

Criteria for Assessing Formal Writing

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A piece of academic writing is evaluated based on how well it fulfills a particular task and achieves the specific purpose the paper sets forth. However, there are some basic needs that readers have. Almost universally, readers want a college-level paper to be meaningfully focused, well supported, clearly organized, and mechanically correct.

Criterion 1: Focus

- High The paper has one clear, central point. One main point clearly controls the entire paper, and the scope is *manageable* given the length of the paper and the nature of the assignment. The point is *meaningful* because it deals with an issue that the audience would likely consider important.
- Middle The paper is not completely controlled by one central point. A central point is evident, but not all of the essay is consistent with that point. The paper contains *occasional* digressions or irrelevancies. The paper might not stand out in terms of having a point that readers might consider engaging.
- Low The paper is not clearly controlled by one central point. The main topic of the paper is *too broad* given the length of the paper, or the central point is simply *not clear*. The paper may be fragmented, with various points receiving equal attention.

Criterion 2: Development & Support

- High The paper's major ideas are clearly and logically developed. The paper reflects sound reasoning, and information is accurate. Readers should respect (if not agree with) the paper's logic. Major ideas are clearly explained through concrete, specific details. The reasoning and support are tailored to suit the audience.
- Middle The paper's major ideas are unevenly developed. Major ideas are well developed as a whole, but *occasional* problems in support, explanations, or accuracy are likely to confuse readers or cause them to question the writer's logic. It is not altogether clear that the paper's support is based around the designated audience.
- Low The development of the major ideas is lacking and/or confusing. Readers would likely find significant flaws in logic, accuracy, or explanations. Major ideas are barely supported or merely repeated. Generalizations are used when more specific evidence is needed.

Criterion 3: Organization

- High The presentation order is clear and logical. Paragraphs and sentences follow a reasonable, coherent sequence. Readers should *rarely if ever* question the connection between one idea and another. Transitions and/or headings effectively signal the relationships among the larger parts of the paper.
- Middle The paper has an order in which points are discussed, but relationships are sometimes forced or unclear. The organizational scheme is recognizable, but some jumps in thought are difficult to follow. The writer has a sense of grouping ideas in paragraphs, but some transitions are awkward or unclear. The organizational scheme might be too formulaic and predictable to suit the situation.
- Low The paper is haphazardly or confusingly arranged. Readers will struggle in connecting ideas, sentences, or paragraphs.

Criterion 4: Mechanics

- High The paper conforms to accepted conventions of grammar, punctuation, spelling, and capitalization in a variety of sentence lengths and types. A few minor errors may appear, but *on the whole* the paper follows accepted conventions. Readers will rarely if ever pay more attention to the paper's mechanics than to its ideas.
- Middle There are a few violations in grammar, punctuation, spelling, and capitalization. Although the paper has few errors, there are some in complicated sentences that distract readers. Readers will notice the errors but not so much that they discount the paper as a whole.
- Low Errors interfere with the *credibility* of the writer or the *meaning* of the paper. There are grammar or punctuation errors even in simple sentences, and the meaning in a few sentences is not clear because of errors. Even some simple words might be misspelled. Readers will likely question (1) the writer's grasp of formal English or (2) the attention the writer gave the paper.