

Talking With a Professor about a Grade -A Guide for Students-

by Tom Sebok

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 you made. 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 weight your professor gave to one or more aspects of your performance.
 - 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:
 - i. were more specific details cited in one student's work than in another's?
 - ii. did one student present his/her ideas more clearly?
 - iii. did one student present a clearer context, demonstrating a better grasp of the "big picture"?
 - b) You strongly disagreed with your professor in class or in one or more previous discussions 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. 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 she/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 she/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 she/he is assigning a fair grade is unlikely to change the grade. However, if she/he believes there may be room for different interpretations, she/he may be willing to consider 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. But 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. If she/he is unable to help you resolve the matter informally, you may initiate a formal grade appeal procedure with the chair.