

Identifying and Prioritizing Writing Strengths and Weaknesses

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Try to identify the highest level problems first. Generally, these consist of idea develop, logic, or clarity. This doesn't mean that you should ignore surface features, but do recognize their place. The following questions might help you identify why papers strike you as strong or weak.

1. Is the student doing the task assigned? If not, does the task that the student is doing have sufficient merit that you can sanction it?
2. Are there fundamental misreadings or misrepresentations of information or ideas? Does the student accurately summarize and represent readings or sources?
3. How effective, appropriate, or ambitious is the main idea or focus of the paper? Is the thesis or topic
 1. clearly established and maintained?
 2. worth addressing?
 3. susceptible to coverage or demonstration in the situation available?
4. How well does the paper fit its intended audience?
 1. Are the ideas "new" or relevant enough to intended readers?
 2. Does the writing assume the right things of readers—or too much, too little, or the wrong thing? Consider in terms of information, facts, basic assumptions but also beliefs and values?
 3. Is the tone appropriate? Is it pitched too high or low or simply “off?”
5. Does the paper have the right kinds and amounts of evidence for claims?
 1. Are evidence and support present or are they missing or inadequate?
 2. Does the paper have the right kinds of evidence, suitable to the task and audience?
 3. Does the writer explicitly connect evidence to claims, or does he or she merely deploy it, leaving it to the reader?
 4. Does the writer address countering positions or confounding information or alternative interpretations? Or are these slighted or missing?
 5. Does the paper treat complexities or subtleties?
6. Is the structure of the paper effective?
 1. Does the introduction provide enough context or clearly signal purpose, without being padded or gratuitous? Is the introduction appropriate engaging?
 2. Is the paper balanced in development? Do important ideas or elements get relatively more attention than less important ones?
 3. Is the organization clear to readers? Does the sequence of parts the most effective one?
 4. Is the conclusion apt and engaging, or is it absent, superfluous, or perfunctory?
7. Is the style of the paper effective?
 1. Are word choices and sentence types appropriate for the audience?
 2. Is the paper free of stigmatized grammar, usage, and punctuation errors?
 3. Is the style appropriately economical and lively? Does the voice of the paper emulate the voice associated with good professional writing in this area?
8. Do errors, carelessness, or presentation so interfere with your reading that the student needs to turn in a "clean" copy before you can respond to the writing? Is the paper in the proper format? Note: You might decide that papers having this problem might more effectively be returned, perhaps with a grade reduction.

A Sample Response Rubric

I want my written and marginal comments to engage the students' ideas and strategies; I try not to comment simply to justify the grade I've assigned. However, students frequently want to know "what they did wrong" (or right). Therefore, I sometimes run off copies of a feedback sheet, check the appropriate responses, and attached the page to each student's paper. Here's an example from a recent assignment.

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Dear _____ :

When I was grading your paper, I first asked some essential questions:

Does the paper make an argument?	Yes	No
Are assertions supported with evidence?	Yes	No
Do you discuss that evidence?	Yes	No
Is the paper easy to follow?	Yes	No
Is the paper well-edited?	Yes	No
Does the paper match MLA conventions?	Yes	No

If so, your paper meets the assignment and qualifies for at least a C.

Then, I considered three other criteria to decide whether your paper merited an A or B:

The ambition and quality of the insights presented

- adequate; perhaps "safe" or standard.
- frequently thoughtful or innovative
- consistently thoughtful and innovative; even striking

The quality of the explanations, reasoning, and analysis used to support those insights

- adequate; perhaps "safe" or developed minimally or obviously
- frequently thoughtful or innovative; detailed
- consistently thoughtful and innovative; even striking or subtly argued

The style of the paper, including not only how engaging are the introduction, development, and conclusion but also how energetic are the sentences and sophisticated and vital is your voice

- adequate and standard; correct but perhaps predictable
- frequently engaging, innovative or stylistically inviting
- consistently engaging, innovative, stylistically sophisticated and inviting

One aspect of the paper that I found particularly strong or interesting is:

One aspect of the paper that you might improve in a revision or in a future assignment like this one is:

Sincerely,

Doug Hesse