

"Talking With a Professor About a Grade" (A Guide for Students)

Assigning grades is one of the most protected of faculty rights and responsibilities. Talking with your professor about a grade - particularly if you differ in your perceptions about what the grade should be - can be very difficult. The following guidelines are suggested to assist you in having a productive discussion with your professor about your grade.

1. Ask specific questions that focus the discussion on how your grade was derived. There are at least four possibilities:
 - a) The professor made an honest mistake. This is easy to fix!
 - b) You made mistakes you did not realize. (In this case, the conversation is a learning opportunity for you. Also, by taking the time to have this discussion with your professor, you can convey to him/her that you are serious about learning.
 - c) You and the professor have an honest disagreement about the importance of various issues.
 - d) Your professor used non-academic criteria in determining your grade.
2. You might suspect your grade is based on non-academic criteria for any number of reasons:
 - a) You have seen the work of other students and it seems obvious to you that your work is stronger, yet your grade is the same or lower.

Hint: Look carefully at "objective criteria," as much as possible, in making this comparison. For example, in looking at papers or essays:

 - 1) were more specific details cited in one student's work than in another's?
 - 2) did one student present his/her ideas more clearly?
 - 3) Does one student present provide a clearer context, demonstrating a better grasp of the "big picture?"
 - b) You strongly disagreed with your professor in class and now you suspect you are being "punished" for doing so.
 - c) You have heard or observed that your professor has demonstrated prejudice against people with whom you have significant things in common (i.e., race, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, etc.).
 - d) Your professor disagrees with your political or social views.
3. In any event, when having the discussion, here are some "do's" and "don'ts":

DO:

- a) Ask appropriate questions about how your grade was calculated.
- b) Ask for examples of what would have made your work stronger.
- c) Try to understand what your professor thinks is missing or incorrect about your work.
- d) Focus on objective criteria (i.e. things that can be measured or valid and recognized standards for evaluating the merits of work)
- e) Use a flat, neutral, inquisitive tone of voice

DON'T:

- a) Accuse her/him of cheating you - even if you believe s/he has done that. Making such an accusation is much more likely to cause the professor to resist hearing your point of view!
- b) Give up trying to gain a clear understanding of the professor's stated reasons for assigning you the grade.
- c) Use a tone of voice which conveys anger or disrespect.

If, after discussing the issue with the professor, you are convinced that your grade does not reflect the merits of your work, politely indicate that you and the professor appear to be in disagreement about how the grade should have been calculated (e.g., "It looks like we disagree about the calculation of my grade" rather than "I think you are wrong" or, worse, "You are trying to rip me off!") Ask if s/he can suggest any alternatives for resolving the disagreement. At this point, informal options to resolve the issue are limited to choices with which both you and the professor can agree. Any professor who is convinced s/he is assigning a fair grade is unlikely to change the grade. However, if s/he believes there may be room for different interpretations, s/he may be willing to solicit feedback from another professor. From the professor's perspective, one disadvantage of this alternative is that another professor is unlikely to have read the work of other students in the class. If the professor is willing to consider the comments of a colleague, an informal resolution might still be possible.

If the professor suggests no other alternatives and you still wish to pursue the matter, you will need to speak with the department chair (in the professor's department) to request that s/he consider the facts and, if s/he believes it appropriate to do so, encourage the professor to re-evaluate the grade s/he assigned to you. According to page 19 of the document "The Professional Rights and Duties of Faculty Members and Roles and Professional Duties of Department Chairs," authored by the Boulder Faculty Assembly one of the chair's duties is to "be receptive to questions, complaints, grievances, and suggestions from . . . students. The chair has the responsibility to take appropriate action as required." Whether - and how - to act is determined by the chair.

If the chair is unable or unwilling to encourage the professor to re-evaluate the grade (or if your professor is the department chair, you may speak with the Associate Dean in the School or College in which the grade was assigned. Your approach with the Associate Dean should be similar to the approach used with the department chair. Ask if s/he would consider the facts and encourage the professor to re-evaluate the grade assigned.

Deans (not Associate or Assistant Deans) have the legal authority to change students' grades (although they do not have the authority to require a professor to do so). As a rule, they are extremely reluctant to exercise their authority to change grades because assigning grades is considered a matter of a professor's academic freedom. If you remain convinced that your grade is unfair, you can contact the Dean of the School or College in which the grade was assigned to ask that s/he review the matter and, change your grade if s/he believes it is unfair.