

Guidelines to students on providing constructive feedback

The feedback provided by students is a crucial part of the learning process here at Dalhousie. The Student Ratings of Instruction are used for various reasons within the university, including

1. Promotion and Tenure – the results of the evaluations are placed in an instructors file and used when it is time to apply for promotions and other personnel decisions.
2. Teaching Awards – there are several internal and external teaching awards both within and outside the faculty/department. In most cases, the awards process requires that instructors provide evidence of teaching accomplishments to be included with their application.
3. Program and Course development – The results of the SRI are used in the development of various courses and programs throughout the university.

Please read the following information on how to provide constructive feedback for Student Ratings of Instruction.

Keep in Mind before Completing Course Evaluations...

Anonymity: Your course evaluations are completely anonymous, both the numerical results and written comments. Your **responses are not linked to your name or ID number**.

Confidentiality: The complete results are confidential to the instructor and unit head (Chair, Director, or Dean). (Note, some aggregate results are disseminated to the Dalhousie community about overall response rates and mean scores for the institution and each Faculty, but the responses are always anonymous.)

The instructor cannot see the results until the final grades for the course have been submitted and approved.

Considerations when Answering Course Evaluation Questions

Questions are asked on a 5 point scale.

1 = "Strongly Disagree," 2 = "Moderately Disagree," 3 = "Neither Disagree nor Agree," 4 = "Agree," and 5= "Strongly Agree."

You should choose 3 = "Neither Disagree nor Agree" only when you feel that your response is between the two endpoints.

You can choose which questions to answer; written comments are welcomed and encouraged.

While course and teaching quality are highly interdependent, the questions have been designed to explicitly address the course **OR** the instructor. Please direct your feedback appropriately.

Departmental questions are only asked once when there are multiple instructors.

If you have questions about SRI process, please visit www.dal.ca/sri for more information or email the SRI Administrator at dalsri@dal.ca.

Considerations when Writing Comments

BE RESPECTFUL: Derogatory comments or criticisms based on race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, etc. are not appropriate in course evaluations.

Constructive feedback from students is a valuable resource for improving teaching. The feedback should be specific, focused, and respectful; and address aspects of the course and teaching that are positive as well as those you feel need improvement.

Keep the following in mind when writing your comments on course evaluations:

Thinking of the following categories when completing the questionnaires may help you organize your thoughts:

| Overall (Course or Instructor) | Teaching Strategies | Outside of Classroom Communications |
|--------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Clarity & Difficulty | Assignments | Personal Traits |
| Organization & Structure | Interest or Motivation | Physical Environment |

Be specific and provide examples when commenting on the course or the instructor. Speak based on your own experiences, not on behalf of your classmates.

Focus on observable behaviours of the instructor or on specific aspects of the course. Describe the situation you are commenting on.

For example:

| Instead of... | This is more helpful: |
|---|--|
| "We were really able to listen in class." This leaves the reader wondering what the instructor did to allow this. | "It was great that the PowerPoint presentations were put online, that way you can follow in class and not have to worry about frantically taking down notes and worry about not getting everything." |

Avoid negative personal or emotional comments; instead, describe actual incidents.

For example:

| Instead of... | This is more helpful: |
|---|--|
| "The instructor is a sarcastic loudmouth." This is worded more as a personal attack, rather than constructive feedback. | "The professor is sarcastic at times during lectures, which makes learning difficult and confusing." |

Describe how the instructor's behaviour or elements of the course affect you. Describing how a situation makes you feel offers the reader a different perspective and allows the instructor to gain a better understanding of the situation.

| Instead of... | This is more helpful: |
|--|---|
| "The exam was unfair." This leaves the reader wondering about what aspect of the exam is unfair. | "I found the questions on the final exam fair, but I found the length of the exam unfair. I knew all the material but really struggled to finish the exam in time. I felt very stressed by the time pressure and may not have performed my best." |

Offer alternative solutions or suggestions to address your critiques of the instructor or the course, which helps the instructor when planning the course for the following year.

Example:

"The instructor could make better use of the LMS to complement what happens in the classroom. In particular, it would help students' engagement with the course if the instructor posted class materials, videos, and readings in the order of how they introduced that material in class."

To help instructors improve the course and their teaching, **please provide both positive and negative comments** in a constructive manner. Formative comments offer specific reasons for judgment. These are very helpful as they inform the instructor of what you suggest be kept or changed. While comments regarding what needs to change may come more readily, it is just as helpful to remind the instructor about what went well.

Consider area of responsibility. While the instructor clearly has influence and control over many of the factors that influence the quality of a course and the teaching, in many instances that influence is shared with students, other faculty and/or administrators. By thinking about who is in a position to change problem areas—or maintain successful practices—it can help you frame your comments usefully. When possible, make suggestions from the student perspective as to actions that the instructor or administrators could take to help improve the situation.

For example:

| Instead of... | This is more helpful: |
|---|--|
| "The projector in the rooms sucks." This is outside the instructor's control. | "The fact that the projector in the room wasn't showing the image properly had a significant impact on the students, and unfairly impacted the instructor's ability to teach." |

Comments about the personal traits (for example, accent or apparent unfriendliness) of the instructor often elicit strong emotions and should be made with sensitivity. Focus your comments on behaviours that can be improved. Also, describe the impact on your learning—this will help the instructor improve the learning experience.

For example:

| Instead of... | This is more helpful: |
|---|---|
| "I couldn't understand the professor." This does not tell the instructor why understanding was difficult. | "The professor had an accent that was difficult to understand, and it would be helpful if they slowed down when they spoke because speaking quickly made the accent even more difficult." |

If your course had **Teaching Assistants, you may be given the opportunity to provide feedback** to them. Please take the time to provide constructive comments about strengths and areas for improvement. Feedback early in their teaching careers will be instrumental in helping them become great teachers.

References

- Ory, J. & Braskamp, L. (1981). Faculty perceptions of the quality of three types of evaluative information. *Research in Higher Education*, 15(3), p. 271-282.
Adapted from: Svinicki, M.D. (2001). Encouraging your students to give feedback. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 87, 17-24.
Donovan, J., Mader, C., & Shinsky, J. (2010). Constructive student feedback: Online vs. traditional course evaluations. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, 9(3), p. 283-296.

This document has been adapted from: <http://www.mcgill.ca/mercury/students/feedback#ref2>