

# Handling Student Complaints

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# In my first four years as division chair...

- I handled about 40 complaints against full-time faculty (we have about 40 full-time faculty in division).
- Over half of faculty did not get a complaint at all.
- About one-third got one complaint.
- About a tenth got two or more.

## Categories of complaints (may overlap):

- My instructor is a bad teacher (disorganized, unclear, unresponsive, gets papers back late).
- My instructor has unfair policies (on absences, willingness to make up tests/final, grading scale).
- My instructor doesn't like me/is mean.
- My instructor thinks I plagiarized but I didn't.
- My instructor must have miscalculated my grade.

# Goals for the process

- Defuse situation; allow everyone to be heard.
- Help students navigate the system.
- Use process as a teaching moment for both students and faculty.
  - Students: Listen for broader concerns; does student need advising?
  - Instructors: Help instructors improve teaching, reduce chances of future complaints.

# Basic Script

1. Tell me what you're concerned about.
2. So what you're saying is that [repeat complaint].
3. It sounds like you felt frustrated/were confused.
4. Have you had a chance to discuss this with the instructor? What happened?
5. What are you hoping comes from this conversation? What would a good outcome be?
6. What I'm going to do next is.... What is the best way to contact you? I will contact you in the next few days. Here is the faculty complaint process.

Complaint process is available in  
the college catalog:

[http://www.highline.edu/home/catalog/appendices/instructional\\_policies.html#grievance](http://www.highline.edu/home/catalog/appendices/instructional_policies.html#grievance)

(Under Appendices/Instructional Policies/  
Instructional Grievance Process.)

# Scenarios

Student wants you to read their paper/project and see if you agree with the grade.



# My response

I'm afraid that's not my role. What I can do is look at the criteria the instructor gave you and see if there's anything confusing or inconsistent. Did you get an assignment sheet or an explanation of how it would be graded?

Student complains that instructor does not respond to emails, and when she does, she's sarcastic and mean. Instructor may have done nothing wrong initially but has escalated the disagreement with angry and/or sarcastic emails.

# My response

To student: I try to focus on repairing communication and solving the problem that started the string of emails.

To instructor: I talk about how this response has led the student to complain to me, and if she wants to avoid future complaints, it would be worth figuring out how not to engage like this.

Student complains about a policy. This policy may be unusual at Highline – and you may sympathize with the student – but it's not wrong.

# My response:

While this is not a common policy at Highline, it's well within the range of acceptable teaching. The instructor has the right to have this policy.

If appropriate, it might be worth telling the instructor that this policy is likely to increase complaints.