

13 Problems with your studies

English-speaking countries promote independent learning so you'll be expected to be proactive when you have a problem with anything on your course. You can't simply wait for things to get better. You also can't expect your professor/lecturer or Teaching Assistant (TA) to point out that you need to improve, or that you're in danger of failing. It's your job to know when your grade is in trouble, and do something about it before it's too late. If you're not proactive, you may end up getting a low grade, or failing the class/course. Here are some common situations that students might find themselves in together with some advice on how to deal with these situations.

Common problems

"I can't understand my classes/lectures."

There are usually two main reasons that you might not understand your classes/lectures. First of all, as an international student, you might still not have the level of vocabulary you need to fully understand classes/lectures or instructions given by your professors/lecturers. In this case, you should work hard to improve your academic vocabulary. One resource that may help you to do this is the Academic Word List, developed by Dr. Averil Coxhead of the Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. This list is available free online.

Another reason you may struggle to understand your classes/lectures is if the professor/lecturer has a strong accent. Some professors/lecturers are non-native speakers and they may have an English accent that you have never heard before.

There are also native-speaker professors/lecturers who have strong accents that you might find difficult to understand, for example, if you're used to standard British English, and suddenly you are studying in the Deep South of the United States. Also, there are some professors/lecturers who don't always speak that clearly.

You must try to learn to understand the professor/lecturer, just as you had to learn to understand classmates in your ESL or EFL classes. It may help to record classes/lectures or parts of classes/lectures on your phone and listen to them again after class, to get used to the new accent. In either case, you need to talk to your professor/lecturer to (politely) let them know you're struggling but working on understanding them. Then ask if you can occasionally ask them about anything you didn't fully understand at the end of a class/lecture and if you have their permission to record them. Lastly, remember that you've also got the textbook and set readings to back you up. You should always prepare for classes/lectures by reading about the subject in advance so that you know what vocabulary is going to be used.

“I've got too much homework or too much to read.”

Your professor/lecturer gives you as much homework and reading as he or she thinks you need. There is nothing you can do about it. What you definitely shouldn't do is complain to him or her about it. It will give your professors/lecturers a bad impression of you as a student. Many professors/lecturers at colleges/universities in the US, UK, and Canada are now listed on the rating website www.ratemyprofessor.com. On this site, you'll see comments from students about their professors'/lecturers' skills as a teacher. Although students can have very different views from each other, this can still be a helpful guide on details such as who is a hard taskmaster and who is too difficult to understand.

taskmaster (noun): If you refer to someone as a hard taskmaster, you mean that they expect the people they supervise to work very hard.

“The reading assignments are too difficult.”

In this situation, it's likely that this is a result of not knowing enough or the right vocabulary. You must realize that there will be times when you'll have to read and reread your set readings two or three times. Don't give up. This will get easier the more you practice. It can help to read the chapter summary or abstract before you read the whole chapter or article, so that you get an idea of what the main ideas in the reading will be. This is especially helpful if you need to translate the English into your own language, because abstracts and chapter summaries are usually short.

“I can't write this much!”

If you're having a hard time writing essays and research papers, there's usually a writing center or lab on campus. There will be staff there to help you learn how to organize, develop, edit, and proofread your written work. Again, with time, this will get easier and you'll become faster. Native-speaker students can also find academic writing challenging so the services offered at the writing center cater for native speakers too. In the UK, the academic writing support offered to home and international students varies, so have a look at the university website beforehand.

“My professor/lecturer doesn't like me and I don't like him/her.”

You will sometimes have problems with professors/lecturers that you don't like, or that you think don't like you. In these situations, you need to keep things professional. Always remember that the professor/lecturer is a professional and he or she will treat you in a professional way. You also need to remember that your professor/lecturer is still in the position of power in that he or she is the one who will make the final decision on your final grade. You don't want to upset or

offend the professor/lecturer unnecessarily, and you need to focus on your work. However, if you think that your professor/lecturer is truly treating you in an inappropriate way, you should speak to your advisor/personal tutor.

Speak to your advisor/personal tutor if a member of academic staff is:

- making racist, sexist, or other highly offensive comments;
- touching you or speaking to you in a sexual way that makes you very uncomfortable This is called sexual harassment. There are strict laws against sexual harassment in the West. You must not accept this kind of behavior from your professors/lecturers, TAs, or even classmates. Luckily, there will be help for you if this rare problem should happen;
- coming to class under the influence of alcohol or drugs (this is rare).

“My professor/lecturer made a mistake in grading my paper.”

Sometimes professors/lecturers and TAs make mistakes when grading and marking work. In this case, politely point out that you think there was a mistake.

Do say:

“I’m sorry, but I think that there has been a mistake on my grade percentage.”

Don’t say:

“You made a mistake on my grade percentage.”

When blaming someone for something in English, especially someone in a position of authority, it’s useful to use the passive. That way you’re not directing the blame at your professor/lecturer.

“I’m failing the class.”

This is, of course, one of the worst things that can go wrong. First of all, you need to speak to your professor/lecturer as soon as you get a few low grades or marks on major

assignments. You must speak to him or her sooner rather than later. This way, your professor/lecturer can explain what you need to do to turn the situation around and improve your grade. This also shows your professor/lecturer that you care and want to do something to improve. Students who aren't proactive send a very negative message. Professors/lecturers might think that their grades just aren't that important to them. These students usually panic at the last moment, right before the final exam, when it's usually too late to do anything to pass the class or get a higher grade or mark. Speak to your professor/lecturer as early as possible.

“I’m having problems with one of my classmates.”

Most of the students you meet are going to be great. There might be a few, however, who make life difficult for their classmates. If you're having a problem with a classmate or people in your study group, you've got to deal with it right away. Try talking to the person first. If you're not comfortable doing that, or it didn't go well, go to your professor/lecturer. He or she can usually help to solve any issue that is happening between you. If not, he or she can at least make sure that you don't have to work together.

Academic support services and centers

Your college or university will usually have a place for students to go to get help, advice, and tutoring services if they're struggling with their courses. Go to visit this center at the beginning of the semester/term to see what services there are on offer. Then, if you do run into trouble, you know exactly who to talk to there and how they'll be able to help you.

These places also often have helpful advice and support for students with learning disabilities.

Some of the services on offer might be free, such as advice and tutoring programs. For example some colleges/universities offer programs where students tutor lower-level

students, or where international students are paired with another student who can help them with their set readings, or where staff members help students with math skills. The tutoring services that are specifically for students for whom English is a second language can be very useful if you have been trying to understand a cultural difference.

You can also hire private tutors if you have the money and time, for example, some centers offer specialized tutoring in Calculus which you would be expected to pay for. Your TAs can also spend time explaining things to you in discussion groups.