Academic Problems and Appeals

Note: What follows is only general advice. There are many other sources of both advice and information, some of which are listed in this guide.

What is an academic appeal?

An academic appeal is the appeal of an academic decision. There are many kinds of academic decisions. Some are made by individual faculty members (e.g., a grade on a piece of work), some by students (the decision to take a given course or program), and some by deans (the decision to permit a student to do a special exam). Many academic decisions are the consequence of rules, such as the rules governing progression (for example, average requirements) in a program.

Before launching an appeal, you need to know:

- whether there is an established appeal procedure
- the deadline for initiating an appeal
- the reasons behind the decision
- who has the power to overturn or modify the decision.

It is easy to feel overwhelmed by academic rules and bureaucratic procedures. Begin by rereading your course outline and reviewing the relevant section(s) of the Academic Policies [www.uwo.ca/univsec/ academic_policies/index.html](http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/academic_policies/index.html). Talk to the decision maker, and listen closely to the explanation for the decision. Remember, it is the job of professors, chairpersons and deans to make decisions in accordance with rules, policies and practice, and also to be consistent in how they apply the rules. As a student you have access to the rules and policies, but very limited access to the practice. If a decision maker has said "no" to dozens of requests like yours, saying "no" to your request may be the fairest decision.

Before you decide to appeal, consider what the appeal will involve, in terms of time and effort. Will it be worth it to you even if it is unsuccessful? Will the result become available in time to do some good? Are there risks involved which you feel you cannot afford to take? You may find it helpful to think about how you will feel if you do or don’t appeal: will you be sorry six months from now?

When should you appeal?

You should think of appealing only when you believe you have a good reason for thinking that an academic decision should be different in your case. What counts as a good reason will depend on the kind of academic decision you are appealing. Ask yourself these questions:

- Is there information about you or your circumstances that the decision maker didn’t know and which might have made the decision different?

- Did the decision maker make a mistake about a rule, policy or some other thing which might make the decision invalid?
Do you yourself know that the decision is not consistent with other decisions made in cases like yours?

Were you misled or misinformed through no fault of your own so that you inadvertently did the wrong thing? (NB: this does not include missing a deadline you should have known about!)

If you cannot answer "yes" to one of the questions above or to a similar question, you probably do not have a good reason to appeal. But it is still important to try to understand the decision. You can always ask the decision maker to explain it; or check policies in the Handbook or other relevant document; or discuss the situation with the ombudsperson or an academic counsellor. There may well be another way to achieve your goal.

The benefit of the doubt

Many students assume that, in appeal situations, they should be given the benefit of the doubt. Others assume that it is hopeless to appeal unless they can prove, beyond a reasonable doubt, that a particular decision about them is unfair. Both these assumptions are mistaken.

The onus is usually on the student making the appeal to make the case.¹ Academic appeals are decided on "balance of probabilities," which means that an unbiased decision maker who has heard all sides of the story and examined the evidence should be able to say: "The fair decision in this case is X, more likely than not."

Two particular points deserve mention. First, grade appeals of academic work of which there is no tangible record, such as an oral presentation, a performance, an internship, placement or practicum, normally do not result in a change of grade. If the decision maker is persuaded that there is some doubt about the accuracy or fairness of the grade in such work, the only remedy available may be to have the student repeat the work. While a student may feel this is burdensome and unfair, and be frustrated because the judgment of a performance seems particularly subjective, there is normally no other solution. Second, most professional programs have responsibilities that go beyond the student and the University: to the public served by the profession and to the profession itself. If a student in a professional program is judged to be below the minimum standard in the program, the only remedy may be for the student to repeat work until the standard is attained to the satisfaction of the program.

Common misconceptions

1. Getting Help: Many students feel asking for help shows weakness. They believe that when they explain that they did not seek help for their problems, they will be perceived as noble or admirable. These are the kind of things students say when they believe this:

¹ When a student is accused of cheating or plagiarism, the onus is on the accuser to make the case.
"In my family, we always try to keep problems to ourselves."
"I thought I could handle it."
"I'm not the kind of person who goes to counsellors."
"I didn’t think my personal problems were anybody else’s business."

We all value independence, but independence is not the same as not asking for help when you need it. The truly independent and determined person gets help when necessary in order to ensure that they achieve their goals. Think of "help" as reaching for the right tool for the job - not as showing weakness. Decision makers, including deans and tribunals like the Senate Review Board Academic, are much more sympathetic to appeals from students who have used all the help available.

2. Giving Up: Not being the kind of person who gives up can be a good thing under some circumstances, but it is not admirable or sensible when you are failing a course; in a program of study for which you are unsuited; or in any struggle which is costing you more (in time, effort, nerves or money) than you can afford to pay. Instead of thinking of dropping that problem course as "giving up," consider that you are "cutting your losses," "rethinking your goals," or "containing the damage." Only you can protect your academic record from failure.

3. Responsibility: People sometimes confuse responsibility with blame. The University expects every student to take responsibility for ensuring the accuracy of his or her academic record, and for registering for the right courses to meet degree requirements. The University also expects students to know about deadlines and to keep authorities informed about whatever might interfere with their academic obligations. The University sees itself as a partner in your education: not as a parent, and not as an adversary. Students who have difficulty grasping the distinction between responsibility and blame say things like:

"How come I'm being punished now for something I couldn't do anything about!"
"It's not my fault!"
"How was I supposed to know?"

4. Complaining: Complaining is not viewed well in our culture, and nobody wants to be seen as a "complainer and whiner." At the same time, we don't want anyone to take advantage of us. So when and how should we complain? And for what purpose?

If you feel you are not being dealt with fairly or receiving the service you have a right to expect, perhaps you can get fairer treatment if you complain constructively. Making your concerns known to those with the power to remedy the situation may trigger a process of change that will benefit others besides yourself.

A constructive complaint is one that focuses on how to fix a problem, rather than on blaming someone. It seeks change for the future instead of an apology for the past. Complaining constructively is easier if you do not feel that what went wrong was personal.

In considering appeals based on extenuating circumstances, decision makers such as chairs, deans and the Senate Review Board Academic are more sympathetic when the student has taken some effective steps to deal with the problem situation. The first effective step may be
getting past your own reluctance to complain. Remember this the next time you hear
yourself saying things like:

"I don’t like to rock the boat."
"I believe in live and let live."
"I just wish someone would do something about it."
"I’ve never been a complainer and I’m not going to start now."

Resources

Names, phone numbers and office numbers of deans and academic counsellors are listed on
the Faculty web sites. They are also available in the University Directory.

Policies and Procedures -  http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/policies_procedures/index.html This
area of the Secretariat’s web site includes policies governing almost everything you can think
of on campus, from flying flags to running for political office.

Academic Policies - www.uwo.ca/univsec/academic_policies/index.html These policies have
been referenced numerous times in this document. They cover everything from appealing a
grade to access to and retention of exams and other work.

Academic Calendars, Western Student Guide and Other Publications - see the Registrar’s
website, www.westerncalendar.uwo.ca/

Schools, departments and graduate programs put out their own guides, pamphlets or
booklets and have their own websites.

Affiliated University Colleges have their own websites:
Brescia University College: www.brescia.uwo.ca/
Huron University College: www.huronuc.on.ca/
King’s University College: www.kings.uwo.ca/

Many appeal forms are now available in PDF format on websites.

The Senate Review Board Application for Hearing is available on the Secretariat’s web
site www.uwo.ca/univsec/

Office of the Ombudsperson guides: all guides on the website are also available in hard
copy.
Decision-making levels for academic appeals

Senate Review Board Academic
SRBA is the final substantive appeal of decisions made by Deans about individual students. Not all decisions of Deans can be appealed to SRBA. Many decision made by Deans are final decisions.

Faculty, School or Affiliated University College
At the level of the Faculty, decisions about individual student appeals are the responsibility of the Dean of the Faculty. The Dean may delegate some decision making to Associate or Assistant Deans, Counsellors, Committees or Departments for advice.

Department
Within a Department, the Chair is responsible for decisions concerning individual student appeals. In practise, this responsibility is often divided between an Undergraduate Chair and a Graduate Chair. There may even be Course Chairs or Course Coordinators. When in doubt about who to appeal to, ask an Academic Counsellor.

Instructor
The Instructor is the person to whom you go first if you have a problem within or about a course. Instructors belong to Departments or Discipline Areas, which in turn fit into Faculties, Schools or Affiliated University Colleges. Instructors have different ranks, for example, TA (teaching assistant), lecturer, assistant professor, associate professor, professor.

Senate
Senate doesn't make decisions about individual students. It is a big committee chaired by the Vice-Chancellor (the President of the University). It is responsible for the academic policies, procedures and regulations with which the rules or policies of Instructors, Departments and Faculties must be consistent.

NOTE: This guide was produced by the Office of the Ombudsperson www.uwo.ca/ombuds. It is not an official university document and is not intended to replace university policy. Original text written by Frances Bauer. Revised January 2013.