

English 1020E – Section 002 Essay Guidelines for Students

What follows is a set of loose “criteria” which will guide the evaluation and grading of essays in English 020E, Section 002, as well as series of useful “Tips” to help ensure that your essay is effective and up to university standard. The criteria employed for marking essays will, to some degree, vary from first term, when you are *not* expected to produce a “research” essay, to second term, when you are. Note is made of such differences as may be applicable below.

These criteria should *not* be viewed as rigidly prescriptive, although they do represent a fairly standard and conventional view of what comprises a university-standard undergraduate paper. I have also not assigned numerical values to the various criteria below: this document will *not* tell you that “grammar” is worth, say, 20% of the final grade for your paper. This is because a) I think such an approach badly misrepresents the way in which essays written in the humanities are *actually* evaluated, and b) it is not flexible enough to account for the way in which form and content inform one another. There is for that reason a fair amount of overlap between criteria.

The Essay as a Demonstration of Student Abilities

These criteria are founded upon certain broad **assumptions** about what we are **asking students to demonstrate** when they write essays. These can be said to include:

- **A command of the subject and materials**
- **An ability to reason analytically**
- **An ability to communicate effectively**
- **A substantial and sound understanding of the conventions and uses of the essay form itself**

All of these are more or less equally important.

Important Criteria for Marking Essays

The list that follows is not exhaustive, but constitutes the *main* elements that are likely to impact upon the grade that you will receive for a paper. Many of these overlap each other (for such, after all, is the nature of language that what we say frequently merges with how we say it), and others are, to some degree, “subsets” of primary criteria.

- **Quality of content**
Self-evidently a paper is evaluated on the strength, comprehensiveness, and subtlety of its content. Has all, or the best of the available textual evidence been used? Has enough reference been made to the textual evidence to provide a solid anchor for the argument?

- **Quality of thesis statement**
The “thesis statement” is a clear expression, generally in the essay introduction, of main point(s) to be demonstrated or proven. The thesis statement provides an all-important “road map” for all that follows: without it, the argument may make little sense to the reader as it unfolds through reading.
- **Quality of conclusion**
This criterion represents your success at recapitulating and reinforcing in a brief form the main points of the argument within a “conclusion” to the essay. This usually includes a short restatement of the thesis.
- **Employment of transitions**
Transitions between paragraphs, ideas, and “sections” of the argument can be both formal, through the use of transitional sentences, or conceptual, in the sense that there is a logical connection between ideas that have been placed together in a sequence.
- **The structure or “flow” of the argument**
Related in obvious ways to the use of transitions, this criterion is based upon the degree to which the overall argument is logically and effectively structured. There are, of course, a number of different ways to structure any given argument, but all of these are not likely to be equally effective. A simple structure (as, for example, in the case of an essay that organizes itself according the chronological sequence of the narrative of the original text) can work, but is probably not the most effective means of expressing an argument. The grade that you will receive will reflect the effectiveness of your choice in this regard.
- **Persuasiveness of argument**
Overall, does the argument “convince”? This criteria rests to some degree, of course, on others: how valid are the supporting points, how strongly and effectively are they communicated, and how well are they integrated into the larger argument?
- **Sophistication of argument**
This evaluates the *effectiveness* of the argument. Does it achieve what has been promised by the introduction and thesis statement? How “clever” is it? Does it rely solely upon obvious points, or does it evoke more nuanced or subtle point in support of its thesis?
- **Acknowledgment of and response to contrary evidence**
It is important that you learn to anticipate possible objections to your arguments, and to respond to these within the essay. A failure to do so may seem to suggest that you have not considered potential problems or objections that others might make.

- **Avoidance of reductive or simplistic arguments**
This is a sort of “negative” criterion, and penalizes papers that have oversimplified or otherwise misrepresented textual features and themes used to support their argument. Arguing, for example, that the “Fall” in *Paradise Lost* is an entirely negative or tragic event ignores the final consolation offered to Adam and Eve at the conclusion of the poem.
- **Use of citation from primary sources**
How effectively and extensively have you been at employing textual evidence in the form of citation as support for your argument? Has the *best* evidence been employed, or has a central passage been neglected? This criterion can also be negative, when you have employed citation unnecessarily, ineffectively, or as mere “filler.”
- **Use of citation from secondary sources**
This criterion obviously applies only to “research” papers. Have secondary sources been employed judiciously and effectively? Conversely, criticism or commentary can be misused, or irrelevantly and unnecessary deployed.
- **Quality of secondary sources**
Again, this criterion applies only to research papers. This is a relatively minor criterion, as students at the first-year level are not expected to have developed the skills or experience required to make very effective evaluations of secondary sources. Nonetheless, you should try to ensure that the sources that you do use are valid and trustworthy. This is particularly true of online sources. Is your source from a reputable institution? Is the author qualified to comment authoritatively? One note: *Do not use Wikipedia or similar open-source online resources, as these lack the quality control necessary to ensure that the information is trustworthy.*
- **Documentation of sources**
This applies, again, only to “research papers,” and is really nothing more than a simple measure of whether all primary and secondary sources have been acknowledged and documented thoroughly and according to established scholarly standards. Has MLA format been used?
- **Style**
This criterion measures the effectiveness of your prose style and rhetoric (as opposed, where the two are separable, from its grammatical correctness). Obviously a well-written paper is more effective and convincing than a bland or boring one. Word-choice and diction most often falls into this category.
- **Grammar and spelling**
Again, this is a simple measure of your ability to employ written English in a grammatically correct manner. Some faults are obviously more important than

others: pronoun reference problems are probably less important than major sentence faults (such run-ons, comma-splices, and sentence fragments).

- **Improvement in targeted areas over last essay**

This evaluates your success and effort at correcting problems that have been identified in your previous written work. Although not a major criterion, you will find that you are rewarded when you respond effectively to criticism and instruction, and are penalized commensurately when you appear to be making the same errors over again.

A Few Tips and Pointers for Students

- It is important *not to be tentative* about your argument. You are trying to “prove” something: don’t undercut your argument unnecessarily by using phrases like “it seems,” “it appears,” or “it seems likely.” These terms suggest that you lack conviction in your own argument, or are trying to hedge your bets. This said, however . . .
- *Do not overstate your argument*, or be afraid to admit when a point is less clear-cut or even certain than it might seem. Literature is by nature complicated and nuanced: if everything that could be said about a text were obvious and uncomplicated, there would be no need to continue studying old texts anew. You should certainly be unambivalent about your central thesis, but you will only strengthen the impression of your analytical abilities by conceding complexity or ambiguity where it exists.
- *Avoid generalities, statements of the self-evident, or banalities*. Remarks such as “This poem is effective because of the use to which it puts metre, rhyme, and image” do little or nothing to contribute to an argument, and merely take up space. Comments like “Since the beginning of time, people have been oppressed by the thought of death,” or “John Milton was a great poet” similarly represent unprovable and ultimately useless generalizations.
- Be sure that all of the points that you make *support or in some way contribute* to your argument. Evidence and analysis, however valid or interesting in its own right, that does *not* assist you in the task of explaining and proving your argument does not belong in your paper.
- *Use transitional sentences* (almost invariably at the beginning or conclusion of your paragraphs) to link ideas and points. The impression of an effective, logical, and “smoothly-flowing” argument is much enhanced by the use of simple statements that show how the next idea relates to the previous one.

Example:

. . . Clearly, Hardy is deeply disturbed by the prevalence of misfortune, pain, and unhappiness in the world.

At the same time, however, is not merely the fact that humans suffer that most disturbs him. For Hardy, it is finally the absence of any kind of divine agency that is source of true despair. . . .

- **Use a “hook” to introduce your first paragraph.** Your introduction will be much more effective if you can spark the reader’s interest with an initial comment or point (relevant, obviously, in some way to your argument) that points to and underlines the interest and value of the thesis that you are about to outline. One effective type of hook employs a particularly vivid or interesting detail from the text relevant to your thesis. You should not, of course, actually try to make your argument here: the hook merely highlights an interesting problem that you are trying to address or solve.

Example:

“They fuck you up, your mum and dad.” Thus begins Philip Larkin in his poem “This Be the Verse.” The shockingly abrupt and casually obscene nature of this pronouncement underlines the seriousness of Larkin’s basic theme: human “misery” is of human origin, and has its roots in the very act of procreation and generation. . . .