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Winter 2004

Criteria for Grading Essays

The aim of these notes is to offer some general guidelines for students on the criteria used to award a particular grade for an essay or other piece of written work.

Assessing Essays

Elements expected of ALL essays:

- Relevance: it directly answers the question;
- Understanding of the topic;
- Evidence of the use of appropriate sources (e.g. books, journals, newspapers etc);
- Organization of material into a coherent structure (e.g. beginning, middle, and end);
- Clear style, including accurate spelling, clear sentence construction, punctuation;
- References;
- Bibliography;
- Legibility. (illegible essays will be returned unmarked);
- Use of your own words, except where directly quoting from another source;
- Language: please avoid racist and sexist language.

These are the minimum criteria for the grading of all pieces of written work.

Analysis

As a general guide, remember the two approaches to analysis that were mentioned in class

- 1) Analysis that seeks to minimize the discrepancies between what we say about what happens and what actually happens. Try not to overreach – i.e., say more than you can reasonably claim to know about a situation.
- 2) Analysis that incorporates not only description but also explanation and, importantly, some understanding of the ways in which people participate in and are effected by the circumstances in question. This includes us in our role as analysts. Higher marks will be given to those students who manage incorporate something of the three aspects of descriptive, explanatory, and participatory analysis in their work.

Essay Grades

A (70% plus)

The student will demonstrate excellence in the use of the following criteria:

- independent thought and critical judgement;
- insightful conceptual analysis;
- critical evaluation of sources and issues;
- clearly developed thought process in response to the question or title of the paper;
- comprehensive understanding of relevant issues;
- use of literature and/or sources in ways that are both relevant and supportive of points made in the paper;
- sources fully and accurately identified;
- heightened awareness of personal relevance of issues under discussion.

(in addition to incorporating all the elements expected of all essays)

B (60-69%)

There will be very good use of many or most of the aspects outlined for an A-grade essay, although certain features will be less fully realized. Thus, for example, a typical B-grade essay will demonstrate a high level of competency in relation to the following:

- independent thought and critical judgement, but may stick fairly closely to conventional terms of reference;
- some insightful conceptual analysis;
- some critical evaluation of sources and issues;
- quite well-developed thought process in response to the question or title of the paper;
- some understanding of relevant issues ;
- use of literature and/or sources in ways that are both relevant and supportive of points made in the paper;
- sources fully and accurately identified;
- some awareness of personal relevance of issues under discussion;
- inclusion of all the elements expected of all essays.

C (50-59%)

There will be very good use of many or most of the aspects outlined for an A-grade or B-grade essay, although certain features will be only partially realized. Thus, for example, a typical C-grade essay will demonstrate the following:

- some independent thought, but critical points will not be covered in any depth
- some insightful conceptual analysis;
- lack of sustained conceptual or theoretical analysis, tending to accept uncritically the principal concepts and theories in an area;
- quite well-developed thought process in response to the question or title of the paper;
- uneven coverage of relevant issues ;
- little use of literature and/or sources in ways that are both relevant and supportive of points made in the paper;
- sources inadequately identified;
- little awareness of personal relevance of issues under discussion;
- inclusion of most of the elements expected of all essays, but not all, for example, at times the paper may lack coherence, the student may show confusion with regard to terminology, or they may contradict themselves.

D (40-49%)

There will be a satisfactory use of a limited number of the features outlined for an A-grade paper, although significant elements will be underdeveloped. Thus, for instance, a typical D-grade paper will:

- display little evidence of independent thought and critical judgement;
- include a partial and rather superficial coverage of key issues;
- lack insightful conceptual analysis;
- show poorly-developed thought process in response to the question or title of the paper
- show little or no awareness of personal relevance of issues under discussion.

and, while some of the elements expected of all essays are present, they are not necessarily adequate. The essay may display, for example, a satisfactory grasp of the topic, and be written in the student's own words, however:

- it may be badly structured;
- it may include some waffle (i.e. using lots of words without meaning very much);
- and references may be inadequate and inaccurate.

Fail

There will be an inadequate use of a significant number of the features outlined for the First. Thus, a typical Fail will:

- display independent thought largely in the form of unsubstantiated opinion;
- demonstrate no evidence of critical judgement;
- include unbalanced coverage of relevant issues, with some omitted altogether;
- lack insightful conceptual analysis;
- show no awareness of personal relevance of issues under discussion;
- include attempts to fulfil some of the elements required of all essays, but it will have failed by and large to achieve those aims.

For example:

- there may be an attempt to respond to the question, but the essay as a whole will not answer it;
- exposition will tend to be confused and badly structured;
- it will often be badly written;
- there may be no references;
- evidence of little or no reading around the topic.

These notes have been adapted from:

[A Guide to Assessment For Lecturers and Students in Higher Education](#) (M Lloyd et al)