

What is an "A" paper?

In the Spring 1995 issue of our newsletter we asked faculty to respond to the following questions: "What are the characteristics of an 'A' paper for your particular course?" and "What are typical problems that prevent a paper from getting an 'A'?" The faculty responses we received raised important issues and provided some useful insights. Evaluating writing is always a matter of weighing and balancing numerous factors, and an element of subjectivity is unavoidable. How much should cogent arguments and accurate facts count? What about organization and style? Are grammatical errors important? Should we consider effort and improvement? It is important to make clear decisions about your criteria before you begin to grade papers. Ideally, these criteria should be presented in a clearly articulated framework that you can share and discuss with your students.

Define the "C" Paper

Students often assume that if they do everything that you ask them to do, even in a minimal way, they should get an "A." To prevent this misunderstanding, it is sometimes useful to start out by defining the "C" grade, the minimum standard to pass, and then define the "B" and "A" grades as involving more effort and more skill, as is done in this grading scale, that was originally designed by Alice Roy, but which has been adapted and modified by numerous other faculty. This particular version was adapted by Sharon Bassett for English 101.

In this framework the "C" paper responds to the assignment in a focused, organized way. All the basic parts of the essay are there, but it may be lacking in development or support, the style is basic, and there may be grammatical errors and some syntactic problems, as long as they don't cause confusion. The "B" paper has these same basic parts, but the introduction and conclusion are more effective, the argument is stronger and better supported, and there are fewer errors. The "A" paper is stronger in every way, but the main difference is that the writer has a voice, a style and a purpose.

"A" for Anthropology

Geri-Ann Galanti in the Anthropology Department said that an "A" paper for her Anthropology 250 course has the following characteristics:

1. Follows directions and completes all aspects of the assignment,
2. Interviews more than the minimum number of people required,
3. Is well-written and well-organized, making it easy for the reader, and
4. Does an in-depth analysis of the data.

Galanti says, "If the student does the first 3 things on my list above, they will generally receive a 'B.' To get an 'A,' however, I must see evidence that they can go beyond mere description and comparison--that they can analyze data." They must be able to "explain why people respond in certain ways; how it relates to other aspects of their culture, etc." According to Galanti, "inability to do in-depth analysis is the major problem preventing papers from receiving 'A' grades."

Declarative and Procedural Knowledge

In *Thinking and Writing in College* Barbara Walvoord and Lucile McCarthy note that cognitive psychologists distinguish between declarative knowledge (knowledge of what) and procedural knowledge (knowledge of how) (p. 59). In Galanti's scheme this distinction is the crucial difference between the "B" and the "A." The "B" student presents the anthropological concepts learned from the course along with the data that has been gathered. The "A" student uses

anthropological concepts and procedures to analyze the data, and goes beyond reporting about anthropology to doing it.

Walvoord and McCarthy use the terms "textprocessor" and "layperson" to describe two related ways students can go wrong in writing for discipline courses. The textprocessor is a student who "focuses centrally on processing texts in some way (summarizing, reviewing, commenting) rather than on addressing the issues and solving the problems outlined in the assignment." (We might add "copying" to the above list.) The layperson addresses "the issues and problems, but does not use the knowledge and methodology being taught in the course."

Neither type of student is likely to get an "A." The "A" student is likely to take on the "professional-in-training" role, focusing on the issues or problems outlined in the assignment, and "using, not ignoring," the knowledge and methodology of the course (9). This is the key point in Galanti's distinction.

An "A" in Sociology

Cristina Bodinger-deUriarte, in the Sociology Department, sent us a useful ten-point checklist that defines an "A" paper very specifically. Point five asks the writer to make his or her own "value added" contribution clear. This is a good way to help students understand the basic difference between the textprocessor and the professional-in-training role.

Bodinger-deUriarte requires a conclusion that focuses on the "so what" factor--the significance of the issues. While some formats might place this information in the introduction, it is clear that the "A" paper recognizes a significance beyond the classroom and the grade.

An Element of Pretense

Most classroom assignments involve an element of pretense, because while the instructor is the real audience, he or she does not read the papers to be informed or persuaded by them. The "A" paper, however, transcends this pretense, and begins to function as a real world document would.

However, as Bodinger-Uriarte's checklist makes clear, assignments have purposes, and the writer of the "A" paper must keep the assignment in mind and remain obedient to its constraints.

An "A" Paper in Chemistry

In some disciplines, the formal constraints of the writing assignments are very strict indeed. In the sciences, it is imperative that the paper have the proper sections, and that the proper information and appropriate style appear in each section.

Donald R. Paulson, in Chemistry and Biochemistry, wrote, "An 'A' paper will include an introduction that clearly provides background material and focuses on the scope of the review. The review section must contain three to four paragraphs focusing on different aspects of the subject being reviewed. Each paragraph in the review section must have a topic sentence which clearly states the area being reviewed in that paragraph. Every sentence in that paragraph must relate to the topic sentence."

"The discussion section must discuss only material that is included in the review section. Each paragraph of the discussion must focus on some specific set of data presented in the review." As in the review section, topic sentences and appropriate transitions are required.

A Minimum of Errors

Finally, "An 'A' paper will also have a minimum number of spelling or grammatical errors. In addition, the paper should be written in a style that does not include either very long sentences with superfluous words or very short sentences. In other words, clarity and conciseness are very important. Finally, the citation and reference styles must be those recommended by the American Chemical Society's Style Manual."

Even this short discussion reveals that there are great differences between disciplines in terms of expectations and standards. The Writing Center welcomes further input from faculty on this important issue.