

UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHERN COLORADO

College of Humanities
and Social Sciences

Communication Studies

Grading Standards

The UNC Communication Studies faculty is dedicated to the goal of student excellence. We hold that student excellence is embodied in two basic areas.

First, we believe that a liberal arts education is designed to prepare students for active, critical and sophisticated participation in the civic order. As such, excellence is engendered as students strive within a disciplinary framework both to understand and to engage the complex and diverse features of the political, economic and cultural landscape they inhabit.

Second, we believe that sophisticated and critical participation in the civic realm requires high levels of ability, knowledge and learning capacity—and that the (life-long) pursuit of these qualities demands discipline and commitment. As such, excellence is engendered as the student demonstrates via course assignments and projects increasing levels of achievement in the areas of knowledge, learning capacity and skill development.

One vital tool used to assist in the achievement of excellence is a clear outline of criteria and expectations concerning the texture and quality of COMM course assignments and projects. In essence, the assignment framework of the Communication Studies curriculum is the primary medium through which the student articulates his or her growing knowledge and insights concerning cultural symbolic activity. As such, the assignment framework is best designed in light of a clear and useful set of expectations.

Grading criteria and expectations are sketched out below. The outlines are compilations of COMM faculty ideas mixed with criteria developed by several different universities (*e.g.*, Harvard) concerning grading standards. In the spirit of Persig, we believe that quality and excellence transcend quantification and evaluative dialogue. Yet, we also believe that clear goals and clear steps to attain those goals are useful tools in the achievement of excellence. The basic elements of the criteria framework used in COMM are defined here:

- **Thesis:** the primary argument (or claim) of a work. The thesis organizes the work.
- **Structure:** the manner in which material is organized and sequentially outlined.
- **Evidence:** the material marshaled to support (or back-up) the claims of the work.
- **Analysis:** the critique designed to evaluate the legitimacy and quality of a work.
- **Sources:** the reference material employed as an information base for the project.
- **Style:** how ideas are worded; the language used to articulate one's ideas.

The Grade of “A”

The completed assignment (or project) simultaneously:

- demonstrates extraordinary effort on the part of the student to achieve excellence
- is of superior (or advanced and exceptional) quality in every way.

1. The completed project demonstrates extraordinary effort to achieve excellence.

Excellence demands extraordinary effort. Here, the student has pushed him/herself well beyond previous personal capacities. New landscapes of achievement potential are clearly being explored and mastered.

2. The project is of superior (or advanced and exceptional) quality in every way.

- The completed project is excellent in every way (this is not the same as perfect). The project demonstrates intense creativity; it outlines a clear and unique thesis; it employs extensive research and effort in project production, as well as elegance and consummate professionalism in project presentation.
- The project is ambitious and highly insightful. It demonstrates extraordinary desire to grapple with interesting and complex ideas. It responds discerningly to counter-arguments; and explores well-chosen evidence revealingly.
- The content of the project enhances, rather than underscores, the audience’s and author’s knowledge (it doesn’t simply repeat what has been taught).
- There is a context for all the ideas; someone outside the class would be enriched, not confused, by reviewing the project. Its beginning opens up, rather than flatly announces its thesis. Its end is more than a mere summary; it is a clear, evocative and memorable coalescence of the spirit of the project.
- The project displays excellent reasoning and problem-solving within a field and works consistently at a high level of intellectual grace and mastery.
- The project raises important questions and issues, analyzes key questions and problems clearly and precisely, recognizes key questionable assumptions, clarifies key concepts effectively, uses language in keeping with educated usage, frequently identifies relevant competing points of view, and demonstrates a commitment to reason carefully from clearly stated premises in the subject, as well as marked sensitivity to important implications and consequences.
- The language of the project is clean, precise, strategically chosen, often elegant. As an evaluator I feel surprised, delighted, changed. There’s something new here for me, something only the author could have written and explored in this particular way. The writer’s stake in the material is obvious.

The A-level student has internalized the basic intellectual standards appropriate to the assessment of his/her own work in a subject and demonstrates insight into self-evaluation.

Thesis: thought-provoking, arguable, incisive; sufficiently limited in scope; usually stated early on and present throughout—the thesis as centerpiece elegantly organizes and structures the entire project.

Structure: logical, progressive (not just a list), supple (invites complications, consideration of counter-arguments), with strong and obvious links between points; coherent, well-organized and concise

Evidence: sufficient, appropriate, and well-chosen; presented in a readable and understandable way

Analysis: insightful and fresh; more than summary or paraphrase; asks penetrating questions of the text, shows how evidence supports thesis; may (sparingly) dwell in depth on one or two key examples

Sources: well-chosen; displays comprehensive research (not mere web cites) deployed in a range of ways (to motivate the argument, provide key-word terms, and so on); quoted and cited correctly

Style: clear and conversational yet sophisticated; word choices (*e.g.*, metaphors and verbs) are provocative and insightful; concise, appropriate to audience; smooth, stimulating, a pleasure to read

The Grade of “B”

The completed assignment (or project) simultaneously:

- demonstrates exceptional effort on the part of the student to achieve excellence
- is of outstanding quality in many ways.

1. The completed project demonstrates exceptional effort on the part of the student to achieve excellence.

Excellence demands exceptional effort. Here, the student has pushed him/herself beyond previous personal capacities. New landscapes of achievement potential are being explored and the student is beginning to approach mastery of the topic area.

2. The project is of outstanding quality in many ways.

- The completed project is outstanding in many ways (this is not the same as perfect). The project demonstrates creativity; it outlines a clear and unique thesis; it employs extensive research and effort in project production, as well as elegance and consummate professionalism in project presentation.
- The grade of B implies sound thinking and performance within the domain of a subject and course, along with the development of a range of knowledge acquired through the exercise of thinking skills and abilities.
- B level work is, on the whole, clear, precise, and well-reasoned, and displays insight. Basic terms and distinctions are learned at a level which implies comprehension of basic concepts and principles.
- The B-level student has internalized some of the basic intellectual standards appropriate to the assessment of his/her own work in a subject and demonstrates competence in self-evaluation.
- The B-level student often raises questions and issues, analyzes questions and problems clearly and precisely, recognizes some questionable assumptions, clarifies key concepts competently, typically uses language in keeping with educated usage, sometimes identifies relevant competing

points of view, and demonstrates the beginnings of a commitment to reason carefully from clearly stated premises in a subject, as well as some sensitivity to important implications and consequences.

- B-level work displays sound reasoning and problem-solving within a field and works consistently at a competent level of intellectual performance.

Thesis: arguable but may be a bit conventional or uninteresting, or feature un-integrated parts; may be only implied, not stated early on; may not be argued throughout, disappears in places.

Structure: generally logical but either ambiguous in places (big jumps, missing links) or overly predictable and undeveloped; few complications or considerations of counter-arguments; some disorganized paragraphs (either bloated or skimpy; could be confusing)

Evidence: generally solid but may be scanty or presented as undigested quotations at points

Analysis: at times insightful but sometimes missing or is a mere summary; makes some inconsistent connections between evidence and thesis

Sources: quoted and cited correctly (for the most part) but deployed in limited ways, often as a straw person or simply as affirmation of writer's viewpoint

Style: generally clear but lacking in sophistication; may be weighed down by fancy diction meant to impress; may exhibit some errors in punctuation, grammar, spelling and format

The Grade of “C”

The completed assignment (or project) simultaneously:

- fulfills the expectations outlined in the assignment
- demonstrates effort on the part of the student to achieve excellence
- is of good quality in many ways.

1. The completed assignment fulfills the expectations outlined in the assignment.

The work demonstrates a clear attempt to fulfill the tasks outlined in the assignment.

2. The completed project demonstrates good effort to achieve excellence.

Excellence demands effort. Here, the student has pushed him/herself beyond previous personal capacities.

3. The project is of exceptional quality in several ways, average quality in others.

The completed project is exceptional in several ways—and average in others. The project demonstrates creativity; it outlines a clear thesis; it employs research and effort in project production, as well as a sense of professionalism in project presentation

- The grade of C implies sound reasoning, yet there is some mixed thinking and performance within the domain of a subject and course, along with some development of a range of knowledge acquired through the exercise of thinking skills and abilities.
- C-level work is consistently clear, but is not very precise or well-reasoned at points; moreover, it does not display acute depth of insight or consistent competence. Basic terms and distinctions are learned at a level which implies the beginnings of, but inconsistent comprehension of, concepts and principles.
- The C-level student has internalized a few of the basic intellectual standards appropriate to the assessment of his/her own work in a subject, but demonstrates inconsistency in self-evaluation.
- The C-level student sometimes raises questions and issues, sometimes analyzes questions and problems clearly and precisely, recognizes some questionable assumptions, clarifies some concepts competently, inconsistently uses language in keeping with educated usage, sometimes identifies relevant competing points of view, but does not demonstrate a clear commitment to reason carefully from clearly stated premises in a subject, nor consistent sensitivity to important implications and consequences

Thesis: fair yet not very original or insightful; is un-integrated (*e.g.*, three unrelated prongs); only implied or not stated early on; not argued throughout, disappears in places.

Structure: discernable yet can integrate big jumps, missing links; or is overly predictable; few complications or considerations of counter-arguments; disorganized paragraphs (usually skimpy)

Evidence: is present but sometimes presented as undigested quotations; may be taken out of context

Analysis: some insightful moments but generally either missing or a mere summary

Sources: present yet plopped in (not strategically located); may be quoted and cited incorrectly, used merely as filler or affirmation of writer's viewpoint

Style: fair yet may be a tad unclear at points and hard to read, or simplistic; may display technical errors

The Grade of "D"

The grade of D implies poor thinking and performance within the domain of a subject and course. On the whole, the student tries to get through the course (or assignment) by means of rote recall, attempting to acquire knowledge by memorization rather than through comprehension and understanding.

The student is not developing critical thinking skills and understandings as requisite to understanding course content. D-level work represents thinking that is typically unclear, imprecise, and poorly reasoned.

The student is achieving competence only on the lowest order of performance. Basic terms and distinctions are often incorrectly used and reflect a superficial or mistaken comprehension of, basic concepts and principles.

The D-level student has not internalized the basic intellectual standards appropriate to the assessment of his/her own work in a subject and does poorly in self-evaluation.

The D-level student rarely raises questions and issues, superficially analyzes questions and problems, does not

recognize his/her assumptions, only partially clarifies concepts, rarely uses language in keeping with educated usage, rarely identifies relevant competing points of view, and shows no understanding of the importance of a commitment to reason carefully from clearly stated premises in a subject.

The D-level student is insensitive to important implications and consequences.

D-level work displays poor reasoning and problem-solving within a field and works, at best, at a low level of intellectual performance.

The Grade of “F”

The work has thoroughly failed (1) to meet the expectations outlined in the assignment and (2) to meet the minimum required effort to achieve a project that has redeeming qualities. The student tries to get through the assignment by means of rote recall, attempting to acquire knowledge by memorization rather than through comprehension and understanding. The student is not developing critical thinking skills and understandings as requisite to understanding course content.