

Grading Equivalencies for Graduate Student Essays

Though the usual grading scale applies in graduate school, the de facto range of grades is B+ to A+. Anything less than an A- indicates that your work is not at the level expected of graduate students; it would be a poor-to-failing grade at the undergraduate level. This is true of your work, not you. We all do bad work from time to time, and a B+ is not a commentary on your personal fitness for grad school, but a criticism of that particular assignment. That said, there is no curve in operation here, and, if the quality of the work merited it, I would gladly dispense an A+ to all seminar members. So here are the numbers and what they mean:

90-100 **A+** Outstanding work that far exceeds the usual expectation for graduate student writing; publishable immediately, or else with some revision. There are no grammatical mistakes here, the style is lucid and easy to read, the argument is clearly stated and well executed, the evidence presented backs up the thesis compellingly, critics are engaged and the argument situated in relation to existing commentary, and the significance of the contribution is made apparent.

85-90 **A** Very good work; what I would expect from a PhD candidate or from an outstanding MA candidate. There may be some stylistic infelicities here, or the odd minor grammatical mistake, but by and large the prose is clean. The argument may be clear but lacking in force; or it may be clear but not exceptionally well executed. Or it may be clear and well executed, but without a sense of its own implications, underdeveloped. Evidence is used well and the essay's overall structure is intuitive and compelling. The engagement with the critics is strong and the writer's own position clearly staked out, though perhaps not as clearly as with the A+ paper. It may be publishable with some extensive revisions.

80-85 **A-** Most papers that have not undergone a multi-stage drafting process and peer editing fall into this category. A- papers often have all the necessary pieces, but they may not connect properly. Some aspect of the argument, evidence, critical engagement, writing, structure, or sense of context may be missing or else inadequately executed. Usually there is potential readily apparent in the paper, but it is not yet up to publishable level; it meets the course's requirements, but is not remarkable in quality. At the lower end of this scale, there may be several minor problems or one major problem that point toward the paper's being under-developed or inadequately thought-out.

75-80 **B+** Papers in this range have not met the basic requirements of the assignment. They may not have answered what the assignment asked them to do, or they have done so poorly. There may be no clear argument, little or no critical engagement, and/or multiple serious grammar errors. The paper is simply not up to standard, and a grade in this range should serve as a loud wake-up call to the writer.

(Modified slightly from a document created by Stephen Ross)