General characteristics by letter grade of university-level student papers

	The A Paper	The B Paper	The C paper	The D Paper	The F Paper
Ideas	Excels in responding to assignment. Interesting. Demonstrates sophistication of thought. Central idea/thesis clearly communicated, worth developing; limited enough to be manageable. Paper recognizes some complexity of its thesis: may acknowledge its contradictions, qualifications, or limits and follow out their logical implications. Understands and critically evaluates its sources, appropriately limits and defines terms.	A solid paper, responding appropriately to assignment. has clearly stated thesis or idea, but may have minor lapses in development. Begins to acknowledge the complexity of central idea and the possibility of other points of view. Shows careful reading of sources, but may not evaluate them critically. Attempts to define terms, not always successfully.	Adequate but weaker and less effective, possibly responding less well to assignment. Presents central idea in general terms, often depending on platitudes or cliches. Usually does not acknowledge other views. Shows basic comprehension of sources, perhaps with some lapses in understanding. If it defines terms, often depends on dictionary definitions.	Does not have a clear central idea or does not respond appropriately to the assignment. Thesis may be too vague or obvious to be developed effectively. Paper may misunderstand sources.	Does not respond to assignment, lacks a thesis or central idea, and may neglect to use sources where necessary.
Organization and Coherence	Uses a logical structure appropriate to paper's audience, thesis, and disciplinary field. Sophisticated transitional sentences often develop one idea from the previous one or identify their logical relations. It guides the reader through the chain of reasoning or profession of ideas.	Shows a logical progression of ideas and uses fairly sophisticated transitional devices; eg., may move from least to most important idea. Some logical links may be faulty, but each ¶ clearly relates to paper's central idea.	May list ideas or arrange them randomly rather than using any evident logical structure. May lack transitions or bridges. May use transitions, but they are likely to be sequential (first, second, third) rather than logic based, or may not relate to central idea. While each ¶ may relate to central idea, logic is not always clear. ¶s may have topic sentences but may be overly general, and arrangement of sentences within ¶s may lack coherence.	May have random organization, lacking internal ¶ coherence and using few or inappropriate transitions. ¶s may lack topic sentences or main ideas, or may be too general or too specific to be effective. ¶s may not all relate to paper's thesis.	No appreciable organization; lacks transitions and coherence.
Support	Uses evidence appropriately and effectively, providing sufficient evidence and explanation to convince.	Begins to offer reasons to support its points, perhaps using varied kinds of evidence. Begins to interpret the evidence and explain connections between evidence and main ideas. Its examples bear some relevance.	Often uses generalizations, rather than specifics, to support its points. May use examples but they may be obvious or not relevant. Often depends on unsupported opinion or personal experience, or assumes that evidence speaks for itself and needs no application to point being discussed. Often has lapses in logic.	Depends on cliches or overgeneralizations for support, or offers little evidence of any kind. May be personal narrative rather than essay, or summary rather than analysis.	Uses irrelevant details or lacks supporting evidence entirely. May be unduly brief.
Style. (How does it sound read aloud?)	Chooses words for their precise meanings, and uses an appropriate level of specificity. Sentence style fits paper's audience and purpose. Sentences are varied, yet clearly structured and carefully focused, not long and rambling.	Generally uses words accurately and effectively, but may sometimes be too general. Sentences generally clear, well structured, focused—though some may be awkward or ineffective.	Uses relatively vague and general words. May use some inappropriate language. Sentence structure generally correct, but sentences may be wordy, unfocused, repetitive, or confusing.	May be vague and abstract, or very personal and specific. Usually contains several awkward or ungrammatical sentences; sentence structure is simple or monotonous.	Usually contains many awkward sentences, misuses words, employs inappropriate language.
Spelling, Punctuation, Format (How does it look?)	Almost entirely free of spelling, punctuation, and grammatical errors. Mastery of MLA format, citation, Works Cited.	May contain a few errors, which may annoy the reader but not impede understanding. May have a few minor errors in MLA format, citation, Works Cited.	Usually contains several mechanical errors, which may temporarily confuse the reader but not impede overall understanding. Conforms to basics of MLA format, but may have several errors.	Usually contains either many mechanical errors or a few important errors that block the reader's understanding and ability to see connections between thoughts. Major flaws in MLA format, citation, Works Cited.	Usually contains so many mechanical errors that it is impossible for the reader to follow the thinking from sentence to sentence. Displays little or no adherence to MLA format.