

# Academic essay rubric

## WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

This is a grading rubric an instructor uses to assess students’ work on this type of assignment. It is a sample rubric that needs to be edited to reflect the specifics of a particular assignment. Students can self-assess using the rubric as a checklist before submitting their assignment. This sample rubric can also be found under the Turnitin tool in Blackboard to facilitate online grading.

## HOW DO I USE IT?

Edit the assignment requirements column, performance level descriptions in each box, and point values to align with a particular course assignment. Distribute the rubric to students when first introducing the assignment. Use the rubric to grade student work. To use the rubric in Blackboard, contact [USC Blackboard support](mailto:blackboard@usc.edu) and [CET](http://cet.usc.edu/online-teaching/) for assistance. Also see the CET resource Tips for Designing Rubrics.

Table for the academic essay rubric

| Criteria | Excellent | Meets expectations | Approaches expectations | Needs improvement |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Thesis/Focus | Thesis and purpose are clear, closely match the writing task, and provide fresh insight. | Thesis and purpose are fairly clear and match the writing task. Thesis and purpose are somewhat original. | Thesis and purpose are somewhat vague and/or only loosely related to the writing task, and/or unimaginative | Reader cannot determine thesis & purpose and/or thesis has no relation to the writing task. |
| Organization | Fully supports thesis & purpose. Sequence of ideas is effective. Transitions are smooth and effective | Organization supports thesis and purpose. Transitions are generally appropriate. However, sequence of ideas could be improved | Some signs of logical organization in support of the thesis. Transitions are abrupt, illogical, and/or ineffective. | Unclear organization and/or organizational plan is inappropriate to thesis and/or no transitions. |
| Support | Substantial, logical, and concrete development of ideas. Assumptions are made explicit. Details are germane, original, and convincingly interpreted | Offers solid but less original reasoning. Assumptions are not always recognized or made explicit. Contains some appropriate details or examples | Offers some support that may be dubious, too broad or obvious. Details are too general, not interpreted, irrelevant to thesis, or inappropriately repetitive | Offers simplistic, undeveloped, or cryptic support for ideas; inappropriate or off-topic generalizations; faulty assumptions; and/or errors of fact. |
| Sources | Uses sources to support, extend, and inform, but not substitute for writer’s own development of ideas. Skillfully combines material from a variety of sources. Always conforms to style manual. | Uses sources to support, extend, and inform the writer’s own development of ideas. Appropriately uses quotes but may not always conform to required style manual. | Uses relevant sources but substitutes them for the writer’s own ideas. Quotations and paraphrases may be too long and/or inconsistently referenced. | Fails to use sources and/or overuses quotations or paraphrasing and/or uses source material without acknowledgement. |
| Style | Sentences are varied, complex, and employed for effect. Diction is precise, appropriate, using advanced vocabulary. Tone is mature, consistent, suitable for topic and audience. Adheres to required length. | Sentences show some variety & complexity. Uneven control. Diction is accurate, generally appropriate, less advanced. Tone is appropriate. Adheres to required length. | Sentences show little variety, simplistic. Diction is somewhat immature; relies on clichés. Tone may have some inconsistencies in tense and person | Superficial and stereotypical language. Oral rather than written language patterns predominate |
| Conventions | Essentially error free. Evidence of superior control of diction | Grammar and syntax are correct with very few errors in spelling or punctuation | Repeated weaknesses in mechanics and usage. Pattern of flaws. | Mechanical and usage errors so severe that writer’s ideas are difficult to understand |