

Expectations: Great, Good, Fair, and Poor Writing

Adapted from Chapter 3 of *Writing for Sociology (2nd Edition)*¹

If you follow your syllabus guidelines, aim for the writing goals indicated here, and check in with your professor or GSI about their expectations, you should have no problem doing well in your writing assignments.

A

An “A” paper demonstrates a superior, sustained, and consistent level of critical engagement with the issues that the writer addresses. This engagement can be seen in the following ways: The writer's understanding of the text(s) upon which the paper is based is plausible, logical, and thoughtful. The response is thorough, exploring the issues in some depth, advancing reasonable claims, and anticipating counterclaims when appropriate. The thesis is clear, and perceptive. The paper demonstrates strong reasoning throughout, supported by persuasive evidence and relevant, fully developed examples. Similarly, the paper’s organization supports the development of the writer's ideas, and demonstrates effective uses of cohesive devices. The word choice is varied and precise, sentence structure is varied, and only minor errors in grammar and usage are evident.

Excerpt from a student paper that got an “A”

*While [a local bar called] Blake's clearly does not have the characteristics of the total institutions that Goffman describes in great detail in *Asylums*, it does draw distinctions between club security and club guests that are analogous to Goffman's “Staff world” and “Inmate world.” Goffman finds that “in total institutions there is a basic split between a large managed group, conveniently called inmates, and a small supervisory staff” where the staff tends to “feel superior and righteous” while inmates tend “to feel inferior [and] weak” (Goffman, p.8). The club bouncer in this context acts as the staff, as he regulates the club guests and is granted power over them, while the club guests assume the role of inmates as they must submit to the demands of the staff to function in the institution—the night-club. There is already an inherent inequality in this relationship, as club patrons must voluntarily give up their free will and obey the bouncer in order to be accepted into the club.*

B

A “B” paper demonstrates competence and an acceptable level of critical engagement with the issues that the writer addresses. This engagement can be seen in the following ways: The writer's understanding of the text(s) upon which the paper is based is plausible and logical. The response is adequate, although its exploration of the issues may be lacking in some details. The thesis is clear, and not already self-evident.

¹ Excerpted from “What Your Grades Mean” in “Teaching Guide for Graduate Student Instructors.” Graduate Student Instructor Teaching & Resource Center, University of California, Berkeley, 2006-2007.

The paper's reasoning is sound, and is based on relevant evidence. The organization of the paper supports the development of the writer's ideas. It generally demonstrates accurate and sufficient use of evidence, although there may be occasional lapses. The word choice is varied and precise, and sentence structure is varied. While errors in grammar and usage may be present, they do not interfere with the reader's understanding of the text.

Example of a "B" version of the above excerpt

Aspects of Blake's bar resemble Goffman's ideas from Asylums, because there is a staff that supervises another group of people (Goffman, p.8). The staff regulates the club guests and is granted power over them, while the guests assume must submit to the demands of the staff to function in the institution the nightclub. There is an inherent inequality in this relationship, as club patrons must voluntarily give up their free will and obey the bouncer in order to be accepted into the club.

C

A "C" paper meets the requirements of the assignment. The writer's understanding of the text(s) upon which the paper is based is generally plausible and logical. The response is adequate, although its exploration of issues may be sufficiently lacking. The thesis is not clear or is weak. The paper's reasoning is varied and is not consistently supported by relevant evidence and examples. The writer's plan of organization may be occasionally compromised, insufficient or inaccurate. There may be errors in grammar and usage, but they do not interfere substantially with the reader's understanding of the text.

Example a "C" version of the excerpt

Blake's resembles Goffman's ideas from Asylums. Goffman finds that "in total institutions there is a basic split between a staff and inmates, and a small supervisory staff," where the staff tends to feel superior and righteous and inmates feel scared and lonely. The bouncer in this context acts as the staff, as they regulate the masses and control their actions and feel superior, and the masses are inmates who submit to all of the demands of the staff because they want to stay in the nightclub. This is always an unequal relationship, and customers must voluntarily give up their free for the entire night.

NP

A "NP" (Not Passing is C- or lower) paper may meet some of the requirements of the assignment, but it is unsatisfactory in other ways. The writer's understanding of the text(s) upon which the paper is based may be inaccurate, skewed, or illogical. The response may be simplistic or incomplete, lacking in detail, use of examples, and the like. The thesis may be unclear or self-

evident. The paper may fail to adduce evidence, or the evidence presented may be unpersuasive or even counterproductive to the writer's goals. It is unlikely that the paper offers a reasonable response to the question or meets the requirements of the writing prompt. The pattern of development may seem erratic to the reader, or overly mechanical. The word choice frequently may be imprecise or repetitive. There may be major errors in grammar and usage that interfere with the reader's understanding of the text, or there may be pervasive minor errors of different types that detract significantly from the effectiveness of the paper.

Excerpt from a student paper that got a “C- or Lower”

Blake's is just like the places Goffman talks about in Asylums because that's where Goffman finds that in total institutions there is split between people who are bossed around who are called the inmates and people who do the bossing around called the staff. It's the staff that likes to feel superiority and high self-esteem while inmates don't like themselves and are pawns in the staff's games, like the movies "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" starring Jack Nicholson and "Girl Interrupted" starring Winona Ryder and Angelina Jolie. These movies are exciting looks at life in asylums. Blake's is just like this. Blake's is like this because the bouncer dominates, they make sure the people in the bar behave. If people don't behave they get kicked out. So the customers at the bar are beneath the bouncers, and so are alienated and feel anxious and scared, which is why they drink.