

How to Communicate and Problem Solve With Your Instructor

1. Identify the Issue

Write out the issue. Think this through. Try to remove the emotion and focus on specifics. Examples include “I am not sure why I received the grade I did.” “Can you explain again what you mean by....” Try to see things from the instructor’s point of view. Assume that they want you to do well and that they care about your progress. Tell yourself this is not about personalities. If you assume they don’t like you or that this is all personality based it is highly unlikely you will find a resolution.

2. Make an Appointment

It is always better to schedule a time when both of you can sit and talk things through. Trying to catch a faculty member after class or in the hallway means they will not have time to really listen to your concerns or offer many solutions.

3. Be Assertive NOT Aggressive

Emphasize that you want to do well in this class and that you care. If you have carefully thought through your issue and written it down, you can keep referencing that. Be careful with the words you use. You want to focus the conversation on your issue, not your anger. Be polite. You will find the faculty member stays much calmer and is more able to focus on your issue, if you are polite and calm yourself. (If you find yourself getting angry, try saying, “excuse, me. I don’t mean to sound angry, it is just that this class means a lot to me and want to do well.” That may help relax both of you.)

4. Adopt a Problem Solving/Cooperative Attitude

Let the faculty member know that you want to work with them to do better. Ask what help is available or where you can go to find out more information. You may want to add in things the faculty member currently does that you find helpful or appreciate.

5. Listen

Be sure to really listen to what they are saying. If they offer a solution or suggestion, repeat it back to make sure you understand.

6. Accept Responsibility

Let the instructor know you understand that as a student you are responsible for your own learning. Assure them that you are willing to do the work and accept the consequences of your actions.

7. Offer Solutions

Be prepared to offer your own suggestions for improvement. If you have listened carefully and followed the above steps this should be easy. You may want to write out some possible solutions before you meet with your instructor. Just be sure you are open to new solutions if they emerge.

8. Be Clear on Expectations

Make sure you understand what is expected BEFORE you leave. Write it out. Read it back to the faculty member to make sure you are both clear. Set up some time lines when you will get things done or when you can expect to hear back from the faculty member.

THANK THEM FOR THEIR TIME!

Random Thoughts

After more than 30 years of helping to resolve student complaints/concerns and being a student myself, I have stumbled upon some thoughts/ideas that have helped many students. These are things to keep in mind or think about as you work to resolve a conflict with your instructor. They may also be helpful for an instructor to keep in mind as they work with an angry student. They are presented in no particular order. I hope you will find them helpful.

Passion is Good, but Anger can Make it Difficult to Think Clearly

I always tell students that being upset about a class or a grade is a good sign. It shows they care. If they didn't care, they wouldn't be upset. We want students to care about doing well, to be passionate about their studies. Unfortunately, however, if you allow that passion to turn into anger, it will make it very difficult to resolve a conflict. Anger interferes with our ability to think clearly. It also puts the other person on the defensive. As difficult as it may be, it is important to try to rein in your anger. Fortunately, there are several things a person can do to keep their anger in check, while maintaining their passion.

Reining in Your Anger

To rein in your anger, remember that it is a physiological response, so you may need to do something physical to release the anger. Practice deep breathing as a way to calm yourself. Take a deep breath and release it just before you start your meeting, if you feel yourself getting angry. Other things that help are to have a written script in front of you, so you know what you want to say. This should be brief and focused on what you have identified as your core issue. You might also try simply verbally expressing your anger and tying it to your desire to do well. Phrases like "I am sorry if I sound angry. I don't mean to sound angry, it is just that this is important to me and I want to do well" can often calm both you and the person you speaking with. Keep reminding yourself that if you get angry you will not be thinking clearly and you will probably not accomplish what you want to accomplish.

Try a Little Empathy – Look at Things in a Positive Light

Human beings are complex creatures. They have a range of emotions and motivations. Having been a student myself for many years, I know that is natural when you receive a poor mark to assume it is because the faculty member doesn't like you. While that may be true or may be a factor, it is actually quite rare. And, quite frankly, I think it would be very difficult to try to get someone to "like" you in the short time you are in class. If you accuse a person of not liking you, the most natural reaction is to deny that. Now, your conversation will focus on that and get nowhere. Take the time to put yourself in the instructor's place. Play the "act as if" game. That is, act as if your instructor really does want you to do well. Assume they do want you to understand and improve and that there is nothing personal in their decisions or grading. Maybe what they are doing is truly for your benefit. This shouldn't be too hard, because in the vast majority of cases it is true.

We are Not Grading Your Life

This is something I ask faculty to think about as well. Life can be very unpredictable. Sometimes things happen to us that are beyond our control. During these times it may be difficult or impossible for us to get our homework done or do well on a test. At these times we often have to make choice between school work and a life emergency. While faculty are willing to work with students in the case of an emergency, there is only so much they can do. They are not appointed to judge your life circumstances or decide whether or not you made the right choice. It is their job to grade you, not on whether or not you are good person, but what you completed in class or as part of a homework assignment. The fact that you had an emergency that prevented you from being present to complete a required assignment may mean you are a wonderful person. They have no way of knowing or judging. All they can do is grade you on what they have assigned. So, if you miss an assignment for a good reason, that may mean you made the right decision, but it may also mean you get a lower grade in the course. The fact you received a lower grade is just one of the trade offs we have to make in life. The only fair thing an instructor can do is grade you on what you actually accomplished, not what they think you might have accomplished. If the course you are taking is a prerequisite for another course, this becomes even more critical. It would be unfair to you and unethical for an instructor to say you have demonstrated the required level of competency in the prerequisite course, if you have not. If they did, you might end up failing the next course and then having to retake both the prerequisite and the next course. This could set you back a year or more.