

Tips for writing a Full Appeal Letter

Introduction

Before you start, we strongly advise you to read the [Code of Procedure for Appealing to a College Appeals Committee](#) and the [Frequently Asked Questions](#) on the Senate website. This should help you understand the rules governing appeals, what is and isn't possible, and how you should start to outline your case.

The ideal outcome of your appeal letter is for your appeal to be upheld and the remedy you want granted without the need for anyone to attend a hearing of any sort. Having your appeal upheld purely based on the letter that is submitted is a satisfying outcome but can only be achieved by covering all the angles. A good appeal letter will essentially present a full hearing on paper.

You must try to answer any possible question that a Committee could pose. If you leave questions unanswered, then a full hearing may have to take place.

So when you're writing an appeal letter, always try to put yourself into the mindset of the people who will be reading it (i.e. the Appeals Committee). Try to imagine what questions they would have if they had you in front of them (click [here](#) for examples). Try to imagine what further information they might want to know to arrive at their decision.

Knowing Your Grounds

It's best to always try to keep in mind the grounds that you are arguing on and how you will find backup for these grounds, in other words: evidence.

Detailed information, as ever, is available in the University Calendar, but for Academic Appeals, the **only two grounds** that anyone can appeal on are:

1. Unfair or Defective Procedure, or
2. Failure to take into account medical or other adverse personal circumstances

You must fulfil one of these grounds in order to proceed. If you are in any doubt, come and talk to the Advice Centre.

Collecting Evidence

Think about any supporting documentation you can get that can help your case. To prepare a case effectively, you need to back up what you are saying with evidence. This might include:

- Your academic transcript (websurf record).
- Medical certificates
- Supporting letters from your parents/family/flatmates/placement provider
- Excerpts from your Course Handbook
- Copies of correspondence between you and members of staff

If you need copies of emails or Board of Examiners minutes then you may have apply for a [Subject Access Request](#) through the Data Protection Office.

For example, if you are saying that your medical circumstances were not taken into account – what you must always ask for are the minutes of the Board of Examiners Meeting when the final classification was decided on and you'll be able to see in those minutes if the medical evidence was mentioned.

You should also check carefully what it says in your Course Handbook. Often, you will be looking for a discrepancy between the procedures described in the Course Handbook and what actually happened.

Remember that the College will be asking the School for a response to your letter of appeal. Obvious though this sounds, it's worth saying – don't put anything in your appeal letter that you know the School can disprove. It just weakens your whole case.

Constructing the Argument

If your are appealing on a 'failure to take account of adverse or medical circumstances' then you may encounter a problem; namely that adequate processes already exist, designed with the intention that students tell their School about their adverse personal circumstances at the time.

If you have not followed these procedures but now want your adverse circumstances to be taken into account, you will need to explain in your appeal letter why you did not follow the procedures.

It will also be important for you to demonstrate your ability outside of the time when the adverse circumstances were taking place. An example to illustrate this might be:

A student in her 4th year is appealing her final classification on the grounds that Adverse Personal Circumstances haven't been taken into account. She got Ds in her final exams where she expected to get Bs. The appeals committee will look at her academic transcript to see what she has achieved throughout her University career. If it seems that she always got Bs, then there is some evidence backing up her statement. If she always seems to have scraped through University on Ds, then there is no evidence to indicate that she would have performed any differently, and her appeal is unlikely to succeed.

Detail

Don't worry if your letter seems long. If your aim, as discussed earlier, is to have your appeal or complaint upheld without the need for hearing, then you simply cannot put in too many details. You've got to be specific. The more specific you are, and the more **relevant** detail you put in, the greater chance you have of having the case upheld at the first attempt. For example:

Don't just say: *"My mother was sick and it affected me"*

Why not? Imagine what the College Committee would have to say about such a statement. There is every chance that they would see the assertion as vague and irrelevant. Everyone's mother gets "sick" sometime. Everyone is "affected" by such things. Why is this case special?

So you need specific, absolute, practical examples and then detail that specific evidence in a causal chain of events that means you were forced into a poor performance.

Like this:

- *My mother was suffering with cancer.*
- *She was up all night vomiting.*
- *I was the only person able to look after my mother, and had to spend the nights tending to her needs.*
- *As a result, I only slept an average of two hours of sleep per night in the weeks before my exam.*
- *That in turn affected my ability to concentrate and effectively study.*

Such a clear and precise listing of events and consequences can only help your appeal.

Don't just say "*I did speak to the school about this*". Again, be specific: When did you? Who did you speak to? What exactly did they say?

Avoiding Emotional Language

Remember to remain formal and businesslike. You will have a much better chance of swaying the academics who will be considering your case if you can avoid adversarial, hostile or overly emotional language. Remaining objective and factual will serve you well and indicate to those reading it that you yourself are sufficiently convinced of the merits of the case not to resort to emotion.

Avoid emotional language like

- "*...it was a disgrace...*" and
- "*...I can't believe that they would even dare do this...*"

Sticking to the facts is more powerful. The appeals committee want to know the facts, and emotions are opinions. What they want to know is: *what happened?* and *what were the consequences?* Emotional language can be a turn off, and can be read as a sign of desperation.

Emotional language may antagonise the people you are trying to win over. It will disempower your message and distract from your content.

Obviously, you must sometimes still write about emotionally charged events and circumstances but remember:

Write factually about the emotions, rather than writing emotionally about the facts.

Logic

A good argument flows in a logical order. Try to ensure that every paragraph of your letter builds on the previous paragraph. Do not force your readers to jump from this August then back to the previous June and to last week, via 1999. As much as you can, try to make your case a chronological narrative.

It's better to show than to tell. Don't just say that you were unable to study because your mother was ill. Show the detail with backup from medical certificates. Try to link practical examples into a causal chain of steps which all build upon each other towards your final argument.

Clarity

If it helps your reader to understand your case, then do not hesitate to use headings to divide your letter into "chapters". Whether academics or not, human beings deal more easily with several smaller chunks of information rather than one large splurge of text.

Ultimately, you want the reader to understand your point and not be confused. The onus is on you to achieve this because you are trying to influence a change of decision. In academic appeals, you are always trying to change a decision that has already been made. An unclear letter will lead to doubt and the natural imperative when in doubt is to stick to what has already been decided.

It will probably be helpful to have someone else (e.g. a member of the Advice Centre team) read over your letter before you submit. This catches grammatical errors and gives you an ideal opportunity to see if you have described the case clearly.

Questions the Appeals Committee might ask...

What do you think was the main cause of the problems you experienced?

How was your studying affected?

Do you think your study skills need to be improved?

If so, what particularly requires improvement?

Were you aware that your performance was slipping?

Have you approached an Effective Learning Advisor for help with study/exam technique?

If so, did your visit to the Effective Learning Advisor change the way you studied?

Do you think your job affected your studies?

Tell us about your placement/elective. Have you had any feedback from that?

Why did you not approach your Adviser of Studies about the problem?

Did you talk to anyone about the problem?

Have you approached your GP? / When did you approach your GP about the problem?

If this situation were to recur in future, what would you do differently?

What other courses of action might you have taken?

Do you still feel this is the right course for you?

If you are allowed to repeat the year, will you be able to cope financially?

Do you know what other sources of support are available to you?