

## What is an "A" grade?

*Prof. Steven Dutch, Natural and Applied Sciences, University of Wisconsin, Green Bay, USA*

Because many courses use objective tests for grading, most students have the mistaken impression that the difference between a B or an A is a matter of points. In reality, letter grades represent different *kinds* of performances.

As a student, I too experienced the frustration of getting a B when I thought I deserved an A. It takes a long time and a lot of practice to develop the analytical thinking skills that generate A-level work.

### D and F:

- Failure to master basic substance of course
- Poor performance in basic skills (math, writing)
- Often, poor attitude and work habits

### What's necessary to raise grade:

- All the above points need work

### C:

- Mastery of basic substance of course
- Basic skills often marginal

### What's necessary to raise grade:

- Improve basic skills (math, writing, reference)
- Master more advanced or intricate course topics
- More critical reasoning (learn facts and themes in proper proportion)

### B:

- Solid, competent performance
- Good mastery of basic skills
- Can summarize and use course skills adequately

### What's necessary to raise grade:

- Analysis, Insight and Creative Approach

### A:

- Solid performance
- Basic skills mastered
- Originality, Creativity, Depth of Analysis
- Sees beyond the obvious, looks for relationships and connections.
- The attempt is what counts.

From this summary, we can see three facts.

1. No amount of point-shaving can really change a C to a B or a B to an A.

2. You cannot get B's or A's unless you give yourself *time* to think about the course material. This applies especially to papers.
3. You have to convince your instructor that you have the qualities it takes to raise you to the next grade. It won't be obvious that you have thought long and hard on a subject unless you make it obvious in your writing. (Writing "I thought long and hard about this" is generally not convincing unless you back it up with some serious analysis.)

---

**This is an example of UNACCEPTABLE college writing:**

If we go by the way the book is written, it would seem that Isaac Asimov is leaning towards the use of mental power in the future or physical power. Now days the use of physical power is much more commanding. You do not stare a person to death, you usually use physical force to kill somebody. Isaac Asimov feels that mentalforce will be a much bigger force than physical. He also states that the use of mental force, also known as mental telepathy, will cause people to change because a person will never be safe and will become cautious. They will build big defenses around themselves in order to make themself feel safe.

The worlds will look much different than the present day world. There will be no internal combustion engine, no Boeing 797's, no aircraft carriers and absolutely no long buslines or people waiting for a taxi. Why will there not be any of these present day headaches? In Asimov's future he has people riding around in a vehicles that hovers a few feet above the ground and he has large space buses traveling from planet to planet taking people wherever they want to go. Inhis book, Asimov has these vehicles hoover going around the planets like present day taxi cabs and picking up people that need a ride.

**Many instructors would grade this D or F. Why?**

1. The first paragraph is *wrong*. The student is writing about Isaac Asimov's *Foundation Trilogy*, one of the best-known major works of science fiction. The *Foundation Trilogy* deals with the collapse of a galactic civilization and the efforts of a secret foundation to predict the collapse and mitigate its effects. The theme could hardly be bigger, and all this student sees is the role of mental telepathy! Not only is his summary not accurate, he has managed to miss the whole point of the work entirely. In fact, the more I look at this excerpt, the more amazed I am at the sheer, breathtaking scale on which he missed the point.

To put it bluntly, this writing is unacceptable because the student *simply doesn't know what he's talking about!*

2. The second paragraph is *trivial*. We *expect* science fiction to predict future technology as being very different from today's. This paragraph is simply padding.

3. The craftsmanship is atrocious. The excerpt is filled with spelling errors and clumsy phrasing.

---

The following three examples all were written by women on the question why women tend to avoid careers in science and math. They provide a good common basis for illustrating the differences between C-, B-, and A-level writing.

---

**This is an example of C-level writing:**

This leads us to second and third factors: Society and personal. Society has always stereotyped girls and boys. It was more proper for the women to cook and sew than it was for men. This holds true for the sciences, except in reverse. Girls were taught into thinking that a scientist has to be masculine. Only those in unbiased environments and/or with a strong desire tend to head in the new scientific directions.

As girls progress in to high school they feel a certain stress or pressure that reminds them it is important they know how to cook, sew and take care of children. They are more likely to choose classes related to a social and family life than to enter physics and chemistry. Here, in these areas, the future is uncertain. No one pushes their daughters into a career like this, rather into a non-risk or safer career.

### **Why is this a C?**

1. Craftsmanship is poor. There are spelling errors and many clumsy expressions.
2. She does not cite sources of her information.
3. She does not back up her statements with specific examples.
4. The writing is vague. For example, what do "these areas" and "a career like this" in the last paragraph refer to? What in the world does "This holds true for the sciences, except in reverse" mean?
5. She generalizes, and inaccurately at that. Is it really true that "no one" encourages their daughter to go into science? (paragraph 2). *Mechanical errors can be forgiven but factual errors, errors of reasoning, or sloppy reasoning will almost always damage your grade.*
6. She fails to follow up on important topics. Who taught girls to think a scientist had to be masculine? Why? How did this custom originate? What can be done about it?

A mechanical note: *never* use the slash construction, for example "and/or", like this writer does. *Ever*. Almost always, a slash means "there's a connection here but I can't be bothered to figure out exactly how to phrase it."

---

### **This is an example of B-level writing:**

Girls scored less on the S.A.T.s by about 45 points. Studies have found that the difference was due to girls not taking as many math courses in school. Girls took one-half the courses the boys did. This made a difference because girls didn't take the upper level courses which appeared on the test. Also girls weren't currently enrolled in a math course when they took the test. Some other factors that might have affected their scores on the S.A.T.s are parents' education, type of school attended, amount of preparation in various field, and intended major in college.

Even when men and women had the same preparation, the women were distributed among different academic fields. Majority of them would go to into foreign languages and education instead of science and mathematics because of the different perceptions of opportunity. Men and women see their majors to be preparation for an occupation; few men see their future in nursing or education just as women don't see themselves as scientists and mathematicians.

Other factors that influence girls in taking math and science courses are councilors, teachers, parents and...

### **Why is this a B and not a C?**

1. Craftsmanship is good, although the sentences are choppy.
2. Logical flow of the writing is good.

### **Why is this a B and not an A?**

1. There are technical flaws. On which S.A.T. do girls score less - verbal, math or composite? Also, upper-level math courses do not appear on the general S.A.T. as she implies in the first paragraph
2. She does not cite sources for her information.

**3. The single most important factor in separating A's and B's - she does not get beyond the obvious.** The last sentence of paragraph 2 should be a major topic of discussion. Why does this perception exist? How can it be addressed? This should be the start of her entire paper, but she never follows up on this topic. Instead she drops it and goes on to something else.

This is a competent, well-written summary of existing information with little or no analysis or new insight. It's good--but not excellent.

---

### **This is an example of an A-level writing:**

A controversial study done by Benbow and Stanley at Johns Hopkins University (1980) claims that there is a genetic basis for superior male achievement in math based on a study of seventh graders and their SAT tests. However, several psychologists disagree. First, they believe that environmental and cultural factors were not ruled out and second, it is not clear that SAT mathematics scores are a good measure of inherent mathematical ability. Sheila Tobias (1982) also adds that boys are more likely than girls to study for the math portion of the SAT. She also adds that the number of boys that have outperformed the top-scoring girl has been declining in recent years. In 1972, 19 percent of the boys who took the test scored above the top girl. By 1978, .1 percent of the boys scored higher than the best girl, and in 1979 only one boy had a higher score than the top-scoring girl (Woolfolk/McCune-Nicholich, 1984, p. 143).

### **Why is this an A?**

1. Craftsmanship is good (although there is one spelling error).
  2. Logical flow of the writing is good.
  3. She cites her sources.
  4. She uses specific examples to illustrate her points.
  5. She synthesizes information from several sources, compares and contrasts viewpoints. She doesn't merely summarize - she analyzes.
- 

### **How to get from B-land to A-land**

#### **B-level writers ask:**

- What happened?
- When did it happen?
- Where did it happen?

- Who made it happen?

These are *descriptive* questions. They describe what happened but don't go beneath the surface.

**A-level writers ask:**

- Why did it happen?
- How did it happen?
- What might have prevented it from happening?
- How did it affect other things?
- What are connections that most other people have missed?
- What will happen as a result of it?
- What might have happened if it didn't happen?
- What have I found out about it that nobody knew before?
- What are some unanswered questions that nobody thought of before?

These are *analysis* questions. They take the incident apart (that's what "analysis" means in Greek) to see how it works and what it implies.