



TATP TIPSHEET

Handling Common Student Complaints

As a teaching assistant, you'll soon become familiar with hearing certain complaints from students. Here are **seven** of the most common student complaints and some suggested responses.

1. "I met all the criteria in the assignment. Why did I only get a 'C'?"

Meeting the minimal criteria isn't always enough to guarantee a great mark. A great assignment (essay, test answer, etc.) will often elaborate on issues that are missing from a more basic assignment. However, sometimes the problem is that the assignment is filled with irrelevancies. Being concise is as important as saying enough. Knowing the appropriate level of detail is part of what is being evaluated. Also...students need to know that there is nothing wrong with a "C" grade. According to the Faculty of Arts and Science grading scale, this level of achievement indicates "intellectually adequate performance".

Helpful strategies:

- As stated above, make sure the student is aware that many faculties (i.e., Arts and Science) identify a C paper as one that fulfills all assignment requirements in a competent fashion.
- Approach a student who has performed well on an assignment and seek his or her permission to use the assignment as a model for the class. With the student's express permission, photocopy a portion of the assignment and use it anonymously in class to model a good paper/test answer/lab report/calculation, etc. Show this to students so that they can identify a goal towards which they should be striving, and so that they know what they need to do to improve. This may be better than the answer key originally provided by the professor.
- If possible, ask that the course supervisor provide anonymous examples of great assignments from past classes, so that students have a clearer idea of what is expected of them.

2. "Most of your comments on my paper were about grammar, spelling, and writing skills. But this course is about _____. You should only be grading me on my knowledge of the subject content."

Communicating an idea effectively is as important as coming up with the idea in the first place. In the end, TAs can only assign a mark based on what is written on the page. If you as a student cannot explain yourself clearly, then you do not understand the material as well as you thought. However, the issue becomes complicated with ELL (English Language Learner) students. Some latitude may be given for individuals whom you definitively know (not assume) to be learners of English. Clarify with the course supervisor what accommodations and support, if any, are given to learners of English in the course. Familiarize yourself with support services on campus for ELL students.

Helpful strategies:

- Prevention is best. Make sure that students are aware that any course that involves significant writing involves them being marked on their *communication skills*, not just their knowledge of specific material.
- Recommend early on that students seek individualized help from U of T writing centers. Ask that the course supervisor also make a similar announcement. Make sure you can follow this up with a list of available campus writing support services.

3. “Your standards are too high.”

This may actually be true. If most of the class is doing poorly according to your method of marking, then perhaps something was misunderstood when the assignment was explained to students, or perhaps they have too little experience with this kind of writing. You (and the course supervisor) will have to decide whether there are extenuating circumstances or not.

If your standards are fair, it helps to describe the general performance of the class to the complaining student. This is where showing (anonymous) copies of high and mid-scoring assignments would be useful: it would demonstrate to students that others in the course understood the requirements. To excel, they will have to meet a higher standard of performance.

Helpful strategies:

- Go over the assignment with the student to identify where improvement is needed.
- Try not to be overly negative. Focus on 2 or 3 of the more urgent problems. Be sure to point out 1 or 2 positive aspects of the student’s work.
- Focus the interaction on real examples of good assignments (make some copies in advance—don’t show the whole assignment, only sections of it). If you do not have access to examples of work from real students, invent something yourself to be used as a model.
- Avoid focusing the interaction on defending your marking style or on issues of authority. Be sure to write up your comments on longer assignments (if possible, type them up and save them on your computer) so that you have written documentation of your grading that you can fall back on when discussing assignments with students.
- Keep an open mind. Sometimes the student may be right.
- Being open-minded and listening carefully to students’ concerns does not mean that you should second-guess your grades. Be prepared to change a grade only after very careful consideration. If there is no clear justification for changing the mark, stand firmly by your original decision.
- Ask that students examine grade distributions and answer keys before disputing a mark.
- Ask students to review the course objectives before disputing a grade or discussing your marking standards. Your standards must fit into a set of guidelines for your department, your faculty and the university. You are part of a larger system, as are the students. The University of Toronto has very stringent guidelines and expectations regarding student performance. Remind your students of this.

For the remaining four complaints, we offer some verbal responses that may be used.

4. “I’m an ‘A’ student, yet you only gave me a ‘C’ in this course!”

- “I understand you’re worried, and that this might be a different result from what you’ve received in the past. However, I’m assessing your performance in this course only. Do you have concerns about your mark on specific assignments/tests? We can look over them together.”

Be clear with your students that you are not responsible for the grades they achieve in other courses or the marks they received in high school. You are evaluating current performance and knowledge and identifying avenues for future growth, not maintaining past achievements.

5. “I did everything the same as the last time, but this time you gave me a poor grade.”

- “Every assignment is a little different, so repeating what you did was probably not enough this time around. Also, we have higher standards over time, since we expect you to improve as you get more familiar with these assignments. Do you want to look over the assignment together?”

Learning is a cumulative process involving sequenced steps building toward a higher level of competency or expertise. Students must show that they have moved through the necessary steps to acquire and apply *new* skills and knowledge, and that they are not simply repeating what they already know.

6. “I put a lot of effort into this paper, but you only gave me a ‘C’.”

- “I know you put a lot of work into this. Unfortunately, we were expecting more in the assignment. Let’s look over the paper and see what happened.”

Be very clear with your students that while the *process* of completing an assignment is important, you are evaluating the *production* of work. Unless evaluating the process of completing an assignment is expressly incorporated into the assessment of that assignment (i.e. awarding marks for submitting a draft version of an essay or report, submitting the steps involved in solving a problem set, submitting the outline for a project, submitting an annotated bibliography, etc.), you cannot possibly evaluate the effort a student puts into an assignment. Every student learns in different ways and at different speeds—the effort students put into their assignments cannot possibly be standardized and evaluated in the same way that the end result of that effort can. If students have indeed put an appropriate level of effort into an assignment, it will show in the product of their work.

7. “But I need a better grade to earn a scholarship/enter grad school/survive probation/stay in student residence.”

- “I know you’re worried about your mark. But it’s important that I mark objectively, and evaluate your work in this course independently of external pressures. Let’s go over your work and see where the problems were. I’m sure you can improve on the next assignment and increase your grade.”

As a university educator, you are responsible for contributing to the development of well-rounded citizens capable of independent and critical thought. You are also responsible for referring students to campus services that can aid them in juggling all the pressures of studying at a large postsecondary institution. Beyond this, however, *you are not personally or formally responsible for the rest of your students’ lives*. The University of Toronto has very high assessment standards and it is your job to uphold these standards. It is also your students’ responsibilities to do their very best to meet these standards. Train your students to be proactive: if they have reason to be concerned about a grade that might affect their student privileges, they must take steps *before an assignment is submitted* to ensure they are doing everything necessary to better their performance. (Telling you they need a higher grade because they need admission to a particular academic program is not being proactive.) Be clear with your students about how you can help them *before* a test is written or an assignment submitted, be clear about your expectations and provide students with a list of all possible resources for learning support. The rest is up to them.

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