

What I Look for in an Essay

When essays are due, many students become anxious and start asking questions like: “How do you mark?” “What do you want to see?” “What do you value in an essay?” To help answer some of these questions beforehand (and hopefully reduce anxiety), I’ve prepared the following list of things I look for in an essay. When reading any student essay, I ask certain questions, and the grade is based on the answers to these questions:

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?
- **Depth:** Does the essay avoid summary or paraphrasing of the literature? Does the argument take a risk and make a claim that is not readily apparent or obvious? Does the essay convincingly draw out (interpret) the significance of textual details? Does the essay engage with the text and elucidate it in thoughtful and creative ways?
- **Logic:** Is the argument consistent? Does it hold together logically? Does the student seem to understand the assumptions as well as the implications of the argument?
- **Research (if there is a research component):** Does the essay engage meaningfully with the secondary sources? Do the sources offer good support for the student’s argument, or does the student successfully critique these sources? Do the secondary sources overwhelm or drown out the student’s voice? (this last is **not** a good thing)

Organization and Structure

- Is there an introduction, body, and conclusion?
- Is the thesis and plan of organization stated clearly in the introduction?
- Do the points flow well? Are there smooth transitions between ideas?
- Does each paragraph begin with a topic sentence?

Writing Style and Mechanics

- Is the essay written in clear, concise, and precise language?
- Is there a good variety of sentence structure?
- Is the essay free of grammar and punctuation errors?
- Are quotations smoothly integrated?

- Does the essay follow MLA guidelines?
- Is the essay properly formatted?

Note: I do not give separate marks for each category because it is impossible to separate them: the organization and mechanics of the essay affect its content and vice versa, and any attempt on my part to assign a grade for just one of these would be artificial at best. The essays for this class are marked holistically, which means I read through the essay taking everything (content, organization, writing) into consideration and then assign a grade.