing & Thinking. In part, they are grounded in multiple discussions with different first-year writing classes about what makes a good paper, and what the various grades should mean. What follows is the handout I would give to my students.]

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Remember that all of the following is built on the basics of coming to class, getting the writing and reading done on time, being willing to value communication, taking the learning seriously, and engaging actively in the process of revision through a series of drafts.

Not meeting these basic requirements would obviously detract from your grade, either on an individual paper or for the course as a whole.

### CRITERIA

F: failure. Failure means not passing in the work, or writing something that has nothing to do with what we're trying to achieve here (like, say, a 14-page list of all the midnight snacks you ate during the semester), or writing something incomprehensible. Work can also get an F for being plagiarized.

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D: Near-failure to communicate despite the effort to do so. The piece exists and has your name on it, as a student of mine once said, but it doesn't have much else going for it. Possible ways a paper could fail to communicate:

It has no identifiable central idea.

It has what is intended to be a central idea, but the piece doesn't seem to connect to that idea.

Individual sentences are difficult or even impossible to decipher. Language is mistakenly used or completely inappropriate to its subject. Paper is riddled with errors in sentence structure (not to mention punctuation, spelling).

Individual sentences make sense in themselves but don't connect to form a coherent whole.

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C: Now we get up to the level where things are working, if not in an outstanding way.

To get a C, a paper must show basic competence, which includes:

Ability to write sentences that are sentences, that are coherent, that the reader understands.

Ability to copy – accurate quotations from texts, spelling the author's name right, and so on.

Ability to produce a paper with few enough mistakes in sentence structure, punctuation, spelling, etc., that the reader is not distracted from the meaning of the paper by its surface. I am very tempted to say that a paper that does contain a distracting number of errors should not get above a C, even if it is otherwise good. Yet I find this a hard guideline to follow, because I feel that the art and thought in a piece of writing is far more important than its surface features. The good reason for taking a hard line is the social context of writing: most people in the world look first at spelling and punctuation when they evaluate a piece of writing, and greatly exaggerate their value as indicators of a person's intelligence and competence.

Instead of saying that weak mechanics limits a paper to a grade of C, if there is a distracting number of errors I will ask you to correct them before I enter your grade in my book.

C means acceptable but not distinguished. A C paper does not surprise; it does not get much of a reaction emotionally; it does not invite the reader to sustained thought. If it's an argument, it argues something that is more or less obvious – something that's hard to disagree with. Its structure is predictable. A C paper is safe; it takes no risks in the direction of freshness or wisdom or beauty.

This paper is coherent, unlike a D paper, but it doesn't come alive. As students of mine have said, a C paper lacks depth; it's done, but it's not very thoughtful. Or feelingful, I might add.

Variations on a C:

C- : often a paper that has the above characteristics, and is full of mechanical errors. Or a paper that barely attains the above criteria (in other words, a paper that almost merits a D).

C+ : Type One: an extremely competent version of the C paper. The smoothest, most mechanically perfect paper that is yet safe, obvious, and predictable gets a C+.

Type Two (far better than Type One): an attempt to carry out a truly intriguing idea or design which gets into serious trouble and doesn't work. The writer had a great intention (which I can detect by reading the paper, without other explanations) but didn't quite know how to pull it off and got all tangled up. This C+ paper can be an A paper in disguise. If it's an argument, the problem in it could be lack of evidence, confused logic, ignoring evidence that contradicts one's argument. The structure of the paper might be baffling to the reader, or word choices might be misleading in crucial ways. It could be that the writer simply hasn't been able to find the words to do justice to the critical parts of the piece, or hasn't been able to get specific enough to make the reader see what she's talking about. Yet there is something here which looks like real potential.

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B: B means good – something of which you can be proud. Good is different from mediocre. Even B- is a grade that says the paper is good.

In a series of discussions with my students over the years, I've come up with a list of desirable attributes that I think people can agree on. You may wish to modify or add to it.

A good paper:

- is thoughtful
- is a form of teaching, communication – it can inspire or bother the reader
- is creative
- is entertaining
- is mechanically correct
- is well-developed
- is vivid and detailed, makes you see the scenes in it
- is about something that people actually care about – an intriguing thought, a genuinely puzzling question, a significant passage in life. In particular, it's clear that the writer cares about the subject.

A good paper is written with authority; the use of language in it is exciting or satisfying in its own right; the author's voice is strong and individual; the writer uses words she knows how to use.

Furthermore, a good paper:

- begins and ends well
- has a title
- has continuity (sometimes this means "it flows"; sometimes this means "it jumps to the right places")
- stays on track (is coherent, it follows)
- makes good use of specifics (evidence, quotation, examples) to support the assertions and generalizations in it and to make the reader experience what the writer is trying to convey
- makes the reader feel there's a point to reading it.

It seems to me that the grades B- through A represent different degrees of the presence of the attributes listed above. Any paper about which all of the above statements could be made with strong conviction would surely be an A paper. But many of the above statements, suitably qualified, could also apply to a B-paper (or even a C+ paper – for instance, a C+ paper could be coherent and mechanically correct, but lack an interesting idea to be about).

So, given the above criteria, I'll try to define what the various grades mean.

B- : either just over the line from acceptable to good, or an ambitious paper that doesn't totally come off (like a Type Two C+ but noticeably more successful).

B: solidly there, substantial, a good piece of work without reservations.

B+: very good. This paper in some way distinguishes itself.

A: excellent, exceptional, out of the crowd. A colleague of mine once defined an A paper as one that makes you want to take it into the office next door and show it to one of your fellow-teachers. I like this definition – and in case you're wondering, it does happen.

The A paper in some sense goes beyond criteria. Its excellence arises partly from qualities in it which the teacher did not specifically ask for in the assignment and could not have described precisely in advance – things which only the writer herself could have come up with. Things like style, passionate commitment, grace, humor, bold and original thinking . . . excellence is different each time it appears.

A- : an excellent paper with a few lapses in it which don't interfere with perceiving it as excellent.

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Obviously, even though we have a list of criteria, a great deal of this evaluation is subjective. It is important to say that I try hard to understand the writer's way of making sense; I do not read papers in order to refute them. And I don't have quotas of certain grades – so many C's, so many B's, etc.; I try to look at each paper on its own merits.