



Office of the Ombudsperson for Students

FAIRNESS TOOLKIT MAKING EFFECTIVE COMPLAINTS

Work out the essence of your complaint in one sentence. Then, in point-form, write out the relevant events that led you to where you are with your complaint. If you have any documents to support your claims, have them ready and review them. This is why it is important, at the first sign of things going awry that you keep a good record of what has occurred.

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Do some research on whomever you are intending to register the complaint with. Learn about their processes - perhaps they have specific deadlines, forms and procedures for filling complaints. Understand what they can and cannot do and determine if you are complaining to the right person or unit.

Consult and seek advice. See if you need to find yourself an advocate. Getting a lawyer may not be necessary, but getting some advice and help from someone who has experience and is working in your best interest, may get you on the right track faster and easier than going at it alone.

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How are you feeling about the complaint? It is in your best interest to make the phone call or write the letter when you are not feeling overwhelmed with anger or emotions. Strong emotions can impair your judgment and you need good judgment, calm and clarity to prevail in order to communicate effectively.

Try to stick to the facts. While you have experienced a variety of difficulties and drawn several conclusions about why this has happened, you need to be able to convey concisely what the problem is and what outcome you'd like to see. Focus on the future.

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Ask how your complaint is going to be handled (the process) in your phone call or letter and for a timeline regarding a response. If you don't receive a time estimate or the one you receive seems unreasonable, state when you would like to have someone contact you, even if it is only to give you a progress report.

Stay polite and professional in your spoken or written word.

Even if you feel that you are not being given the same courtesy, stay focused on your objective to seek a resolution. There will be another avenue to address the way you perceived you were treated when making your complaint.

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If you choose to make a phone call, depending on the nature of your complaint, whether there are any timeline issues, and how well you believed the call went, you may wish to **follow-up with a letter, confirming your conversation**. This is why it is important to get the name of the person you spoke to. See *Fairness Toolkit: Writing So You Will Be Heard*

Follow-up if you don't receive a reply or update by the date that was given to you or that you requested. Again, do it calmly and politely, and inquire as to why you did not receive a reply and when you could expect one. A little bit of empathy for the complaint-recipient (who may not be the decision maker) can go a long way in cultivating cooperation.

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Focus on what is within your control and don't waste your energy, emotions and well-being on what is not. Remember that a resolution of your complaint does not necessarily mean getting what you want. Whether we like it or not, we can only do what we can, to the best of our ability and only about things which are in our control.

Considering that we make complaints because we feel we have been wronged in some way and we seek some reparation, it makes a lot of sense to complain well. Consider some things that will help you keep focused:

- Rarely do you ever have 100% of the picture to make an iron-clad judgment about a problem. Stay open to new information that may change your view on the issue.
- Don't assume mal-intent just because you have been adversely affected. People are not always aware of how something has affected others and are willing to help once they become aware. Don't assume the worst; give them the benefit of the doubt. It may not make your problems go away, but it will help in dealing with it.
- Complaint-recipients are people just like you. Sometimes people just don't know what to do when faced with a complaint. Don't jump to quick conclusions if you don't get through on the first try. Think of it as a multi-level process depending on the nature of the problem.
- Some problems or complaints take longer to address. You may have ideas about how long it should take, but making assumptions without fully understanding the complaint-recipient's workload, priorities and the processes they have to follow will only lead to frustration.