Troubleshooting V. Behind the Scenes

My student wants me to re-grade a paper or exam

Believe it or not, Graduate Student Teachers are fallible and there are times when students are unfairly graded. There will be times when allocated points on an exam are not tallied properly. If you make a mistake, simply apologize and assure the students that the new grade will be recorded promptly.

Re-grading written work is another matter. Different instructors have different rules regarding their willingness to re-evaluate students’ work. Many people feel that grading decisions are final as, in fairness, re-reading one student’s paper would demand the impossible (and unnecessary) task of re-reading them all. Whatever you and the professor decide, state your policy clearly to the students and stick to it. Keep in mind that changing one grade as an exception opens the flood gates for a hoard of students to ask you to do the same for them.

If you (or the professor) decide you are willing to accept student protests about grades, there are a few rules by which you may want to abide. One valuable approach is to have students submit a written request for a reevaluation of their work, outlining where they felt credit was unjustly not given. Typically, students either lack the motivation to do a critical evaluation of their own work, or realize in a second reading (done when they are less emotional) that the paper was not as good as they remembered and/or that your comments suggesting improvement make sense. Another good approach is to tell students they are not allowed to approach you with grading concerns for at least two days. Not only will it prevent them from swarming your desk immediately after class, but it will also give them some time to think about the comments provided to them. In all cases, it is helpful to remind the students that reevaluation is not a promise of a grade increase, as it goes both ways; if you think work merits additional credit you will give it, but you will take it away if, after further consideration, you feel you graded too highly. Each method tends to result in fewer re-grade requests.

Although it will seem like more work, it is a good idea for you to take responsibility for re-grading your own exams, as you are more likely to be consistent in your grading policies than another person would be.

Unfortunately, stories of students being taught that they should always request more points on an exam are common. They tend to be told that asking for more points is “a numbers game”; that is, some percentage of the graduate student teachers probably will give in automatically to avoid having to deal with the student’s request. Don’t be that person.

A student has asked me to review a paper someone else has graded because he/she is unhappy

As there is no standard procedure, it is best to clarify course policy regarding re-reading and re-grading of work with the professor and other graduate student teachers before the semester begins. If students are unhappy
about their grades, students should first be urged to submit their questions and concerns about their papers in writing to the instructor who graded them. If they are still unsatisfied after discussing it with the graduate student teacher, they should be referred to the professor. If the professor was the original grader, it is better to discuss the situation with the professor and reach some consensus on the proper procedure before going ahead and re-grading anything. Of course, there may be times when having multiple people review the work is appropriate. If a student merely wants a second opinion for its educational value, you can read the work and offer constructive comments. However, as most requests to “review” are either implicitly or explicitly requests to re-grade, it is typically not done.

**I think someone is cheating or has plagiarized a paper**

If you think someone is cheating on an exam in class, immediately “hover” over that student as you proctor the exam. Make a note of all the details you can – what materials you think are being used to cheat, who is involved, etc. Feel free to move that person, or the person from whom the student is copying, to another seat. If you move the latter, you can quietly explain to the student that you suspected someone was cheating and you wanted to protect him/her. Another option is to make a general, anonymous announcement that you have suspected an incidence of cheating, that you will walk around the room, and if anyone is found guilty, you will assign an immediate “F.” You will be amazed at the degree to which abstract fear can affect students during an exam.

If you suspect a student has plagiarized another’s work, or submitted an entire paper that was written by someone else, make a copy of the paper and be sure to note exactly the parts of the paper that are questionable. To give the student the benefit of the doubt, call the student into your office hours for a meeting, suggesting that you would like to discuss his or her progress in the course. When you sit down with the student, describe your reaction to the work. Perhaps you found his or her use of language striking and uncharacteristic, or perhaps the student’s work did not speak directly to the topic of the assignment. Let the student if you have found an online resource (such as Wikipedia) with similar or even the same language or argument. Ask the student to give you a synopsis of the paper. This will help you judge the degree to which the student understands and can articulate the argument set forth in the work, versus “lifting” the ideas off of someone else. If you think two students have submitted nearly identical work, you may want to meet with both – perhaps separately first and then together – to determine if the copying was “accidental” or collaborative and known or unknown. Consult the [NYU Statement of Academic Integrity and Disciplinary Procedures](#).

Without question, you will want to report any instances of suspected cheating or plagiarism to your professor. Be as clear as you can about your suspicions and the evidence you have supporting them. Once you talk to the professor, he or she has primary responsibility for determining what steps will be taken. Any official statements of “fact” that cheating or plagiarism has occurred
must be made by the faculty member. The professor may decide to handle the entire situation him or herself. However, as you may be involved as the sole witness, you may also need to discuss it with the student.

A student was suspected of cheating or plagiarism and wants to know what will happen next

The steps to be taken in any case of suspected cheating or plagiarism are ultimately determined by the professor of the particular course. The professor may choose to handle the situation him or herself, or may decide that further action involving other University members is warranted. Detailed procedures are provided in the NYU Statement of Academic Integrity and Disciplinary Procedures.

I disagree with the professor’s grading criteria

While you have a right to your own opinion, you must ultimately assign grades according to the standards set by the professor. Do your best to understand the principles underlying those standards. Ask enough questions about the rationale so that you can adequately explain the grading scheme to students. Tempting as it may be, it does not help to let your students know that you disagree with the professor; it merely undermines his or her relationship with the students and creates a bad dynamic between you and the instructor.

The Graduate Student Teachers are not getting along

Unfortunately, this can be a reality of any teaching experience. Even in the most nurturing and collaborative departments, there are times when you might feel competition or an atmosphere of negativity, either among graduate student teachers in a particular course or among graduate students within an entire department. If the interactions seem to move beyond a healthy competitiveness, consider with whom you could discuss the situation calmly, honestly, and diplomatically. A good first step is to approach either the professor of the course and/or your own academic advisor. If you believe that neither would be helpful, consider speaking with your Director of Graduate Studies or your Program Director. Regardless of your choice, in all cases it is essential that you try to be as diplomatic and tactful as possible. For many reasons, it is in your best interest to maintain professional and positive working relations with faculty and other graduate students alike.

An unprepared student came to office hours / My students want to be “spoon fed”

Students sometimes need a little help to get them going. Often students know more than they realize and simply need some directed, process-oriented questions to get them on the right track. However, if a truly unprepared student
comes to office hours, you should feel free to tell the student that you are happy to meet when he or she has some specific questions to ask of you. If possible, let the student sit right outside of your office and formulate his or her ideas. If necessary, ask the student to return when you can be of more use to him or her. Do not allow yourself to feel pressured into doing the work for students. Remember your job is to coach, not to take over.

**My students want infinite time to be dedicated to them**

While it is important to be polite, you should set clear limits with your students. Although extenuating circumstances may make you want to have an extra hour for students at sometime during the semester (e.g., you want to review paper topics individually with each student before they begin writing), for the most part, you do not have to see students beyond the limits of your office hours. Be specific about the time you have to work with students and then stick to it firmly. You can also refer students to other graduate student teachers that have office hours at other times, and suggest that students can always talk to the professor directly about problems they are having as well.

You should also be aware that a student’s consistent desire to request time with you may be a symptom of other concerns, such as the student’s emotional attachment to you or the student’s personal problems. If you feel that is a possibility, talk to your professor about the situation.

**A student wants to take an Incomplete**

Explain to the student that an Incomplete will only be granted for a clearly extenuating circumstance, with supporting documentation, and that the work is expected to be made up by the end of the following semester. Then, tell the student that he or she needs to speak directly with the professor about the situation. Graduate student teachers are not authorized to grant Incompletes to students under any circumstances.

**My students want to badmouth the professor**

Always remember your role in the triad of student-graduate student teacher-professor. It is of no use to anyone to allow students to be disrespectful in the classroom. While you should listen to the students’ concerns and give them room to voice their opinions, it is important to emphasize the need to be respectful of everyone’s stance – including the professor’s. Often, students want to badmouth the professor when they are confused about the material, or when they are not doing as well in the class as they would like. Rather than ignoring the situation, try to use their venting of feelings as an opportunity to solicit feedback about the course and the kinds of changes they would like made to it, if they could.

**A poor student wants a letter of recommendation from me**
Although this may sound harsh, you should not hesitate to decline writing a letter of recommendation for a student about whom you could not write something positive. You can gently explain to the student that you do not feel comfortable writing a recommendation, or that a recommendation from you would not necessarily be the strongest statement of praise, and that he or she might want to look elsewhere for a letter that would be more helpful. It might feel a bit awkward, but you are not doing yourself or your student any good writing a false letter.

**A student wants to major in a field in which he or she is failing a class**

It is important to be honest with students about their abilities; you may do more harm than good if you do not describe the difficulties a student may have if he or she pursues a particular avenue of study. At the same time, it is essential that you convey your feedback regarding a student’s performance tactfully. If you think a student is ill-prepared for advanced work in an area, be clear in conveying what his or her standing in the course is and describe the disadvantage it could put him or her in with respect to the level of complexity that would emerge in further study. You can suggest seeking advisement from College Advising Center (998.8130) (link). You can also suggest additional tutoring in the field.

**A student missed the exam**

Speak to the professor about the students’ options. You will probably have to offer one make-up for any and all students who missed an exam. Beyond that, students who cannot come to a make-up can be referred to the professor for special arrangements.