

Tips for writing a Stage 1 Complaint

Introduction

Before you start, we strongly advise you to read the [Complaints Procedure](#) and the [Frequently Asked Questions](#) on the Senate Office webpage. This should help you understand the rules governing complaints, what is and isn't possible, and to whom your complaint should be addressed.

When you're writing a complaint, always try to put yourself into the mindset of the people who will be reading it (i.e. the Complaint Investigator). Try to imagine what questions they would have if they had you in front of them. Try to imagine what further information they might want to know to arrive at their decision.

We will assume here that you have already tried to negotiate an informal resolution to the problem, or that an informal resolution is not appropriate in the circumstances.

Knowing Your Grounds

It's best to always try to keep in mind the grounds for your complaint and how you will find backup for these grounds, in other words: evidence. Has your School failed to live up to published standards (e.g. in the course documentation or on the website)? Has someone behaved inappropriately towards you (e.g. sending inappropriate emails/texts or belittling you in front of others)?

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
- Witness statements from other students
- Excerpts from your Course Handbook or PGR Code of Practice
- 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.

You should also check carefully what it says in your Course Handbook or any other published documentation. You may be looking for a discrepancy between the procedures described in the documentation and what actually happened.

Remember that the Complaint Investigator will be asking the person(s) responsible for the situation you are complaining about for a response to your complaint. Obvious though this sounds, it's worth saying – don't put anything in your complaint that you know can be disproved. It just weakens your whole case.

Constructing the Complaint

Detail

Don't worry too much about the length of your complaint. Your aim is to give the investigator all the information s/he needs to fully understand the situation and why you are complaining. You've got to be specific. The more specific you are, and the more detail you put in, the greater chance you have of having the complaint upheld at the first stage. For example:

Don't just say: *"I was misled about my course choices and it has affected my degree."*

Why not? Imagine what the investigator will say about such a vague statement. It immediately throws up more questions. Who misled you? When? In what way? What exactly did they say to you? What was the result of this? Is there any evidence? And so on.

You need a clear and precise listing of events and consequences to help the investigator understand your complaint.

Relevance

Ok, so you need plenty of detail in your complaint, but you need to make sure it is **relevant** detail. There's no point going on for pages and pages, describing everything that's happened to you since you've been at Uni. You will bore, confuse and irritate the investigator as s/he tries to wade through it all to get to your point. In extreme cases the University could even refuse to deal with your complaint until you have revised it to make it easier to understand.

Stick to information that is directly related to the complaint you are making. If you think that a lot of background information is necessary so that the investigator understands the context, make a separate 'Background' section and clearly explain what this information is for.

Clarity

If it helps your reader to understand your case, then do not hesitate to use headings to divide your complaint 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 decision. An unclear letter will lead to doubt and the natural imperative when in doubt is to keep things the way they are.

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

Logic

A good argument flows in a logical order. Try to ensure that every paragraph of your complaint builds on the previous paragraph. Do not force your reader to jump from this August then back to the previous June and to last week, via 2002. As much as you can, try to make your case a chronological narrative.

Avoiding Emotional Language

Remember to remain formal and businesslike. You will have a much better chance of swaying the person who will be considering your complaint 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 complaints investigator wants 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.

Avoid personal insults, sarcasm and aggression. You may have your opinion on your tutor’s personality and habits, but remember it is facts which make a complaint, not opinions.

In most cases, it is likely that you will still have to work or study with the people named in your complaint. If you have called them all the names you can think of, it’s going to be much more difficult to get back to a good working relationship again. You can write an effective, powerful complaint and still be diplomatic.

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.

Staying reasonable

University staff and other students are only human and make mistakes from time to time. Try to retain a sense of proportion when you are making your complaint. If you show that you have tried to resolve the problem informally, have been willing to compromise where appropriate, and have stuck to the facts, you have a much better chance of your complaint being taken seriously.

Remedy

As you will see, the complaint form has a specific section where you are asked to outline what remedy you are seeking. This is something you need to think about early on in your complaint. Your chosen remedy or remedies must be **realistic**, **relevant** and **reasonable**. Examples of remedies might include:

- More detailed feedback on your work.
- More frequent meetings with a supervisor.

- For another student to stop staring at you in lectures or texting you.
- For the person responsible for the problem to apologise to you.
- Changes to be made to a policy or procedure for the benefit of future students.
- Financial compensation for a loss you have suffered.

It might be appropriate to ask for more than one remedy.

Avoid unrealistic requests. Even if you think a member of staff has acted badly towards you, it's pointless asking for their salary to be docked, or for them to be disciplined or sacked, as the Complaint Investigator does not have the power to do these things. Of course there are situations where disciplinary action may need to be taken, but in such cases the Complaint Investigator would refer the case to the Human Resources Department for them to decide what is appropriate.

Once again, if you are in any doubt, the Advice Centre is there to help – just ask.