

## Approaching Your Professor about a Grade

Approaching an instructor with a question or a complaint about a grade can be an intimidating process. You studied hard for that exam or worked long hours on that paper. You were satisfied that you had done well and were going to receive a high grade. But when your work was passed back, you didn't do as well as you had thought. You wonder why. What happened?

You make an appointment to see your instructor. It is natural to be apprehensive. After all, she is an expert in this subject and you are just trying to learn it. That's why she's the instructor and you're the student. But still you have questions.

Try to be as well prepared for your meeting as possible. Reread your exam or paper and bring it with you, review your course notes, prepare a brief outline of the salient points you wish to address. You want to impress your instructor that you have serious concerns.

Sometimes a simple objective mistake has been made. Your answer was marked wrong, yet the answer sheet says it is correct. Or the instructor totaled up your score incorrectly. These are the easiest grade complaints to deal with for both student and instructor. Normally, politely pointing out the error to the instructor will result in a prompt correction, and that will be the end of the matter.

Far more difficult to deal with are disappointments about grades on papers or essay exams, where there may be no right or wrong, no objective A- versus an equally objective C+, but where the instructor's judgment of the quality of the work determines the grade. In these cases, it is important to get a clear understanding, right from the start, of what your instructor sees as short-comings in your work. Perhaps you worked only at the periphery of the assignment and did not deal with the more important or more central issues. Perhaps some of your claims were not as fully backed up, either in factual support or in the logic of your reasoning. Or perhaps at a key spot your writing was too vague, or syntactically sloppy, so that it wasn't clear just what you were trying to say. This can be an eye-opening part of your conversation, and you may come to see that your work wasn't as good as you had thought. While this may be a disappointing insight, it can only serve you well as you prepare for your next essay or exam.

On the other hand, however, your instructor's explanation may reveal that she had missed something in your work. She thought you were arguing for X, which is only tangentially relevant to the theme of the paper, but you are able to convince her that you were actually arguing for a much more central and germane point Y. Or the instructor suggests that you avoided dealing with certain issues, and you are able to refresh her memory by showing her exactly where in the essay you did in fact deal with some of them. (These things can happen when instructors need to read and grade a large number of essays in a short period of time.) In cases like this, the instructor may realize that there is more to your work than she had previously noticed and raise your grade accordingly.

Throughout your conversation, whatever direction it may take, be polite and respectful. While you might feel angry and upset about how you were graded, directing that hostility toward your instructor is likely only to change the instructor's impression of your character and not your grade. Keep in mind also that suggesting that your grade should be based on something other than quality (e.g., "I really worked hard on this paper, and deserve a better grade"; "I need at least a B to avoid probation") or that students are appropriate judges of their own work ("my paper is better than my roommate's, but he got a better grade") is unlikely to persuade an instructor to change your grade.

Sometimes your instructor will have understood your paper well, and her criticisms are well taken, but still you are disappointed with the outcome. Here it is good to keep in mind that the instructor just may be a tough grader. So long as you have no reason to think she is treating you unfairly and evaluating you on a different basis than she is your classmates, you may have to abandon hopes for a higher grade. (On the other hand, if you do believe you have not been treated fairly and have been graded on something other than normal academic criteria, then you may want to direct such a complaint elsewhere. See the [Faculty Code of Conduct](#) and [University Policies and Regulations, Regulation #25.](#))