

## Responding to complaints

Complaints may be received in person, by telephone, by email or by letter. This document gives some principles that should be borne in mind when responding to complaints, however they were made.

1. Check whether your college or department has a policy for dealing with complaints – it might specify who should respond and/or a response time.
2. Check any departmental policy or standards relevant to the complaint (such as service level agreements) – sometimes complaints are not based on reasonable expectations.
3. It is **essential** to respond to all complaints with sympathy and understanding, regardless of the appropriateness of the complaint or the decision about remedial action. Remember that the person who has made the complaint is another human being who deserves respect. Focus on issues and solutions, not personalities or emotions.
4. Always demonstrate a willingness to understand a customer's feelings and situation, whether or not you actually agree with their stand-point. This will go a long way towards soothing anger and disappointment, even if you are unable to provide a response which fully meets their expectations or their initial demands.
  - a. Use phrases like, "I understand that must be very upsetting for you," rather than "Yes, I agree, you've been badly treated." Remember that you can understand without necessarily agreeing with the point
  - b. Try to make contact by phone, even if you are sending a written response – this is often more reliable and effective when trying to diffuse conflict and rebuild trust.
5. Before sending your response
  - a. check again that it reflects relevant policy (see 1 and 2)
  - b. read it back to yourself and ask "What would I think if I received this? How would I feel?" If your answers are less than positive you should re-write the letter
6. Finally, remember that positive things can arise from complaints:
  - a. when a complaint is dealt with properly, it often makes the person who complained a much stronger ally than they were before the incident that gave rise to the complaint
  - b. a complaint often identifies a weakness in procedure and thus offers an opportunity to improve

See overleaf for a simple template for a response to a complaint. It should be used as a guide and altered to suit the situation.

**Template response (remember to alter it to suit the situation)**

Name and address

Date

Reference

Dear.....

I am writing with reference to (situation or complaint) of (date).

First of all, I apologise for the inconvenience/distress/problems created by our error/failure.

We take great care to ensure that important matters such as this are properly managed/processed/implemented, although due to (give reason – but be careful as to how much detail you provide - generally you need only give a broad outline of the reason), so on this occasion an acceptable standard has clearly not been met/we have clearly not succeeded in meeting your expectations.

In light of this, we have decided to/that (solution or offer). We hope this will be acceptable to you.

I will call you soon to check that this meets with your approval/Please contact me should you have any further cause for concern.

Yours sincerely,

*With acknowledgements to [www.businessballs.com](http://www.businessballs.com)*