

Grading Standards for Papers

Students are often puzzled by the grading standards for critical philosophy papers. Some ask, “If I answered the question competently without making any significant errors, why didn’t I get an A?” Here is a *rough* outline of the standards I use to grade your papers.

B: The Baseline Grade

The grade of B functions as a baseline grade, signifying competent but not exceptional work. Essays are graded up or down relative to the following baseline criteria. A B paper:

- Addresses all major parts of the assignment
- Conveys a solid understanding of the relevant readings and ideas
- Offers clear and consistent arguments for a clearly articulated position
- Considers significant objections to that position and replies to those objections
- Contains no significant misunderstandings
- Is generally well written and well organized, with few or no grammatical, punctuation, or spelling errors

B+: The Beginnings of Distinction

A B+ paper meets all of the standards for a B, but might in addition:

- Offer the beginnings of an original or powerful argument or idea, such as an unusually apt analogy that illuminates a previously obscure aspect of the problem, a clever counterexample to a seemingly persuasive claim, a sharp distinction that does real philosophical work, or a subtle observation drawn from a close reading of a text; or
- Work out ordinary ideas to a greater depth than usual (perhaps by discussing more iterations of significant objections and replies)

A– or A: Outstanding Work

An A– or A paper meets all of the standards for a B+, but might in addition:

- Work out the original or powerful idea or argument fully and deeply—that is, in a way that demonstrates a firm grasp of the underlying concepts, principles, and argumentative strategy; or
- Offer an unusually comprehensive and systematic (rather than scattershot) survey of possible moves by both sides and clearly and systematically evaluate them, coming to a closely reasoned conclusion

B-: Errors or Omissions

Most of a B- paper is fine, but somewhere it contains significant errors, misunderstandings, or omissions. A B- essay falls just short of B standards by, for example:

- Failing to address a major part of the assignment
- Misunderstanding a substantial philosophical point, or conflating different positions
- Failing to articulate a consistent position
- Offering fallacious arguments, or arguments that don't actually address the question at issue
- Failing to consider objections to the position defended therein
- Wasting space on issues or ideas that are not pertinent to the assignment
- Lacking a clear organization and logical structure
- Containing numerous grammatical, spelling, or punctuation errors

C+, C, or C-: More Serious Problems

A C paper exemplifies one or more of the problems of a B- paper, more often or more pervasively. C grades may also be assigned to papers that miss the point of the assignment.

D or E: Moral Failings

These grades are reserved for moral failings, such as plagiarism or not bothering to make a serious effort.

Note: these are the grading standards for papers prior to the assignment of late penalties. Moreover, I reserve the right to refuse to assign a passing grade to a seriously defective paper until major problems are corrected.

Note: these standards are based on the grading standards written by Elizabeth Anderson, Professor of Philosophy at the University of Michigan.