

Writing handout #1: Expectations and grading criteria

In order to clarify what my standards are and what I expect in an “A” paper, I would like to provide you with (1) a few comments of my own, and (2) a description of a grading scale that I have borrowed and find very helpful as I grade papers. I will have this scale at hand as I read your essays, so it seems fair to provide you with a copy up front.

Writing is important, and not just for English majors. (One strong predictor of future success in a biology graduate program is your score on the verbal part of the GRE.) It is both an essential professional skill in most fields, and a useful tool for learning and thinking about practically any subject. We decided to include writing projects as well as standard exams in this course for two reasons. One is to help you develop your skills in writing about scientific subjects; the other is to offer you an opportunity to learn and think more about particular evolutionary topics that interest you.

Our standards and criteria for grading these assignments are based on those two objectives. Because we hope that you will exercise and improve your skills, we expect you to pay attention to “mechanical” issues such as correct sentence structure, grammar, paragraph organization, and spelling as well as to stylistic points such as clarity and conciseness. Because this is an upper-level class at a respectable university, we expect your papers to go well beyond summarizing what you’ve read, and to include your own original ideas, syntheses, and reflections. These are not unrelated demands: the clearer your writing, the better it communicates and allows your readers to appreciate your ideas. Conversely, awkward or meandering prose marred by distracting errors will leave your readers puzzled or annoyed rather than enlightened.

Skeletal Scale for Evaluating Papers

Developed by staff of the Campuswide Writing Program at Indiana University, Bloomington. <<http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/cwp/skelscale.html>>

A. Reserve this grade for papers that are excellent in thought, organization, and style. The **A** paper should use a sound organizational strategy, with clearly developed paragraphs proceeding from a unified thesis. The ideas themselves should be engaging and show illuminating insights into the work being studied. Assertions should be supported by textual evidence (not necessarily quotations). There should be very few distracting errors in style, diction, or mechanics.

B. A **B** paper will still be quite good, but it can be weaker than an **A** paper in some areas. It may have good ideas that are marred by some problems of organization and style. Or it may be well-organized and well-written but offer fewer or less valuable insights than an **A** paper.

C. This is the grade you will generally give to a paper you would call "clearly acceptable, but not exceptional." A **C** paper will show a competent understanding of the assigned topic, but its insights will usually not go beyond the obvious points that most papers make. A **C** can also be assigned to an inconsistent paper that shows some excellent insights but that fails to tie ideas into a unified whole.

D. A **D** paper should have some virtues--either occasionally good ideas marred by unclear writing or clear writing conveying superficial ideas that show a lack of engagement with the work being studied.

F. Give this grade to a paper weak either because it is poorly written throughout or because its ideas show no insight into the work being studied, or to a completely unacceptable paper obviously written in haste without thought or effort.