

# HANDBOOK FOR STUDENTS GRADE APPEALS STUDENT GRIEVANCES

*Prepared by*

*The Dispute Resolution Board and Student Affairs & Enrollment Management*

## INTRODUCTION

If you are concerned about a grade you received, or have a concern about any member of the university who you think violated, misapplied or wrongly followed a written policy or procedure, this handbook will help you navigate the process for addressing your concerns. Formal complaints for grade appeals or student grievances are heard by the SSU Dispute Resolution Board. This handbook describes the informal process that must be followed before a formal complaint is filed.



## GRADE APPEALS

- If you think the final grade given for a class is incorrect, the first thing to do is to talk to your instructor. You can use email, however, going to meet during their office hours may be more useful to you. This step is mandatory, even if you file a formal complaint.
- If there is some reason that you cannot approach your instructor in person or by email, contact Laurel Holmstrom, 664-2801, holmstrl@sonoma.edu in the Senate office, ST1027.
- Once you've talked to your instructor, if the issue cannot be resolved, then ask yourself the following questions to see if you have grounds for filing a grade appeal:

### →Have I checked the course syllabus for grading policies, and other rules?

The syllabus will normally need to be submitted with a formal complaint. Be sure you are clear about what the instructor's expectations were for the class as described in the syllabus.

### →Is there evidence that the grade was given capriciously?

Capricious means "given to sudden and unaccountable changes of mood or behavior; changing according to no discernible rules; unpredictable."

Examples: The instructor singles you out in a way different from other students so that it affects only your grade; course rules are applied differently to different students and that affects your grade, etc.

It is not capricious if a change or behavior affects the entire class in the same way.

### → Is there evidence that the grade was given with prejudice?

Prejudice is a “preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or actual experience.”

Complaints of prejudice can become more complicated. If the prejudice was a form of discrimination based on your race, color, religion, national origin, sex (including sexual harassment and sexual assault), sexual orientation, marital status, pregnancy, age, disability, medical condition, or covered veteran status, contact Joyce Suzuki by phone at 664-4470 or email [joyce.suzuki@sonoma.edu](mailto:joyce.suzuki@sonoma.edu)

If a finding of discrimination is found in your circumstance, you can then file a formal complaint for a grade change with the Board. Contact Laurel Holmstrom at 664-2801.

If the prejudice is based on an unprotected category, such as Greek status or being an athlete, consider that the burden of proof is on you to demonstrate through evidence that the prejudice affected your grade.

### → Is there evidence that the grade was a clerical error?

Example: Your instructor tells you in an email that your grade is a B+ and on PeopleSoft you see a B- for that course.

### How to proceed:

- These reasons are the only reasons you can use to file grade appeal. Remember, that according to the Grade Appeal Policy ([http://www.sonoma.edu/UAffairs/policies/grade\\_appeal.htm](http://www.sonoma.edu/UAffairs/policies/grade_appeal.htm)), the grade the instructor has given is assumed to be correct, so the **burden of proof is on you to demonstrate one of the above conditions** that resulted in an unexpected grade.
- If you decide that you have the evidence needed to file a formal grade appeal, go to the Dispute Resolution Board website. (<https://www.sonoma.edu/Senate/committees/drb/drb.html>). Here you will find everything you need to know to file a formal grade appeal.
- **There are three steps you must follow BEFORE filing a formal grade appeal.** Download the cover page for grade appeals and read it over. Fill out the top section. As you move through the steps, keep a record of what you’ve done in each step to document the informal process for use in your formal grade appeal narrative.

- **STEP ONE:** Meet with the instructor of the course you are appealing. Discuss your grade and attempt to understand the instructor's reason for the grade. Take the grade appeal cover sheet to this meeting. If you and your instructor cannot come to an agreement, have the faculty member sign your form. By signing the form, the faculty member is signifying that a resolution could not be found for your concern. After the meeting, email the instructor what you understood about how the meeting went and ask for their confirmation. This email exchange can be part of your documentation.
  
- **STEP TWO:** Your next step is to talk to the Department Chair of the department of the instructor named in the appeal. Go to the Department office or go online (<http://www.sonoma.edu/university/academics.shtml>) to find out who the Department Chair is and how to make an appointment. When you meet with the Department Chair, explain your evidence for your grade appeal and ask if the Department Chair is able to help resolve the dispute informally. This is another **necessary step** in the process of filing a formal grade appeal and may even resolve the issue. If the Chair cannot help you, ask that person to sign the cover sheet too. After the meeting, email the Department Chair what you understood about how the meeting went and ask for their confirmation. This email exchange can be part of your documentation. *This step is unnecessary, if the faculty member who gave you the grade you are appealing is the Department Chair.*
  
- **STEP THREE:** The last step of the informal process is to talk to the Dean of the School for the course in question. There are five academic Schools. Use the website above to figure out which School your course is in and who the Dean of that School is. For example, an English class is in the School of Arts and Humanities; a Math class is in the School of Science and Technology. Make an appointment with the Dean through her/his assistant. Present your evidence to the Dean and discuss the reasons why your concern was unable to be resolved by the instructor or the Department Chair. If the Dean cannot resolve the concern, ask that person to sign your cover sheet too. After the meeting, email the Dean what you understood about how the meeting went and ask for their confirmation. This email exchange can be part of your documentation.
  
- Now you are ready to prepare and file a formal grade appeal. At this point, contact Laurel Holmstrom, [holmstrl@sonoma.edu](mailto:holmstrl@sonoma.edu), 664-2801 in the Senate office in Stevenson Hall 1027 for assistance filing a formal appeal. In preparation for filing formally, please read the materials on the Dispute Resolution Board website, specifically:
  - ✓ Advice for filing a grade appeal
  - ✓ Helpful information for students writing an appeal to the Board
  - ✓ The Formal Dispute Resolution Procedures



## STUDENT GRIEVANCES

- Student grievances can be filed regarding an action that is in violation of written campus policies or procedures, or constitutes arbitrary, capricious, or unequal application of written campus policies or procedures. Written campus policies and procedures can be found at: <http://www.sonoma.edu/UAffairs/policies/>; in the SSU Catalog under Policies and Procedures (<http://www.sonoma.edu/catalog/>); in Department Handbooks, particularly for Graduate Programs, and in area such as Residential Life.
- If you are upset and believe a campus policy or procedure has been violated, etc. contact the Vice President for Student Affairs & Enrollment Management office for assistance in completing whatever informal process is indicated by the policy violated. The Vice President for Student Affairs & Enrollment Management office is in Salazar Hall, 1080.
- Typically, a legitimate student grievance will follow a pattern similar to the grade appeal process of talking to people informally before filing a formal grievance. Once you have completed the informal process and have not reached a resolution, contact Laurel Holmstrom, 664-2801, [holmstrl@sonoma.edu](mailto:holmstrl@sonoma.edu), in the Academic Senate office in Stevenson Hall 1027 to file a formal student grievance.
- In preparation for filing formally, please read the materials on the Dispute Resolution Board website, specifically:
  - ✓ Advice for filing a student grievance
  - ✓ Helpful information for students writing an appeal to the Board
  - ✓ The Formal Dispute Resolution Procedures

Remember, in a grievance, you must propose a remedy or remedies for the Dispute Resolution Board to consider. Keep in mind that the Board may decide on a different remedy or remedies as it deliberates the case.

All the information you need for formal complaints can be found at:

<https://www.sonoma.edu/senate/committees/drb/drb.html>