

Professor Mingay: What I Look for in an Essay

When I mark an essay, I examine the essay as a whole; I do not start with a high mark and deduct marks for each error. An error—depending on the type—does not necessarily mean you can no longer receive an “A.” Further, I do not mark on the “curve.” I grade according to the standards of the Department of English, ensuring that all English instructors at King’s arrive at similar conclusions about an essay. I do not pick favourites, and a low mark does not mean you are a bad person! I am always (always!) happy to read your drafts and help you improve.

Content

- **Specificity:** Does the essay make specific references to details of the text to support its argument? Is the evidence clearly explained in relation to the central argument? Does the evidence relate to the sentence that introduced it? Does the word choice accurately reflect discussion?
- **Depth:** Does the essay do more than simply repeat or rephrase the quotations? Does it use critical language and literary terminology rather than clichés? Did I learn anything new, or did the essay express points in a unique way? Does the essay examine the text/quotations in detail?
- **Logic:** Are there clear topic sentences that prepare the reader for the paragraph? Is the paragraph consistent, and not diverge from its topic sentence? Does it hold together logically? Does the student understand what is being asked in the topic?
- **Research (if there is a research component):** How extensive is the essay’s research (date of articles, topics, etc)? Does the essay engage meaningfully with the secondary sources, or just find a quotation and force it into the paragraph? Does the student successfully critique these sources, or engage with them in any way? Do the secondary sources replace or initiate the student’s own argument (don’t do this!).

Organization and Structure

- Is there an introduction, body, and conclusion?
- Is the thesis and plan of organization stated clearly in the introduction? Are there points that connect logically with the topic sentences? Does the essay begin with an introduction to the topic, or is it overly general and philosophical?
- Are there smooth transitions between ideas?
- Does the student know how to divide paragraphs properly?

Writing Style and Mechanics

- Is the essay written in clear, concise, and precise language? Does the student have a broad vocabulary and know definitions of words?
- Is there a good variety of sentence structure?
- Is the essay free of grammar and punctuation errors? Any essay that has subject/verb agreement errors, for example, usually does not receive higher than a D+/C-.
- Are quotations smoothly integrated using a variety of methods?
- Does the essay follow MLA guidelines?

- Is the essay properly formatted, including a title page and spelling my name properly?

Note: Although I do not give separate marks for each category, be advised that grammar errors will have a significant impact on your grade. Beyond that, I look at the essay as a whole.

Sometimes the first page of an essay is a “D,” but then finishes strong for a “B-.” I read through the essay taking everything (content, organization, writing) into consideration before assigning a grade.