

Department of Politics Grading Philosophy and Standards

Department of Politics Grading Philosophy

The Department of Politics is committed to grading practices that are rigorous, fair and constructive. To this end, faculty and preceptors are expected to provide undergraduate students with grades and with written feedback as appropriate to the nature of a given assignment. Grades and feedback are intended both to enable students to distinguish between their best work and weaker efforts, and to identify paths to future improvement. We posit common grading standards below for all undergraduate coursework in courses whose primary designation is in the Department of Politics; overall course grades are also to be assigned and interpreted with reference to the general levels of excellence set out in these standards. Their application to a particular piece of work will take into account the nature of the assignment in question, including the level of the course (if applicable) and the length of time allowed for completion of the work. In order to give coherence to the overall pedagogical aims of the Politics curriculum, these grading standards are substantively related to those for the Junior Paper and the Senior Thesis (set out separately in the Department's Undergraduate Regulations).

Syllabi for courses whose primary designation is in the Department of Politics are expected to state the range of components that will enter into the grade, and the percentage of the grade that each component will be worth. Those components may include class or precept participation together with prescribed written or oral assignments. A syllabus or a separate document should also outline the general standards of quality that characterize good work in the course, remind students about rules regarding plagiarism, and set out expectations about any collaborative work permitted in the course.

Faculty members are responsible for the fairness of grading procedures in their courses, and are encouraged to consider and adopt methods of safeguarding such fairness that are suitable to the size and nature of their course. These may include anonymous grading; comparing pieces of graded work among different graders in a different course; assigning preceptors to grade the work of students in other precepts; reading and grading examinations question by question, rather than full script by full script; and other methods. The department will offer administrative support and advice to support such methods to the extent reasonably possible. Faculty (and preceptors, where relevant) are expected to return graded work in a reasonably timely fashion, and to submit overall course grades by the date established by the Registrar except where individual student illness or other documented factors require a temporary giving of an incomplete.

University-wide Grading Standards

The Politics departmental grading standards below expand upon, and are related to, the following university-wide grading definitions:

A+ Exceptional	Significantly exceeds the highest expectations for undergraduate work
A Outstanding	Meets the highest standards for the assignment or course
A- Excellent	Meets very high standards for the assignment or course
B+ Very good	Meets high standards for the assignment or course
B Good	Meets most of the assignment or course
B- More than adequate	More than adequate; shows some reasonable command of the material
C+ Acceptable	Meets basic standards for the assignment or course
C Acceptable	Meets some of the basic standards for the assignment or course
C- Acceptable	While acceptable, falls short of meeting basic standards in several ways
D Minimally Acceptable	Lowest passing grade
F Failing	Very poor performance

Department of Politics Grading Standards for Coursework

These standards are intended to be interpreted and applied by faculty and preceptors in ways that make sense for the assigned work in question. Thus, standards pertaining to grammar and style apply only to papers and examination essays, not to statistics assignments (and so the words “paper or essay” are added where appropriate below). Nevertheless, we consider many of the elements of excellence to be similar in varying types of assignments in Politics courses, and believe that a common set of standards is valuable for the department.

A. Work in the A range will meet or exceed very high standards for the assignment or course. It may be outstanding in the clarity of its argument, the application of the analytical techniques it employs, the relevance and sensitivity of the evidence it deploys, or all of these. It will generally manifest intellectual creativity, while -- where relevant --

demonstrating attention to important works on the subject and indicating with care and precision the importance of its questions and conclusions for the understanding of politics. When appropriate, it will also anticipate and respond to major objections to its position. To merit an A, a paper or essay should be well written, developing its arguments in an orderly way and presenting its ideas clearly and crisply. Poor grammar and style and more than occasional misspellings have no place in an A range paper or essay.

The mark of A+ is reserved for a work that satisfies all of these criteria to an extraordinarily high degree and significantly exceeds the highest expectations for undergraduate work; such a grade is extremely rare. The mark of A- should be given to a work which demonstrates intellectual creativity and meets very high standards for the assignment or course in all but one or two of the above respects.

B. Work in the B range is less outstanding, but still meets the standards for the assignment or course in a high to more than adequate way (varying across the B range). A work that meets the expectations of the instructor but does not go beyond doing so with general competence would merit a grade in this range. Like the A range work, one in the B range should where relevant be grounded in substantial research appropriate to its objectives, but will fall short in some way, as for instance by ignoring important sources or by failing to anticipate major objections. A paper or essay in the B range should be clearly written and logically organized, and have relatively few faults in grammar and presentation.

A grade of B+ is appropriate for sensibly conceived and, where relevant, well-written work that shows little originality or creativity. A B- is appropriate for sensibly conceived works that have some significant flaw in execution or a number of less important shortcomings.

C. Work in the C range meets at least some of the basic standards for the assignment or course. It may be flawed in the adequacy of its research, the logic of an important argument or proof or calculation may be faulty, the conclusions or findings may not be explored adequately, or the writing may be mediocre. An informative case study that offers little analysis or a review of some body of literature that generally gets things right but does little with them should be given a grade in the C range.

A grade of C+ should be given to the most informative of works in the C range, those that meet basic standards for the assignment or course; a C- to those that fall short of meeting the basic requirements of the category in several ways.

D. To merit the grade of D, a work must show evidence that the writer has some knowledge relevant to the subject. Beyond that little can be said in praise of a work meriting a D, which is the lowest passing grade.

F. A work that does not meet the minimal requirements for the grade of D should be given an F. This is a very poor performance that fails to satisfy the requirements of the assignment or course.

Department of Politics Standards for the Junior Paper

A Junior Paper written in the Department of Politics is normally an essay of 20 to 35 double-spaced pages that is clearly focused on one--or a few related--political questions, problems or issues. Junior papers are supposed to define a significant political question or problem and to answer it through a process of systematic research which may, depending on the nature of the topic selected, involve reading primary and secondary literature or original documents, interviewing, or compiling and analyzing statistical data. The range of subjects suitable for such essays is very wide. Most projects involve the following elements: defining a significant question, formulating a hypothesis, gathering and assessing evidence, reviewing critically the work of others on this subject, evaluating alternative methods of inquiry, critically reviewing one's own arguments, and relating one's findings and conclusions to a larger political context of issues. The Junior Paper is not a passive review of the existing literature, nor a summary of facts, nor a long editorial. It presents a critical and creative analysis of a question, problem or issue. A presentation of the student's own well-reasoned views is an essential part of this exercise. Policy recommendations are welcome but not required.

In general, the standards defined below for senior theses apply in faculty evaluations of the Junior Paper, with the understanding that the time available to work on a Junior Paper is much less than the time available for the senior thesis.

Department of Politics Standards for the Grading of Senior Theses

A: A thesis in the A range will meet or exceed very high standards for such a work. It may be outstanding in the clarity of its argument, the application of the analytical techniques it employs, and the relevance and sensitivity of the evidence it deploys. It will generally manifest intellectual creativity, while demonstrating attention to important works on the subject, and indicating with care and precision the importance of its questions and conclusions for the understanding of politics. It will display elements of originality in its conception of its subject, in the evidence and reasoning it brings to bear on that subject, in the analytical techniques it employs, or in all of these. It will demonstrate attention to important works on the subject, and will indicate with care and precision the importance of its questions and conclusions for the understanding of politics. When appropriate, it will also anticipate and respond to major objections to its position. To merit an A, a thesis should be well written, developing its arguments in an orderly way and presenting its ideas clearly and crisply. Poor grammar and style and more than occasional misspellings have no place in an A thesis.

The mark of A+ should be reserved for theses that satisfy all of these criteria to an extraordinarily high degree and significantly exceed the highest expectations for undergraduate work; such a grade is extremely rare. The mark of A- should be given a thesis which demonstrates intellectual creativity and meets very high standards for such a work in all but one or two of the above respects.

B: A thesis in the B range is a less outstanding work of a significant subject, which however meets the standards for the assignment or course in a high to more than adequate way (varying across the B range). A well done case study which yields few lessons of general import, or a good critical review of a significant body of thought which does not go beyond previous work on the subject, would merit a grade in this range. Like the A range thesis, one in the B range should be grounded in substantial research appropriate to its objectives, but the latter will fall short in some way, as for instance by ignoring important sources or by failing to anticipate major objections. A thesis in the B range should be clearly written and logically organized.

A grade of B+ is appropriate for a sensibly conceived, well-written project that shows little originality or creativity. A B- is appropriate for well-conceived theses that have some significant flaw in execution or a number of less important shortcomings.

C: A thesis in the C range meets at least some of the basic standards for the assignment or course. It may be flawed in the adequacy of its research, the logic of an important argument may be faulty, the conclusions or findings may not be explored adequately, or the writing may be mediocre. An informative case study that offers little analysis or a review of some body of literature that generally gets things right but does little with them should be given a grade in the C range.

A grade of C+ should be given to the most informative of the theses in the C range, those that meet basic standards for such works; a C- to those that fall short of meeting the basic requirements of the category in several ways.

D: To merit the grade of D, a thesis must treat a non-trivial subject in politics and must show evidence that the writer has some knowledge about that subject. Beyond that little can be said in praise of a paper meriting a D, which is the lowest passing grade.

F: A thesis that does not meet the minimal requirements for the grade of D should be given an F. This is a very poor performance that fails to satisfy the requirement of submitting an acceptable senior thesis.