Managing Difficult Conversations about Grades

Better Grading Practices and Resources | Teaching Commons

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Designing and Preparing your Assessments

By clearly deciding, defining, and communicating expectations and criteria when designing assessments, you can better prepare your students, Teaching Assistants (if applicable), and yourself for the grading process.

- Assessment Approaches and Tools for Grading (YouTube video) offers guidance and ideas for different grading tools to assist you.
- All About Rubrics is an instructional handout supporting the construction and use of all types of rubrics.

Refer to the Senate Grade Reappraisal Principles in your syllabus to ensure students understand the process, timeframe, requirements, such as the necessity to have **"sufficient academic grounds"** and the type of work accepted for reappraisal.

Since the course director is the first contact for a grade re-appraisal, you can articulate your course process on grading inquiries and offers specific guidance and instruction for students, that you can refer to. Guiding questions:

- Will you require a timeframe for students to review their graded assessment and feedback before requesting a re-grade?
- How will students request a re-grade? For example, an asynchronous request in writing, or audio or video file, outlining the questions students have about the grading, or justification for why they believe a re-grade is warranted?
- When can students expect to receive a response? Managing student expectations can help reduce inquiries and stress levels.

What can you do before, during, and after assessments?

- Before or at the time of assigning an assessment communicate the purpose, task, expectations, and grading criteria of the assessment.
    - Consult TILT Higher Ed and TILTed Pedagogy for resources.
- While grading and providing feedback, pay close attention to how feedback is framed, and support students in understanding feedback.
    - Marking Efficiently and Effectively: Feedback offers a dialogic feedback cycle with quality feedback and feedback strategies.
    - Feedback and Feedback Literacy offers feedback strategies to support students in understanding and using feedback.
- When assessments are returned, remind students of the course process on grading inquiries or re-grading requests, and follow the process set out. For example, re-grading requests that do not abide by the policy are returned to students with a reminder of what is required.

- In Crowdmark you can provide a message to all students when graded assessments are returned, which could include the key points for re-grading requests.

How can you facilitate the re-grading process?

When receiving and responding to grade inquiries:

- Be aware of your emotions as you may be responding to the student's emotions, and the re-grading process can stir up defensiveness or a challenging nature.
- Use active listening or close reading skills to best understand the student's concerns.
- Reflect back to the student what you gleaned from them to demonstrate and check for understanding. Examples include
  - "I sense that you really care about your performance on this assignment, that it is important for you to do well to achieve your long-term goals, and you need a better grade. Is this an accurate description? To ensure you are successful in the course, focusing on learning throughout the assessment process will better prepare you."
  - "If I understand you correctly, you think you better achieved [specific criteria] than your grade reflects because [reflect back student's justification]"
  - "If I understand you correctly, you have questions about [specific criteria]"
- Respond to their questions or concerns regarding the grading, referring to grading criteria, expectations, purpose of the assessment, and feedback provided.
  - Reinforce the points they made in their justification, connecting to how they achieved the specific criteria referenced, giving more points/credit whenever warranted.
    - If you are engaging with a student synchronously, you may wish to postpone any grade changes so you can spend time analyzing the work without being put on the spot. If you require re-grading requests to be made in writing, when a student approaches you, you can remind them of the re-grading policy and ask them to email you, and you will review their assessment with their stated questions or concerns.
  - Provide explanations and examples of expectations not met and describe what would be required to fully meet the criteria.

- Give students a manageable number of (e.g. up to 3) key points to apply or respond to.

What can you do if the conversation becomes more difficult?

There can be a lot of pressure on students. There is often a focus on grades in education, particularly as the main criteria for success. Sometimes students can take grades personally, associating them with their own self-worth. Remind them that it is not a judgement of them and on their academic abilities, and rather an evaluation of specific aspects of the work they submitted. Even if you have framed feedback focusing on the work, not the student personally, engaged in dialogue with the student using active listening and reflecting back facilitation strategies, and responded to the student's questions and concerns, providing specific explanations, students may be persistent, unable to accept the explanation and grade, and may even resort to harassing behaviour. In this case, external support may be needed, and there are many York University resources available.

- Consult your Undergraduate or Graduate Program Director (UPD/GPD), coordinator, Chair of your department, or Associate Dean Students of your Faculty/School.
- If students express to you concerns for their well-being, you can refer them to York University Supports for Student Well-being.
- If students' express accessibility related concerns, you can refer them to York University Student Accessibility Services.
    - If you know the student has an accommodation letter sent from their accessibility counsellor, you may be able to reach out to the counsellor for support, as the accommodation process is a collaborative one.
- If students express to you concerns that their human rights have been violated, or you feel your human rights have been violated, consult with York University Centre for Human Rights, Equity and Inclusion and your chair, UPD, GPD or coordinator.
- If there is a violation of the code of student rights and responsibilities, consult with your UPD, GPD, Coordinator or chair for support, and there is an option to file a complaint with the Office of Student Community Relations.

Resources

Elkhoury, E. (n.d.). *All about rubrics*. York University Teaching Commons. https://www.yorku.ca/teachingcommons/wp-content/uploads/sites/993/2025/07/Rubrics-Handout_Licensed.pdf

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Teaching Commons. (2021, August 24). *Assessment approaches and tools for grading* [Video]. Youtube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-QkT1DZaHx0

York University Centre for Human Rights, Equity and Inclusion. https://www.yorku.ca/services/rights/

York University Office of Student Community Relations. https://students.yorku.ca/oscr

York University Student Accessibility Services. https://students.yorku.ca/accessibility

York University Supports for Student Well-being. https://www.yorku.ca/well-being/resources/students/

Winkelmes, M. A. (2009-2026). *TILT higher ed examples and resources*. TILT Higher Ed. https://www.tilthighered.com/resources

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