This page attempts to typify the kinds of papers which receive certain grades, but the categories are only approximate. Papers vary greatly, and particular papers may combine certain characteristics of widely-separated categories. I try in grading to come to some fair synthesis. Papers marked with two grades (e.g. B-/B) are halfway between the two grades.

An A paper has the strengths of an A- paper and is likely in addition to make me see something new about the topic and its relation to the work analyzed. I think of any essay receiving an A as a possible submission for one of the English Department's spring essay-prizes.

An A- essay makes a cogent and illuminating argument about its topic, supporting it with the sensitive analysis of particular passages of text. Its writing and organization are clear, and often fun to read as well. It will often read more deeply than a B+ paper, and create a richer context for its argument.

A B+ in the major is necessary to honor in the senior year at Smith; a B+ essay is thus Honors work. It makes a cogent, sensitive argument, supporting it with accurate commentary on particular passages in the text. It's likely to deal with its material less searchingly than an A- essay, but will nonetheless make a convincing and thoughtful argument. Organization and writing are clear.

A B essay makes a clear, sensible argument about its topic, supporting it with accurate commentary on particular passages. While not considering its topic as deeply as a stronger essay, it reads with care and attention to language. Writing and organization are clear, though there may be places where they could be better.

A B- essay makes a coherent argument about its topic, supporting its assertions with particulars in the text. It's alert to what the text means, though it often needs to discuss the language of passages more fully than it does, and it may sometimes miss their tone or their implications. Organization and writing are usually easy to follow, though there may be some wordiness or confusing patches.

A C+ essay may have a perceptive argument incompletely developed by the body of the paper, or its argument may be somewhat vague. Its account of particular passages is generally on target but often tends to be only approximate. Typically it needs to examine the language more fully and makes occasional mistakes in interpreting reference, diction, syntax, etc. Organization is sometimes unclear, and individual paragraphs may lose focus. The writing may be comparatively easy to follow but it tends to lack energy and precision.

A C essay has an argument but it remains vague and undeveloped, not fully related to the particulars cited in the text. There's often a good deal of inaccuracy in the understanding of individual passages and there's often more plot summary than necessary. Organization is often unclear and writing often demonstrates several problems, esp. vagueness, unclear transitions, and unfocussed paragraphs.

A C- essay will often lose itself in particulars or, if it makes an central argument, won't develop that argument by examination of evidence in particular passages. Writing is often vague and the reasoning unclear. There's a lot of plot-summary without clear purpose.

A D+ essay tends to substitute plot-summary for argument about the text, and to avoid examination of particular passages. Writing is often hard to follow.

An essay receiving a D gives little coherent sense of the work treated.