

# Standards for Grading Philosophy Papers

**S**TUDENTS ARE SOMETIMES PUZZLED by the grading standards for argumentative 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 guideline for how papers in this course are graded.

## **B** COMPETENT BUT NOT EXCEPTIONAL WORK

The grade of “B” functions AS A BASELINE GRADE, signifying competent but not exceptional work. Papers are graded up or down relative to these baseline “B” criteria. The paper

- addresses all parts of the paper topic.
- offers consistent and coherent arguments for a clearly articulated position that makes sense.
- considers significant objections to that position.
- replies to those objections.
- makes relevant use of course readings and lectures, displaying a grasp of their content, without merely replicating them.
- is generally well-written and well-organized, with few or no grammatical, punctuation and spelling errors.
- does not contain significant misunderstandings.

## **B+** THE BEGINNINGS OF DISTINCTION

A “B+” paper meets all of the standards for a “B”, but in addition also

- offers the germs of an original, striking, or powerful idea, argument, or application—something which goes beyond the ordinary, beyond what one would expect an undergraduate to come up with on a first pass at the topic. 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; a subtle point drawn from a close reading of a text; a compelling illustration or application of a principle. All of these can count as an idea that rises the paper above the ordinary.

- alternatively or in addition, works out ordinary ideas to a greater depth than usual, or develop relevant arguments that demonstrate real mastery of the course readings

## **A-/A** OUTSTANDING WORK

An “A-” or “A” paper meets all of the standards for a “B+”, but in addition also

- works out the original, striking, or powerful idea, argument, or application fully and deeply, with outstanding execution that demonstrates a firm grasp of the underlying concepts, principles, facts, and argumentative strategy.
- alternatively, offers an unusually comprehensive survey of possible moves by both sides, and clearly and systematically evaluates them, coming to a closely reasoned conclusion. The survey must be systematic, not scattershot: it must develop the alternatives logically and to substantial depth, not just assess a random mix of *ad hoc* considerations. And it must consistently display an understanding of the underlying point of different arguments, what they are really getting at (not just a superficial swipe at them).
- alternatively, for a paper based on a text, the paper might offer an unusually sophisticated, close and systematic reading of a philosopher’s texts, paying attention to tensions and contradictions in the author’s work, alternative interpretations of passages (offering persuasive arguments for preferring one interpretation to another), and interpretations that bring out philosophically significant points, especially if they offer fresh, unconventional readings

Now, for the downside:

## **B-** MOSTLY OK, BUT WITH ERRORS, OMISSIONS, OR MISUNDERSTANDINGS

A “B-” paper falls just short of “B” standards, by making a few significant mistakes. For example, it might

- fail to answer some part of the paper topic.

- misunderstand a substantial philosophical point, or confuse different positions.
- fail to articulate a consistent position.
- offer fallacious arguments or arguments that don't really address the core issue.
- fail to consider objections to one's position.
- waste space on issues that are not pertinent to the paper topic.
- offering a confused, sloppy, superficial, or erroneous interpretation of course readings or other cited texts.
- containing numerous grammatical, spelling, or punctuation errors.
- lacking a clear organization, failing to logically order and signpost important points.

**C** MORE SERIOUS PROBLEMS

A paper with a "C+" or "C" or "C-" exemplifies one or more of the problems of a "B-" paper, but more frequently or more pervasively.

"C" grades may also be assigned to papers that miss the point of the assignment, confuse polemical assertion with argumentation, or lack proper citation of central points in minor ways that do not raise any suspicion of plagiarism.

**D, E** INADEQUATE

These grades are reserved for incoherent papers (lack of a minimally coherent thesis or argument), and for moral failings: not bothering to make a serious effort, plagiarism. Cases suspected of plagiarism will receive an E, be referred to the Dean's office, or both.

NOTE: these are the standards for papers prior to assigning late penalties. Also, instructors reserve the right to refuse to accept a seriously defective paper for a passing grade, until major problems are corrected.

*The above description of grading standards was developed by Elizabeth Anderson (used here with her permission and only minor revisions), based on others that had been used in the department.*