

## Grading Guide for HGO 4301 Social Dimensions of Environmental Change

### Overview of the assignment

The point of the essay is to demonstrate what they have learned in the course. This includes three aspects: i.) the empirical content of each of the topics taught; ii.) their ability to identify and use theoretical concepts that were introduced in the course; iii.) relationships between different conceptual ideas in the course (nature-society 'border war', knowledge, governmentality, the commons, politics, scale, social exclusion / intersectionality, ethics, justice). Excellent essays will demonstrate an ability to include all of these aspects, while those on the lower end of the spectrum will only engage with (i.). They are expected to engage both the assigned readings and others they find themselves. The maximum word limit is 4000 words. They were encouraged to write closer to 3000 words.

Students are expected to write their own essay topics in this course. They are given support for developing them through a topic development lecture, a seminar on their chosen topics, and feedback on a 1-page abstract that outlines their questions and topic. It is therefore expected that they will have a reasonably focused topic. It is important to keep in mind that this is often the first time these students are attempting to define their own 'research question(s)'. As such, essays should NOT be evaluated on the quality of the question asked, but rather on the extent to which they are able to write a coherent essay within the context of the topic they outline. Particularly if they write in Norwegian (and therefore I could not help them articulate the question), it is important to focus on content rather than the elegance of the question(s). Attached are the guidelines they have been given on focusing a question and on writing their essays.

They are expected to engage 3 topics from the course and nearly all of them have chosen an example or case study they will analyse. In other words, they approach it like a mini-research project. Many are working on interesting questions that will take them significantly beyond the course. In most cases, this should have already been approved by me, but ask me if you have any concerns. The reason I want three topics is to avoid students from reading for one topic and writing an essay on that. I want them to engage with (most) of the course. There are only a few students who did not attend most lectures so unless it is obvious they have only a limited understanding of the course material, *do not evaluate them on the percentage of course materials used.*

### A note on the word count:

I had meant to lower the word limit due to COVID but forgot before the course was published. Essays between 3000-4000 are perfectly acceptable. Those that are significantly shorter or longer are acceptable but will be judged on completeness (or lack of precision). It is possible to write top class essays shorter than 3000 words, but the student would need to be an exceptional writer. Longer essays are rarely better and marks can be taken off if the text is not sufficiently edited.

### A

- Essays whose design shows awareness and understanding of the research literature, and which attempts to address (and succeeds in addressing) a particular gap in that literature.
- Essays which build both on set readings and on a wider range of materials (either supplied as 'further reading' or discovered during independent library work).
- Essays whose design and/or execution shows a capacity for original thought, together with an ability to write clearly and sustain an argument.
- Essays whose execution reflects an ability to adopt an appropriate methodology, and to use that methodology effectively and imaginatively to address a clearly defined research question(s).
- Essays which combine competence with originality in data collection (where appropriate), analysis and interpretation.

### A +

- Meets the criteria outlined above and additionally demonstrates particular excellence in more than one of the following:
  - Originality in, and careful thorough application of, research design
  - Methodological innovation
  - Range of coverage or depth and imagination of discussion
  - Creative synthesis of wide-ranging literature
  - Development/ introduction of new ideas that are thought-provoking or which challenge received views
  - Wide range and high quality of original materials
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## **B**

- Essays whose design is inspired by the relevant research literature and which tackle a clearly defined research question.
- Essays which draw effectively on key readings supplied during the course of study, and refer at times to other literature and examples.
- Essays whose design and execution show clear thinking, together with an ability to write well and sustain an argument.
- Essays which are methodologically sound and include original materials.
- Essays which are well-presented (they are complete, comprehensive and are appropriately referenced and illustrated)

## **B -**

- Meets the above criteria.
- May have less new data/original material than would merit a B. Analysis may be limited by less-than-ideal choice of methods.
- There may be some unevenness in written communications skills, so that the best use of otherwise good original materials is not made.

## **B +**

- Meets the above criteria, and additionally includes one or more of the following qualities:
  - Careful research questions
  - Methodologically commendable
  - Effectively combines own materials with a range of existing literature and ideas
  - Development of new ideas
  - Poorly developed conclusion
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## **C**

- Essays which, though competent are lacking in content, focus, organisation, breadth of reference, or depth of discussion
- Essays in this class do work with a specified research problem, but this may not be grounded in an adequate literature review.
- Essays which have B qualities may also fall into this category if they are too short, rushed, unfinished or badly organised.

## **C -**

- Essays which are poorly designed and/or contain little original material and/or fail to give a reasonable account of how the materials were chosen and organised.
- Original materials are partially described rather than fully explained
- Lacks a conclusion.

## **C +**

- Essays contain some original material, are reasonably well-argued and show a satisfactory understanding of the issues involved but fail to engage with more than 1 or 2 aspects of the course.
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#### **D**

- Relevant material is presented, but essays lack order/organisation/argument. Structurally problematic.
- Essays at this level shows some knowledge of key literature and contain some original material. However, these may be used ineffectively or inaccurately.
- Essays will have a poor grasp of conceptual issues, omit some key points, or fail to identify and address a research problem/questions.
- Findings include unsubstantiated assertions and/or literature reviews contain too many omissions or inaccuracies.

#### **D -**

- An attempt is made to organise the material and present an argument. However, arguments may be weakly developed, or contain evidence of poor judgement.
  - Text may stray from the point and/or show limited comprehension of key themes.
  - Contain a large number of inaccuracies or misinterpretation of the literature.
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#### **Fail**

Essays in this grade show inadequate knowledge of relevant material. They contain little or no relevance to the course. Treatment of the topic is superficial. Knowledge of the key literature is minimal.

Includes some literature review, and makes references to research findings, but is deficient in knowledge/understanding of literature and fails to incorporate relevant findings.

#### **The students were given the following ‘top tips’ for essay writing**

I would like to give you a couple of top tips for your essays based on common mistakes I have seen in the past.

1. Be careful not to use too many words simply describing your case. Most of you have a specific, empirical example you are working with. This is a good idea. But the essay is about showing me what you learned in class so the case is really a tool for you to think with, an example through which you talk about complex ideas. If you are writing 3000 words ;-), then an absolute maximum of 500 words should be spent describing the case, probably more like 250. You can talk about the case throughout the essay--this is often a good idea--but most of what you say about it should be linked to explaining conceptual / more abstract ideas than just describing the empirical context.

2. Some of you have picked examples for which there is good academic literature already available. This is absolutely fine. But be careful that you do not overly rely on the analysis of one author. The point is for you to develop your own analysis based on reading several sources.

3. When working with multiple sources, it is better to bring them in to support your

argument rather than the other way around. Many essays and theses suffer due to the quality of argumentation--not the ideas, but how convincing you are. So I do NOT advise that you structure your essay to say, 'Haraway argued that signs are important for understanding the nature-society nexus. Cronon says that blah, blah. But Walker says blah, blah. It is more effective to say something like, 'There is not a consensus in the literature on how to analyze the nature-society nexus. Some, like Haraway, are insistent that blah, blah. Yet others focus more on blaah, blaah.' In this kind of framing YOU are doing analysis (=there is not a consensus in the literature...' and the 'blah, blah' parts) and you are using the literature to support your point.