A Question of Expectations

"A ‘C’?" I heard one of my students say from the back of the classroom. It was apparent from the tone and volume of his statement that he believed his paper warranted a higher grade than that. I asked him if he had a specific question regarding my comments. He shook his head and then volunteered the following statement: "I work really hard in this class, and I even had some tutors from another college look at the paper, and they all thought it was a good paper. I just don’t know what I am not doing. What exactly does it take to make an ‘A’ on an essay?

I tried to explain that a ‘C’ meant that his writing was what I would normally expect a competent, average incoming freshman to write like. A ‘B’ would mean that his writing exceeded that expectation, and an “A” would mean that his writing far exceeded that expectation.

Although students are trained in the K-12 educational system to see a “C” grade as diminutive, I do not believe that it is, nor does most universities. For example, the University of Kentucky’s Writing Center makes the following response to that idea:

A 'C' means that you have met the terms of the assignment competently. Your instructor is always glad to see you working hard and seriously. However, your instructor's job is to grade not the intent, but the final product. Just as an engineer must evaluate the sturdiness of a bridge regardless of the effort that went into it, an instructor must assess the quality of an essay on its own merits. Doing anything else would mean misleading you about your real progress as a writer. Similarly, rewarding someone else for high effort but unsatisfactory performance would devalue your own fine work.

As you can see, it’s a letter that says that this particular piece of writing is an average, competently written essay. Even though the letter grade was, in this case, warranted, the student’s comment made me aware again that students coming into the college have not written enough to know what constitutes a well-written paper – at least by college standards. This was not the first time a student’s concept and mine did not agree, but it did make me step back again and reconsider what characteristics a paper needed to have to make a high grade. In response then to his comment (and those of previous students), I decided to put together this article.

9 Characteristics of a Well-Written Essay. The following are nine characteristics that most academic institutions look for in a well-written essay:

- It strongly asserts an opinion on some issue or idea.

A well-written essay has a definite viewpoint or opinion that the writer passionately desires to communicate to his or her readers. It is this sense of mission, of urgency, that I find lacking in many student writings. Through my teaching experiences, I’ve learned how to distinguish
between papers written from a sense of “mission” (papers that reflect definite conceptual and aesthetic goals that students are trying to accomplish in the piece) and those that were written to simply satisfy an assignment.

- It moves beyond the “surface level” of the topic and examines possible implications, motivations, or “hidden” connections, etc.

Another characteristic that I look for in a well-written essay is its ability to move beyond the “surface-level” of the topic to those unseen elements: possible implications, motivations, “hidden” or unconsidered historical, cultural, social, or conceptual connections, etc. By definition, an expository essay “exposes” some new perspective, connection, or concept. Consequently, a well-written essay should “dig” beneath the “surface” of the chosen topic.

Most papers that I receive from students only go as far as what they’ve actually seen, experienced, or can point to within a designated text. I refer to these students as “Tree-Huggers;” they “play it safe.” In these papers, the students don’t seem to understand how to use those observations, experiences, or readings as a beginning “jumping point” to begin to question the realities and views they’ve experienced or heard from others. What I’m looking for are students to be “Limb Swingers;” students who are willing to make inferences, take chances, and see where those “hidden elements” take them.

Students should remember that the point of the essay is not to give them a place to regurgitate their experiences and readings to the instructor, but it is to give them a place and an opportunity to begin to question, to hypothesize and theorize, possible explanations and connections to those experiences and readings with other parts of their lives.

- Its content throughout is creative, fresh, and insightful.

Since the essay is to be an “opinion piece” that “digs down” into the topic to “expose” or “uncover” some unconsidered aspect of the topic or experience, then its content throughout the paper should be creative, fresh, and insightful. It should bring out a new perspective, a new viewpoint, on the issue – rather than just “regurgitate” the same information and perspectives.

- It demonstrates a personal connection between the writer and the topic.

I have found that the papers that are the most interesting to read are those that contain some personal experiences of the writer. One of the oldest rules of writing is “to write what you know.”

- Its writing is engaging and invites reading.

The essay should engage the mind and emotions of the reader. Its use of language should be enthusiastic and lively, and it should exploit the visuals appropriately by using sensorial details and analogies. It should be a pleasure to read, almost like sitting down to a well-performed drama or musical, since its use of words and sentence structures should demonstrate a sophisticated sensitivity to the rhythms and music of language. Also, sentences need to be varied – not the same type of sentence structures over and over again -- and the emphasis of the sentences should be appropriate to the meaning that the writer is sharing at that point of the paper. Phrasing, likewise, should be fluent, even graceful. And finally, word choices, especially verbs, need to be accurate and sensitive to the various connotations or associated images and meanings.

- It’s well organized and structured.

It’s a paper that reflects a writer’s ability to make use of each section, each paragraph, to the best of his or her advantage. It not only follows the assigned structure, but it also is able to manipulate and use that structure to assert and emphasize the main points of the paper in a clear and concise manner.

- It effectively synthesizes outside sources with the student’s own writing.

Source materials should not just be thrown into a paper to satisfy a requirement for sources. Nor should they be used by themselves to try and make the argument for the writer. Sources need
to be properly set up, formatted, and then expounded upon and explained on how the material relates with or illustrates the point the writer is trying to make within the paper. Too many times, basic college writers erroneously assume that the reader will automatically understand how this source relates with or illustrates the point under discussion. It is often hard for them to understand that this assumption is, in fact, flawed.


One comment I’ve heard a numerous times from students is “Shouldn’t the content of the paper be what’s most important?” I would answer in the affirmative if we were talking about writing at grades K-10. However, I believe that by the time a student becomes a Junior or Senior in high school, and definitely by the time, he or she is a freshman in college, then the organization, structure, and language usage should be considered as important as the content itself. I believe, and many in the workforce likewise believe, that both of these aspects are equally important and should be equally focused upon.

And of course, the way I grade reflects this belief. 50% of a paper’s grade is content, and the other 50% is based upon the paper’s organization, structure, and language usage. What good is a paper that has marvelous content, but it’s badly organized and structured, and/or has so many errors in it that you cannot appreciate the content of the piece? On the other hand, what good is a paper that has marvelous organization and structure, and not a single error in the whole piece, but it doesn’t say anything? Both are important, and I believe both should be equally weighed and critiqued.

- It’s professional in its overall presentation.

Finally, colleges should prepare students for the work place by teaching them that their work for class needs to be done in a professional manner. Papers should not be turned in crinkled, torn, folded three or four times, chewed, mauled, etc.

By a student turning in work like that, it says that the student does not care about, or think much, of their work. If the student doesn’t care about it, there’s a high chance the quality work within that paper is going to be extremely poor.

The attitude and behavior that students show to the instructor and to one another trains them for how they will act in the work place. If students get in the habit of being allowed to get away with poor work habits and attitudes in the classroom, then they will carry this habit with them to the work place. As an instructor, I want my students to be successful in everything that they do; consequently, they need to learn to think and act professionally.