


When Students Complain About Grades

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Overview

It happens — and all too often for our comfort: students complain about their grades. How should you respond?

- This page offers [strategies to help you resolve grade issues with your students](#), based on suggestions shared by veteran instructors at the Academy and elsewhere.
- Keep in mind, though, that **your best option is to be proactive**, so that grade complaints don't arise in the first place! Learn more: [Minimizing grade complaints](#).

Preliminaries

Get some perspective...

- **We are not selling diplomas.**
Some students see taking a class as a *transaction*, an exchange of this for that: they pay tuition and in return they get credit, a good grade, and ultimately, a credential or degree. Right? Well, no. Students are paying for *the opportunity to learn* from our instructional content and from instructor feedback. Their **tuition dollars buy them access to our learning materials and processes — and to your expertise**. What they do with these resources is up to them.
- **Grades are earned, not given.**
So be careful of your language. **Instructors do not give grades: students earn grades**. Here's what a couple of veteran professors had to say on this subject:
 - *The moment the teacher falls into the language trap of "You gave me a B," it reinforces the concept that the grading of students in the class is capricious, and that the instructor, not the students, bears the majority of the burden that determines the grade. This is not true, and a simple change in word choice will reframe the discussion entirely.* (A comment from "tzikeh," posted on [MetaFilter](#))
 - *I do not "take off" points. You earn them. The difference is not merely rhetorical, nor is it trivial. In other words, you start with zero points and earn your way to a grade. You earn a grade in (say) Econ 100 for demonstrating that you have gained a degree of competence in economics ranging from being able to articulate the basic principles (enough to earn a C) to mastery and the ability to apply these principles to day-to-day affairs (which will earn an A).* (from [Art Carden, writing in Forbes](#))
- **Assignments and courses are milestones along the road to mastery.**
At the Academy, courses in a degree program assume that students have mastered certain skills in previous courses. Students who have not gained sufficient competence in one course will struggle in the next, more advanced class. *Passing students whose skills do not meet minimum standards sets them up for failure.*
- **This is all part of the job.**
You were hired for your professional expertise, so "Make your peace with the salient reality that grading [...] is a professional and qualitative judgment call on your part," suggests [Rob Weir, professor of history at UMass Amherst](#). And keep in mind that responding to student complaints is part of your job as an instructor, as thankless and frustrating as this task can sometimes be.

Let your colleagues inspire you...

- Check out these veteran Academy instructors' [solutions to real-life grading dilemmas](#).
- Take a look at this excellent tool from the Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence and Educational Innovation at Carnegie Mellon University, which provide detailed suggestions based on the reasons *why* a student is complaining: [Solve a Teaching Problem: Students complain about grades](#).
- **Responding to Challenging Students Online**: this resource includes very helpful suggestions about ways to think about and approach difficult conversations with online students.

Hi [Student Name],

I have never yet had a student email me every day of a semester. I'm not sure it's really appropriate for me to hear the details of your financial situation though I of course sympathize. AAU students have very diverse backgrounds.

I cannot make further exception for your work than what is stated in your accommodation letter. Nor can I alter my grading, as that would be unfair to your fellow students, and also unfair to you. If you do not achieve the skills and abilities necessary to succeed in this class, you will be even less prepared and further disadvantaged in the next level studio. This is the challenge we are facing now, with your having barely passed ARH110 and ARH170. You are now trying to play 'catch-up' on skills you should have mastered in those classes, alongside learning the not-so-simple material of this class alongside. It does not actually do you any "favor" in the long term.

I do see some improvement in your work, but there is no way for me to know ahead of time if you will be able to improve sufficiently to pass this course. I cannot guarantee you a passing grade based on a commitment from you to revise work. Your writing and work does hint at some level of understanding of the architectural issues at hand, but your 'final products' do not evidence at this time sufficient development or understanding in your application of principles to your design or graphic or physical product.

If you seek a more sure path, as I have said previously, perhaps it would be better for you to step back, withdraw from the course and work on your drawing and model-making skills before resuming this class. Especially if the work typically takes you longer. You need to learn ways and find a working method by which you can more smoothly express yourself visually and spatially, so you can move your design process forward. I think you have gotten a good taste of the level of work expected in this studio, and could continue to work on what you need at your own pace.

Find materials that you can more easily manipulate for models - maybe museum board or even paper, wire mesh that you can easily mold.

Find tutorials on model-making - it doesn't have to be 'architectural' model-making. Just learning how to put different materials together.

Graphically, you can practice tracing over drawings and diagrams to sharpen your line-making skills.

You can use CAD software to check your dimensions, scale and proportion.

Find more case studies and study their spaces, drawings and diagrams, and how they are able to communicate their intentions.

Then you would be better prepared to succeed in this class when you feel you are ready.

I am always happy to receive revisions and improvements, and you can resubmit to Late Assignment folder anytime. As I said previously, though, it can not simply boil down to me telling you what to do. Your work should evidence absorption of your learning. I also have an allotted amount of teaching time for the whole class, so cannot be expected to "re-teach" material constantly.

I hope this gives you a clearer picture by which to set your course and efforts. I'm happy to discuss face-to-face online as well. Good luck.

Best,
[Instructor Name]

Double-check yourself...

Was the student graded appropriately?

- Review the [AAU Grading Scale](#), and spend a little time reviewing your feedback on the student's assignment(s). If you have questions or doubts about your assessment, [talk with your director](#).
- Keep in mind that [grades mean different things for students at different levels](#). An A for a beginning student means something different than an A for a student at the end of their Academy career.

Work with your student

- Lots of emotions are attached to grades, so you may find it helpful to insist on a [cooling off period](#) to allow students time to review your feedback and reflect on the quality of their work.
- When a student emails you about a grade, ask them to do some [legwork](#) before you discuss their work with them. Have the student:
 - Review the [AAU Grading Scale](#) to clarify the Academy's general approach to grades.
 - Take another look at the [grading criteria or rubric](#) for the assignment.
 - [Review their own work](#) in relation to the rubric and [make notes about their work's strengths and weaknesses](#). Identify the [specific points on the rubric](#) on which they think they were unfairly graded and any questions they might have. Getting students to identify the problems with their work themselves makes them more invested in solving these problems.
 - [Reflect on how much time and effort](#) they have put into their work so far. How does this compare to time requirements for online courses, in general, or for this assignment, in particular?
 - [Review all the feedback you gave their classmates on the same assignment](#). (You can verify that they've done this by checking the "Participation" section of their grades interface.)
 - Ask the student to [get back in touch with you](#), after they have completed these tasks, so that you can discuss any questions they still have. You might also ask that they send you the notes from their investigation to help focus your conversation.
- Propose an [online meeting](#) to review and discuss the student's work — but make it clear that changing their grade is an unlikely outcome of such a conversation. Getting involved in an email battle can be frustrating and counterproductive, and both parties can be tempted to say things they wouldn't express face-to-face. A live meeting humanizes the encounter. (Learn more: [Teaching in a Virtual Office](#)) *In your conversation:*
 - [Assume the student's good intentions](#) — and [don't take the conversation personally](#).
 - Keep the [focus on improving the student's work](#), not on the grade.

When you meet with students, as much as possible, orient the conversation away from justifying the grade the student received, and toward "here's how you can improve on future assignments of this type." Regardless of whatever snotty emails I've received from a student, I always approach this type of meeting treating the student 100% as if they are honestly trying to improve their writing/test taking strategies/etc. — and for almost all students, being treated that way puts them in that mindset (comment from "rainbowbrite" on MetaFilter).

- Remind the student that **a grade is not a judgment on their ability but an opportunity for growth** — and that your job is to help them understand where they still have room for growth and how to improve. (Learn more: [Are Good Art Students Born or Made?](#))
- **Don't be a martyr.** If the student is argumentative or abusive or otherwise inappropriate, end the conversation politely. Let the student know that if they are not satisfied with the result of your discussion, they can contact the department director or — worst case scenario — file a grievance. Students can find information about the grievance process, including FAQ and detailed directions for filing a grievance, on the [Live Chat & Information Center](#) page.
- *If your student can't or won't meet with you*, use the communication strategy outlined in [Responding to Challenging Students Online](#) to craft an email response.
- *If appropriate for your class and your discipline*, **offer the student an opportunity to redo the assignment**, so they can demonstrate that they have learned from your feedback. If you decide to do this, set some *specific guidelines* for their late submission:
 - Give them *limited time* in which to complete the revision — say, one week — and adjust the closing date on the relevant assignment so they can submit their work.
 - Require them to *explain in writing* (or *via video*) on how they have incorporated your feedback into their revision.
 - *Average their two grades* — the grade on the original assignment and the grade on their revised work — to determine their assignment grade.
- **Protect yourself by keeping good records:** document your communication with students within the LMS: save Mailbox messages, etc. *And don't put anything in writing that you wouldn't want to see published in the local newspaper!*

Learn more

- Remember that the best way to deal with grade complaints is to make sure they don't happen in the first place! See: [Minimizing grade complaints](#)
- [Real-Life Grading Dilemmas](#) (includes great advice from veteran AAU instructors)
- [Fair, Transparent & Meaningful Grading](#)
- [AAU Grading Scale](#)
- [The Meaning of Grades](#)
- [Responding to Challenging Students Online](#)
- [Using Rubrics for Critique & Grading](#)
- [How do I respond to students who are unhappy with their grade?](#) (great discussion with thoughtful suggestions from many instructors)
- [Solve a Teaching Problem: Students complain about grades](#) (an excellent tool from the Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence and Educational Innovation at Carnegie Mellon University, with detailed suggestions based on the reasons *why* a student is complaining)
- [Can you 'bump up my grade'? dealing with grade complaints and requests for extra credit \(Part 1\)](#)
- [Dealing with Student Complaints](#)
- Max Roosevelt in *The New York Times*: [Student Expectations Seen as Causing Grade Disputes](#)
- Art Carden, writing in *Forbes*: [Dear Student: I Don't Lie Awake At Night Thinking of Ways to Ruin Your Life](#)
- Cathy Davidson: [Why Students Gripe About Grades](#)