

Gloss on FYS Research Paper Rubric

Ability to present a clear argument

Exceptional papers have a thesis that forms a central core of the argument and shapes the structure throughout. By “thesis,” we mean something more than a declarative sentence; it should be a statement about which reasonable people can disagree, and which can be evaluated using evidence. In an exceptional paper, the thesis is obvious early on, and each new segment of the paper has a clear connection to the larger argument. If a paper meets this standard, the reader should never be in doubt about what the argument is or how specific portions of the paper serve to advance that argument. The reader finds the argument and main points easy to remember. In an exceptional paper, all claims in a thesis are fully developed, and opposing positions address truly comparable issues.

Acceptable papers offer a clear thesis statement, but the argument is not sustained throughout the paper so the reader is occasionally left to make connections between the thesis and evidence presented. As with the exceptional papers, the thesis in an acceptable paper must be easily identifiable. An acceptable paper falls short of the higher standard in either or both of the following ways. First, the paper’s structure is not effectively organized around the thesis. As a result, segments of the paper may contain multiple ideas that distract the reader from the central focus. Second, the author may provide information that could be germane for the argument, but doesn’t make the connection for the reader. The reader thus feels as though the author is simply presenting information without a clear purpose, or is leaving it up to the reader to make connections and draw conclusions. The reader can remember the general thrust of the paper, but may find it hard to recall the key points. Papers may be classified as “acceptable” if they fail to address a small portion of a multiple claim thesis.

Unacceptable papers do not include a clear or consistent thesis. Unacceptable papers leave the reader uncertain about the author’s core argument. This may be because the thesis is implicit and left to the reader to ferret out. It also may be because the pro and con positions are not congruent, so the author is comparing apples to Koalas. Papers also fall into the unacceptable category if the author shifts arguments as the paper evolves. In this case, there may be a clear thesis statement, but later in the paper the author appears to be taking a different and/or contradictory position. Upon finishing, the reader finds it difficult to articulate the paper’s argument. Papers that are reports rather than a research papers should be classified as unacceptable because they simply describe the topic rather than providing a thesis and attempting to make a reasoned argument for it.

Ability to address different points of view

Exceptional papers fully and fairly analyze the views of credible experts in the field whose position differs from the author’s. Exceptional papers not only acknowledge that there are credible arguments on the other side(s) of the issue, but explain them fully and fairly.* In other words, exceptional papers go beyond setting up a simplistic or patently false “straw man” argument. They also create an interaction between the differing views where claims are juxtaposed and their merits evaluated. In exceptional papers, the author explains why s/he has reached a different conclusion. A paper can be rated as exceptional in this category even if the author’s position has to be inferred; it need not be laid out in a manner that would merit an exceptional rating in “Ability to Present a Clear Argument.”

Acceptable papers acknowledge the existence of some arguments that run counter to the author's but they are not treated fully and fairly. Acceptable papers note the existence of other views, but may fall short of the exceptional standard by not directly addressing the claims made by the thesis, or by failing to treat the other side(s) fairly and fully. Acceptable papers also fall short by failing to explain why the author's position is preferable. Papers in this category often present opposing views in parallel paragraphs or separate sections of the paper.

Unacceptable papers largely fail to show any awareness that there are points of view that differ from the author's. Unacceptable papers may fall short of the acceptable category in any of several ways. First, the paper may be written as a report where the reader is given no sense that reasonable people could disagree on the topic. Second, the paper may deal with a topic that is clearly controversial, but the author writes as though constructing an opinion piece and ignoring the existence of other views. Third, the author may make a passing reference that "some people think" something else, but fail to make any effort to articulate the other position.

Ability to use evidence to support the author's claims**

Exceptional papers consistently employ the most appropriate evidence in ways that support the author's claims. In an exceptional paper, almost all of the claims are supported by evidence that is accompanied by clear citations and drawn from appropriate sources. Typically, this evidence will show the ability to do scholarly research by drawing on multiple sources (for example, a paper that rests on one or two books or a collection of essays from one work would not meet this standard). By appropriate sources, we mean those that are germane to the topic and appropriate for a college research paper. Usually, this would be primary documents and scholarly sources, but the topic may require that the student use some less traditional materials.

Acceptable papers frequently support the author's claims with appropriate evidence. Acceptable papers have some of the qualities of exceptional papers, but are not as consistent. They may include several segments that lack evidence, fail to provide citations, or are drawn from inappropriate sources. Papers may be classified as acceptable if they otherwise meet the exceptional standard, but are overly dependent on a few sources.

Unacceptable papers frequently fail to provide sufficient appropriate evidence to support the author's claims. Papers in this category contain multiple paragraphs without evidence and/or citations, or the evidence is drawn primarily from inappropriate sources.

*If the student simply omits an argument on the other side that an intelligent lay person would be aware of, the assessment team will take this into account in evaluating the "fully and fairly" aspect.

**This section is aimed at assessing the student's ability to follow the standards expected in academic discourse. The focus is therefore more on mechanical aspects than on the quality of reasoning; weak reasoning should be taken into account in either the Argument on Different Points of View sections as appropriate.

