

Do not be surprised when students dispute grades. This happens to almost every instructor. However, grade disputes pose particular problems if you are a new, inexperienced TA evaluating student work for the first time. Experienced teachers have developed standards for evaluating student work; most new TAs have not. As a result, many TAs lack confidence in their ability to evaluate student work and feel uncomfortable addressing student complaints (see Chapter 6 for advice on how to grade student papers fairly and on developing standards of evaluation). Dealing with disputes over grades can be emotionally taxing. New TAs especially tend to feel that their judgment is being questioned—which might well be true—and react defensively. TAs who are unsure about their grading standards or insecure about assuming authority as an evaluator of student writing

may opt to give complaining students the grades they want. Others give all of their students high grades, believing that will prevent complaints. There are better courses of action to take.

If a student questions a grade in class, make an appointment with the student to discuss the matter further. When the student arrives at your office, assume control of the meeting. If a student is irate, abusive, or unwilling to listen, end the conference. Tell the student to leave and schedule a new meeting when he or she has calmed down. If a student is ready to discuss the grade calmly, ask the student if there is anything you marked or wrote on the paper that he or she does not understand or any error he or she does not know how to correct. Answer any specific questions the student has about your comments on the paper. Then go through the paper with the student, pointing out what you marked and why, offering suggestions on how to fix any problems you see and build on any strengths. As you talk through the paper together, most students come to see why the paper received its grade. If they still have questions, summarize the grading standards you use in the course and your particular expectations for this assignment, and then point out specific places in the paper where the student did or did not meet those standards and expectations. If the student is still not satisfied at that point, there is little else you can do except to offer your help on the next assignment.

Because you are a TA, some students may ask you to let someone else (probably a professor) review a disputed paper to see what grade that person would give it. Behind this request is the unstated assumption that as a TA, you are not a “real” teacher—a “real” teacher would have given the paper a different (i.e., higher) grade. Whether you ask someone else to look at the paper is up to you. Most TA supervisors are willing to review a disputed paper and tell you what grade they would have given it. Just be sure to conduct this consultation outside the student’s presence.

If the student remains unsatisfied, you have a few options left: tell the student the matter is over and advise the student to move on to the next assignment, allow the student to rewrite the paper, or refer the student to your supervisor. Rewriting the paper allows the student to take advantage of your comments and conversations. The final grade for the assignment is either the rewrite grade or an average of the first grade and the second—the choice is yours. There are times when rewriting a graded paper helps the student mature as a writer, but these rewrites greatly increase your workload, so consider carefully whether you want to make this a common practice. Finally, if a student is just not going to be satisfied with any course of action you take, refer him or her to your teaching supervisor.

Sometimes when reviewing a paper, you may decide you assigned the wrong grade. If you feel you graded too harshly, you can give the student a higher grade; just be sure to explain the basis of the change. Do not, however, lower a grade on review. That type of action seems vindictive. If you realize the grade is too high, just leave it, tell the student the grade is more than justified, and revise your standards as needed for the next set of papers.