

## What makes an "A" paper?

This question is probably the most frequently asked in any English class. To help answer it, let me outline for you what a paper must have in order to get a "C" grade:

- The paper must be college-level work: that means that it must have evidence of focused, thoughtful inquiry. A college-level paper does not have misspelled words (especially in the age of spell-check) or grammatical errors, and it does not use slang or colloquial language. Such errors reduce a paper's grade to below a C; no paper with such errors can receive higher than a C-, and most will receive D's.
- The paper must have a clear thesis. The thesis is the paper's "point," what the paper is about – which is more particular than just being "about" the Middle Ages, for instance, or "about" Shakespeare's *King Lear*. What in particular are you exploring? What point are you trying to make about your specific area of inquiry? Consider a thesis the conclusion you've come to about a specific topic. If your paper doesn't have a thesis, it will receive no grade higher than a C-, and it will probably receive a D.
- The paper meets all other primary assignment requirements. The focus of the discussion fits the prompt, the length is what's called for, the formatting matches standard rules of college essay writing, and the language is consistently academic. MLA citation guidelines are followed, textual support is provided, and works are fully introduced and contextualized for the reader before they're analyzed. Papers that don't satisfy all the major requirements for a given essay will receive a grade no higher than a C-, and most will receive a D.

So what makes a "B" paper? Besides correct spelling, good grammar, and a thesis, the "B" paper's thesis is interesting, limited, and specific. Its argument makes clear steps, and its good, cogent evidence and organization reveal the care taken in writing the paper and analyzing the evidence. Its paragraphs make sense as paragraphs – each treats a part of the argument – and the paragraphs follow one another logically, tied together by an implicit structure (the enthymeme).

Then there's an "A" paper. Besides correct spelling, good grammar, an interesting argument, good evidence, and logical organization, the "A" paper has a *compelling* thesis, one that might challenge at first but which holds its own with the reader. There are no holes in its argument: on the contrary, its analysis is sophisticated. It is a paper the reader *thinks* with, where the next idea presented is both precise and intriguing, sometimes even surprising or provocative. An "A" paper reads beautifully aloud, and reveals a probing intellect. An "A" paper has some "art" to it.

The most important advice I can give you for writing "A" papers is to write a draft at least a week ahead of the due date and revise it BEFORE HANDING IT IN. I've found in my own writing that I don't figure out what I'm talking about until the end of writing my first draft. Only when I've written a draft does my thesis become clear. When I rewrite, I use what I've figured out at the end of the writing process to BEGIN my second draft, and VOILA! I have a better paper. I'm happy to read rough drafts of your papers, and I encourage you to spend the minimum time needed to write a good paper (a simple rule of thumb: a five-page paper requires at least ten hours of organizing and writing, and that doesn't include research time).

*\*\*The text of this explanation is lifted mostly verbatim from a sheet given to me in a lower division literature course when I was an undergraduate. The link to the original text is below.*