

# perfect essay is . . .

There is nothing more rewarding for a university student than receiving an A on the first essay of the year. Sometimes that first grade can create a confidence which will dictate a student's academic performance throughout the year. *Excalibur's* Jacob Katsman talked to professors and teaching assistants in the faculty of arts to gain insight to the subjective question of what constitutes an A essay at York.

**N**ovember is usually described by faculty of arts students as a month of late nights spent over computer screens and typewriters with dark coffee in hand. Usually, first essay topics have already been handed out, and with the middle of November sneaking up as quickly as it does, it is not long until these essays are due.

For first year students in political science, history, geography and other arts departments, first essay topics are often confusing. Students are plagued with many questions starting with how to write a thesis to which books to use to how to organize a university essay. Everybody has some idea of what should be in an essay, but after the first papers are marked, the majority of students are unpleasantly surprised with their results.

The political science department is sometimes referred to as a nurturing ground for law school students for whom nothing lower than an A or a B+ is acceptable.

Political science professor Harold Kaplan shared his views on how to write an A paper at York:

"One of the important aspects in writing an A essay is finding a topic which interests you," said Kaplan. "If the professor tells you to choose your own topic, you should never go ahead before you discuss the topic with the professor."

He also explained that students should start early and not go into the library four days before the essay is due. "Consult a number of different sources and never rely on one," he suggested. "Always make a rough draft and then spend time revising. Most students let it go too long and when the essay is due, they end up handing in their first draft."

Another major problem Kaplan finds in undergraduate essays is that too many rely on only one source. His greatest advice to students is to "read widely," and familiarize themselves with many different views on the topic.

"Students in political science should be aware that there are many powerful viewpoints embodied in the literature they read," he explained. "If you are writing something from a heavily Marxist viewpoint, you should know it is Marxist. If you read a book with a free market, pacifist, Marxist or any other powerful perspective, you should be aware of that viewpoint and not simply treat it as a restatement of obvious facts."

"Students should not just lift a viewpoint out of the book, but be smart enough when reading heavily opinionated material to look for other viewpoints and not just naively get caught up in one opinion," he suggested.

"A student is not likely to get an A on an essay if the professor or teaching assistant feels, when reading it, that a student has written one page and then thought 'OH! what goes next' and then write another page. The marker should be guided through the essay and get a notion that the student knows where she or he is going from the start," he added.

What distinguishes a B essay from an A essay?

"In a B paper," he said, "there is a good deal of work and competence. It may not be very exciting or interesting to read, but it is well organized and solid. In a B essay, there is a notion that the student is still wrestling with the topic."

"In an A essay, however," Kaplan said, "it is obvious that a student has read more widely and there is more sophistication of recognizing a difference in viewpoints. There is more care in writing and structure of sentences. It is clear the student has paid attention to detail. An A essay is likely to be less dogmatic and there is no sloppiness in terms of footnotes, spelling and grammar."

So, does Kaplan believe an A+ grade can be attained at York?

"I can't speak for all professors at York," said Kaplan, "but I think A+ should be saved for occasional use. Perhaps when students have contributed something of their own, something original, something creative to the paper, they deserve an A+ grade."

Kaplan believes there is no substitute for reading. The more you read, the better you will understand an issue. "I

don't believe emphasis should be placed on some brilliant flashes of insight. It is reading, taking time, taking pains and taking good notes on what you read which will determine a good grade."

Kaplan thinks too many students waste time trying to pad a bibliography. "It is pretty easy to see," he said. "When most of the footnotes refer to one or two books and the other books are left idle, it is pretty obvious. 'I don't think you fool professors too often.'"

## 'Mastery of the subject'

Gino Montanari is a first year geography teaching assistant. He ended his first year at York with a C+ average, but was able to isolate his essay writing mistakes in his second year and finally reached his goal of an A average in his graduate year.

Montanari looked back at his undergraduate years and outlined the steps he followed to succeed academically at York.

"My first year as an undergraduate was very difficult, since I had just come out of high school and was still trying to understand the university system. I found myself spinning my wheels in the mud in the first year and not able to cope with assignments and having them done on time."

"As the years progressed, I found my attitudes towards the quality of my essays changed dramatically in a sense that I began organizing everything I did in my university academic life. I began setting aside a certain number of days that I would have enough time to do a good job on my assignments. Organization was a key factor to the improvement of my grade point average."

"Another factor which led to the change of my attitudes was a friend who helped push me to my limits and recognize my potential. He motivated me to do well by doing well himself. I saw him succeed academically and I wanted to imitate him."

"He would go over my essay drafts with me and give constructive criticism. He taught me that the key to academic success is organization, planning and talking to professors, TAs and other students about the assignments."

"Everybody has potential, but priorities have to be set in order for that potential to be realized. I think it is important to have someone pushing you to reach your goals. For me, it was instrumental. I think that the majority of students have to spend a lot of time in order to do well."

"My priority was to delegate as much time as possible to fulfil the assignment in its entirety. Not just finding the material and writing about it, but understanding the material and writing in such a way that I showed the reader I had understood the subject from both sides of the issue. In my conclusion, I either came up with a comment or a critical evaluation to the point that I felt satisfied with myself and the quality of my work."

"Everything you hand in should be your best. If it is not your best, why are you handing it in?"

Montanari has three points to follow when attempting to write an A paper:

1. A definition of excellence:

"I agree with the Dean's definition of grades which is handed out by the faculty of arts for use in all faculties of the university. According to the Dean's definition, an A+ means a student did exceptional work. I believe you can actually go over your essay before you hand it in and ask yourself whether or not you have done exceptional work. If you always tell yourself the truth and the answer is yes, then you should receive the grade you deserve."

2. A mastery of the subject:

"Students must have a clear knowledge of the subject they are writing about. In their papers, they should take into consideration various viewpoints and show the person marking it that they have mastered the subject. Mastery of presentation comes with the knowledge of the material. Attention to detail is vital and can sometimes mean a difference between a B+ or an A."

"The ability to synthesize the readings into a coherent essay is another important factor in writing an A essay. It is also vital for students to critically evaluate their topics. I would not give a grade higher than a C to a student who had just described something in an essay."

"You may describe something, but you may not understand what you are describing. All you have done is regurgitate what you have read in a book. Students must be able to evaluate and analyze what they have read."

3. The adequacy for an A:  
"It is not enough to do only what is assigned in order to get an A. I believe that just doing what you are told will not guarantee you an A anywhere. When you say, 'OK I have done the work, but there is something more,' and you do that something more, then you have reached that potential for an A grade. It is doing that little bit more that counts."

"Don't just sit back and do what is asked. Be active, go to your professor and TAs and bug them. Ask them what you have to do and what they expect of you to get an A."

"If you leave your paper on the TTC, a person knowing nothing about your essay topic should be able to pick up your paper, read it and understand it."

## 'daring in its content'

"History students are encouraged and expected to do their own thinking, and critically evaluate the material they read," said American history professor Jerry Ginsburg.

Ginsburg has taught at York for 18 years and is currently teaching 19th century American history as well as a course on Harlem and the black world. He identified two important factors he thought were essential for an A paper.

"A hallmark of an A essay is going beyond the obvious," said Ginsburg. "An A paper is usually daring in its content and shows that a student has thought critically about the topic and did not recapitulate the literature."

In the history department, Ginsburg explained, essay grades are taken off for misreading the text, an illogical argument or superficial analysis, incorrect punctuation and format, and grammar and spelling errors.

"The second factor to an A essay is content," he added. "By this, I mean structure and presentation. The way the paper is written is just as important as what is written inside it. If the student's thoughts are good but they are not conveyed in an effective way, then a good grade will not be attained."

Ginsburg thinks students should remember what they were taught in high school English classes but never thought was important. "Essays should have a clear set of interlocking paragraphs. Every paragraph should have a topic sentence underlining the main idea of that paragraph. Every paragraph should have its own function within the paper. A student should be able to block out paragraphs into ideas, and put them together in a constructive form of an essay."

"One of the problems students have is putting their thoughts on paper and not revising them," Ginsburg explained. "Usually the first words are poorly structured and badly organized. I think students don't always realize it is better to organize first before they start writing." He thinks students should organize their thoughts in an outline, then block out paragraphs in ideas and block out topic sentences.

"Paragraphs should be treated as units of thought. If students would structure their essays in a more coherent form, they would surely better their grade."

"To attain a grade of an A+, a writer not only has to question the evidence and analyze it critically, but also has the ability to step back and take a bigger perspective. Ginsburg passionately believes in education. "What saddens me is that a lot of students have never had the

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