WHAT IS AN "A" PAPER IN 300 AND 400 LEVEL COURSES?

Students ask this question frequently in upper division English classes. To help answer it, let me describe what the student must do in order to get a "C" grade in 300 and 400 level English courses.

C. A "C" essay is college level work. It shows signs of thoughtful inquiry and skillful writing. It is organized according to a clear, logical principle.

Grammar: The paper deploys scholarly English, and the writing enhances the argument rather than detracts from it. A college-level paper does not have any misspelled words (especially in the age of spell-check); a college-level paper does not have grammatical errors. Such errors may reduce a paper's grade below a C. No paper with more than a few grammatical errors will receive higher than a C-, and most will receive D's. The C essay meets the assigned length, and does not try to cozen the teacher by tweaking margins and font sizes to a ridiculous degree. (Students are welcome to bring in rough drafts for help with grammar.)

Thesis and Evidence: A "C" essay has a clear thesis that it sets forth to prove. A thesis is an argument, not a mere topic. For example, writing a paper "about" the Middle Ages or the medieval idea of kingship does not qualify. These are topics, not arguments about those topics. A thesis is always a statement to which one can agree or disagree. It always asserts an original conclusion the student reached in response to a question. In the paper, the student will set out to prove this argument. If the paper has no thesis, it will never be of passing quality. (Hint: if you cannot point to a single sentence in the essay and declare that it is the thesis, you have a problem.) To prove the thesis, the essay incorporates accurate quotations, specific examples, and pertinent sources from the text in its argument. It does not make unsubstantiated generalizations. It does not quote sources without an attempt to assess their value.

Introduction and Conclusion: The introduction and the title of a "C" paper do an adequate job of setting the stage for the argument. The conclusion is reasonable, and we can see how the writer got there using standard transitions.

However, the essay does not rise about average because it neglects any part of the excellent criteria for an "A" paper. The organization works, but may be standard. Or the style is grammatically correct, but flawed by passive voice or some other problem. Or the thesis is clear and developed, but not ambitious enough (or too ambitious) to cover in this length of assignment. Or the sources are good, but they are integrated a little awkwardly. Perhaps little introductory phrasing or appropriate punctuation appears before quoted material or examples, or those examples might not be as relevant as they could be. Perhaps the quoted materials consume too much space in the essay and choke the development of an original argument. The essay's claims have some support, but perhaps too much or not enough for the size of the assignment. The mechanical details of MLA formatting and citation, while generally correct, might be off in a few minor places. In general, it is a decent paper, but it is by no means perfect.

B. A "B" essay is better than average.

Grammar: Besides avoiding spelling errors and grammatical errors, the "B" essay shows a strong sense of diction and concision. The writer goes beyond the automatic word choice to find one more precise and effective. Besides avoiding grammatical errors, the paper avoids awkward sentence construction such as passive voice, nominalization, or other stylistic problems. The essay nails down solidly the mechanical details of MLA formatting.

Thesis and Evidence: The "B" essay has a thesis more focused than the average paper's thesis. It creates an argument in clear steps, and it uses cogent evidence to support each step of the argument. The thesis is more challenging than most, and it moves beyond the obvious to explore territory that is subtle and easily overlooked. To reach an intelligent conclusion, the "B" essay not only incorporates relevant quotations, examples, and sources into its argument, it integrates them more fully than the average essay. As a careful essayist, the writer employs introductory material before quotations and then makes smooth use of punctuation to integrate the quotation into the body of the essay. While the average "C" essay does a decent job of using primary textual evidence, a better-than-average "B" essay selects the best possible textual evidence, supplemented with additional pertinent information. It uses an appropriate amount of secondary research or historical data, moving beyond that found in the primary text.
An "A" essay is extraordinary. It is difficult to improve further. It is a product of effort and talent. To create the "A" essay, the writer exceeds the minimal demands of the assignment in some substantial way. The essay does all of the following: it makes me forget that I have to grade it as a teacher; I want to re-read it. It is literate, fluid, and substantive in every way. The opening is vital, its main body has a real argument addressing key issues in an original way, and the conclusion is powerful and compelling--both in terms of logic and style. It leaves me with something to think about. The author demonstrates a definite awareness of the audience and what readers need in order to follow the argument. The paper delves deeply into an important question about the text, and does so even-handedly, with no oversimplification or misrepresentation.

The writer clearly considers ideas raised in the assigned readings and class discussion, yet the student not only incorporates these ideas, he or she takes the old debate into new territory. The paper is consistently good and original. No obvious logical fallacies or contradictions appear. The essay handles counter-arguments with aplomb. The readers always know when the author presents the ideas of others--and they can tell what the writer thinks of those ideas. The paper documents outside sources appropriately, maintaining a workable balance between the author's voice and those of the sources. Quotations appear seamlessly integrated into the argument with introductory material and subsequent analysis. The student selects sources that are appropriate to the context of the argument--perhaps even surprisingly authoritative sources--rather than "filler" material that sounds neat, but does not convince or contribute directly to a line of reasoning. An "A" essay shows a stronger sense of originality and artistic nuance than the "B" or "C" paper.

The thesis is not only clear and developed throughout the essay, it is striking, challenging, and thoughtful. The transitions between topics are smooth, or at least seem to belong there. The essay offers general abstraction when necessary but always supports it with concrete details. The tone suits the subject and audience. The best essays are even elegant, graceful, or forceful. As a wordsmith, the writer has not created overwrought figurative language, but applied it judiciously--like a spice. The essay avoids clichés in favor of fresh phrasing. The title suits the essay well. As an added bonus, the format is flawless and follows the guidelines of the appropriate discipline (for English papers, this format is found in the MLA Handbook, 6th edition). You have gone the extra step to ensure ethos as a writer with a clean, professional-looking copy with clear print. In sum, this is literate writing with a purpose. With some tweaking and expansion, it might even be publishable material.

Note that "C" is, according to academic regulations, "average," while a "B" is "good." Logically, that means a "B" is better than satisfactory, better than adequate, better than average. The average grade then, is a "C," and a grade of "B" requires unusual effort and accomplishment.