Guidelines for Grading Freshman Writing

Revised - Spring 1984

These guidelines take as a starting point the definitions of 5

grades given in the General Information Bulletin (1983-84, p. 79):

A=excellent, B=above average, C=average, D=pass, F=failure.

"Average" is assumed to be average work for a freshman at UT.

The attached grading criteria are further based on the idea

that the total effect of a piece of writing results from the

successful or unsuccessful combination of certain features. Each of

the five grade categories describes a hypothetical paper with a

certain combination of features. Though few real papers will fit any

of the descriptions exactly, any paper receiving a particular grade

will have several of the features listed for that grade.

The order in which the qualities appear in all the categories

suggests their relative importance: i.e., the highest priority is

whether or not the paper fulfilled the assignment, especially in

terms of achieving a purpose, using a mode of development, and

creating a sense of audience. Another area of major importance is

content: the quality, quantity, and interrelationship of the ideas

in the paper. In order of decreasing importance, other criteria are

organization (including use of introduction, conclusion, and

transitions), language use (at the sentence and word level), and

mechanics (spelling, grammar, punctuation, and proofreading). In

some cases, particularly strong or weak performance in one area can

counter-balance performance in other areas. For example, a well-organized, smoothly written and mechanically perfect paper may not receive a high grade if the writer missed the point of the assignment or had nothing interesting to say. On the other hand, a paper with a strong sense of purpose and interesting content may be graded down for excessive mechanical errors. In addition, an instructor may weigh one of the categories more heavily if she/he has been focusing on it in class or in comments on the writing of a particular student. But students should be aware that there is an unavoidable element of subjectivity in the very human activity of judging writing, and the ultimate interpretation of the guidelines rests with the instructor. The criteria are offered as one means to help the student come to a better understanding, through the course of the semester, of what constitutes good writing.

The description of the C paper represents an exit-level standard. A student should be able to write a paper of "C" quality in order to pass the course, though an instructor may assign a final grade of D to represent a student's overall performance in the course.

GRADING CRITERIA

A C paper does a competent job of fulfilling the assignment. It adequately communicates a sense of purpose (uses an identifiable mode) and shows some awareness of an audience. The content, while perhaps not striking, has some news value. The paper has a recognizable thesis, supported by sufficient detail, and is organized

clearly enough that the reader can follow the argument. The paper

includes an introduction, a conclusion, and transitions, though

they may be less than effective. Sentences are clear and logical

for the most part. Diction is understandable and includes few

clichés, repetitions, and redundancies. Though the paper may

contain mechanical errors, there are not enough to seriously distract

the reader.

   A B paper deals effectively with the assignment, communicating

a clear sense of purpose and audience (use of mode). If offers

interesting content unified around a clear thesis and supported by

substantial, logically ordered detail. The paper draws the reader

in from the beginning, includes transitions which lead the reader

from point to point, and offers a thematically related conclusion

at the end. Sentences are not only logical, but are sometimes varied

in structure through effective use of coordination, subordination,

and parallelism. Word choices are fresh and precise. The paper has

few mechanical problems.

   An A paper does an exceptionally good job of fulfilling the

assignment, showing a strong sense of purpose (and use of mode) and

creating the sense of a community of readership with its audience.

The content has striking news value, entertaining or informing the

reader through an ingenious or imaginative approach to the subject.

The central idea is risky, but nonetheless abundantly supported with

well-ordered detail. The structural elements from title to conclusion

all work together to create a smooth, unified whole. Artfully varied

sentences result from the writer's command of structures. Word choice

is not only precise but distinctive and sometimes clever, demon-

strating an awareness of the figurative power of language. Mechanical

errors are minimal.

A D paper is unsuccessful in one or more important ways. The

writer may have been off center in her/his approach to the assignment.

The paper lacks a clear sense of purpose (or use of mode); the writer

may seem uncertain of the audience. Though the paper has a discernible

subject, the ideas are too commonplace or general to have much news

value and may not be centered on a thesis. If a thesis is present,

it may not be convincingly or thoroughly supported. Ideas may not be

organized in a perceivable pattern; attempts at transitions may be

awkward or non-existent. The introduction and conclusion may be

empty placeholders, Sentences may contain mixed structures (i.e.,

may not scan), or they may all be structured on a repetitive pattern.

The paper may contain one or more fragments, run-ons, or comma splices

per page of text. Diction is often imprecise, confusing, or clichéd.

The paper may contain a distracting number of mechanical errors.

An F paper fails to fulfill the assignment. The writer may have

misconstrued the purpose (mode) and writes without a sense of audience

or with a mistaken notion of who her/his audience is. The paper

offers only a superficial treatment of the subject, with a weak or

unsupportable central idea and little or no logical development.
Order may be confusing, and the writer may have shown no sense of
a reader's expectations concerning the opening and closing of
discourse. The writer may lack a sense of "sentence," generating
two or more fragments, run-ons, or comma splices per page of text.
Correct sentences may be elementary in structure. Word choice may
not represent a college-level vocabulary or may show a misunderstanding
of word meanings. Mechanical errors are copious. An "F" paper falls
below the acceptable level of college writing because of its lack of
understanding of the subject, or the writer's inability to communicate
his knowledge, or both.