Writing an Appeal Statement

Introduction

If you are considering mounting an Academic Appeal, you should consult with a EUSA Academic Adviser, who will be happy to discuss your case with you, to help you understand the process and make your appeal as persuasive as possible. Not everyone who considers mounting an Academic Appeal will get to the stage of filling in an appeal form, but sometimes the act of writing an appeal statement is a good way of establishing for your own benefit whether or not you have a case worth submitting.

This guide should be read in conjunction with EUSA’s Academic Appeals Factsheet, Flowchart and Sample Appeal Letter, as well as the information on Appeals on the University’s Academic Services Website.

Grounds

When writing an appeal statement, you should keep at the centre of your thoughts the grounds on which you are appealing. In most cases, these are restricted to two specific grounds:

a) substantial information directly relevant to the quality of performance in the examination which for good reason was not available to the examiners when their decision was taken;

b) alleged irregular procedure or improper conduct of an examination. For this purpose “conduct of an examination” includes conduct of a meeting of the Board of Examiners.

c) evidence of prejudice or lack of due diligence in the examination on the part of any examiners.

For Postgraduate Research students only, there is a third ground:

You must satisfy one or more of these grounds in order for your appeal to be considered, and from the University’s perspective, it is only information which relates to these grounds which is relevant to an appeal. For this reason, whenever you think of something you’d like to add to your appeal letter, ask yourself ‘does this relate to one of the appeal grounds?’ If the answer is ‘no’, then it may be that the extra information serves only to distract attention away from the basis of your appeal.
This doesn’t mean that your letter has to be short: if you have a lot of relevant details to get across, don’t be afraid to do this, but make sure you don’t stray off-topic (see below on structuring more complex statements).

a) ‘Substantial Information’

Many appeals are mounted with ground a) as their basis. Usually only events or situations which would qualify for consideration as Special Circumstances will be regarded as ‘substantial information’. As a general rule, these circumstances would include:

- serious illness or injury;
- the death of a member of your immediate family;
- other unforeseen events occurring on or close to exam dates or coursework deadlines.

But not:

- minor illness, such as a common cold;
- occasional low mood;
- death of a pet;
- a relative’s wedding.

b) ‘Irregular Procedure/ Improper Conduct’

If you are appealing on the grounds of ‘irregular procedure or improper conduct’, you will usually need to refer to a specific University regulation or item from your programme handbook which you are suggesting has not been followed.

Examples of possible irregular procedure might include:

- marks/average percentages calculated incorrectly;
- incorrect information given by a member of staff or in a programme handbook which you feel has affected your performance;
- demonstrably inadequate supervision of a dissertation;
- any aspect of an assessment which directly contravenes the University’s Assessment Regulations.

Evidence

Providing evidence is usually essential to mounting a persuasive appeal. This can be anything which will support your case, which might include:

- Medical certificates/ Letter from your GP or specialist
- Supporting letter from a counsellor
- Copies of emails/letters/minutes of meetings between you and academic staff
- Excerpts from a course/programme handbook
Supporting letters from anyone who can make a relevant contribution

If your case is based on an illness suffered by yourself, or someone close to you, you will need to provide medical evidence for this. It will be helpful if you can prove that you saw a medical professional around the time of the affected assessment. Likewise, if you have suffered from difficult personal circumstances, you will also need to provide evidence of this. In some cases, it may seem insensitive of the University to expect evidence of something deeply personal or traumatic, but this is unfortunately necessary to guard against (very rare) cases where people are less than entirely truthful. Remember that supporting evidence can also be useful in clearly documenting the ‘good reason’ for coming forward with your circumstances after assessment if you are making a ground (a) appeal.

If you are in any doubt about the kind of supporting evidence you should submit, you can contact the Academic Advice team at academic.advice@eusa.ed.ac.uk or 0131 650 2656.

Your **Course/Programme Handbook** and the **University’s Regulations** can be very useful forms of evidence, but they must be used carefully. If you want to prove a discrepancy between what you were led to expect and what happened subsequently, then reference to your handbook or to regulations may support this. However, if you (for example) claim not to have been informed about something, make sure it isn’t in your handbook— if the information is in the handbook and you simply hadn’t read it, this may undermine your appeal.

**Constructing a Good Statement**

1. **Where to start**

   If your appeal is being submitted late (after more than 2 weeks if you are a continuing undergraduate student, or more than 6 weeks if you are a final year student or postgraduate), it will need to be looked at by a Late Appeals sub-committee to decide whether or not it will be considered. In this case, the first thing you should do is explain exactly why your appeal is late- supporting evidence for this will be vital to give your appeal the best chance of being considered.

   For those who are attempting to appeal on the basis of ground a), it is important to bear in mind each aspect of the ground: it may not be enough to provide ‘substantial information directly relevant to the quality of performance’ if there is not ‘**good reason**’ why this is being supplied at such a late stage. Students are expected to submit this information in a Special Circumstances form prior to their exams, so you will need to explain why you did not do so— the fact that you were unaware of this expectation is not generally considered a valid excuse.
2. Organising the detail

If you have a lot of relevant detail to get across, it is not a problem for your appeal statement to be long, but it is important that you write clearly and arrange the information in a way which makes it easy to read; for example by using sub-headings.

If there are several aspects to your appeal, it will usually be better to separate these by theme, even if they overlap chronologically: telling a rich story doesn’t usually translate into a good appeal statement, especially if it includes irrelevant detail. For example, if you were suffering from recurring illness and from financial hardship over the same period of time, it would be better to treat these two issues separately, otherwise you’re likely to end up with a rambling narrative:

‘Then I was sick for two weeks, and I wasn’t able to pay the rent so I got kicked out of my flat, and my hamster, whose name is Brutus, died because he found it too cold outside, and then I dropped his cage on my foot and broke my toe’.

3. Create a timeline

If an aspect of your appeal is quite complicated, it can often be very helpful for the reader if you present a ‘timeline’ to summarise when key events took place. This will help you avoid going through too much detailed chronological description and will allow you to focus the main sections of your statement on arguing your case in relation to the appeal grounds.

For example:

- July 21st: Meeting with my supervisor to discuss final work needed on dissertation
- August 3rd: Became ill with suspected bronchitis
- August 5th: Consulted doctor and received diagnosis and medication (letter attached)
- August 10th: Emailed supervisor to request extension (no reply)
- August 3rd – 17th: Able to work only very minimally on dissertation
- August 20th: Dissertation hand-in date (dissertation submitted)

Your timeline should help you to express what happened and when it happened, but you should also remember to explain how it affected you.
It is not enough to say ‘I had bronchitis, so I did badly in my dissertation’. Instead give a full explanation of the way in which your illness prevented you from working as you would normally have done. For example:

‘I was advised against leaving my flat between 3rd and 17th August, so I was unable to go to the library to do secondary reading for my dissertation. This meant that I was able to refer to only a limited range of sources.’

4. Refer to attachments

If you are attaching supporting materials with your appeal, it is very useful to refer directly to these in your statement where each specific piece of evidence is relevant. You can do this by numbering your attachments (1, 2, 3/A, B, C).

For example:

“I have read the Board of Examiners minutes (Attachment A) and I do not believe from what is written there that my case was dealt with according to university assessment regulations (Attachment B).”

If you include a large number of attachments, it will be helpful to provide a summary of what is included in each at the end of your appeal statement.

5. Keep your cool

In an appeal statement, it is important to remain formal and businesslike. This is especially relevant where you are alleging improper conduct or irregular procedure (a Ground B appeal). Although it is inevitable that many Ground B appeals will involve criticism of the University or its staff, this should be done in a measured and reasonable style, avoiding the use of hostile or combative language, such as:

“My school has acted in a disgusting manner…”
‘Dr X is not fit to be teaching undergraduate students, let alone Masters students…’

Using hostile language will distract attention away from the core material of your appeal. It is worth bearing in mind that key staff within your School will see your appeal submission and be given the chance to comment on it. It is best for your appeal case if they are able to concentrate upon exactly what you are alleging, so that they can respond as effectively as possible.

Equally, attempting to plead with the Committee or flatter them will seem like a mark of desperation. Sometimes it is tempting to beg for reconsideration on the basis of previous good performance in your studies, but bear in mind that this type of argument cannot be considered during the appeal process (which looks only at whether or not the assessment at issue can be considered sound). Stick to the facts and this will prove much more persuasive.
6. Get it checked

When you have finished a draft of your appeal statement, send it to an Academic Adviser (academic.advice@eusa.ed.ac.uk), who will be able to provide you with constructive comments. You can also ask in your letter for copies of correspondence to be sent to your Academic Adviser, so that we are kept up to date with the progress of your case. This makes it easier for us to discuss the situation with you if you get back in contact with us at different stages of the process.

The Academic Advice team will be happy to help you at any stage of the process, even if you have not contacted us before. We can provide information and advice through face-to-face meetings, email or telephone, and can attend appeal hearings with you in a supporting role, or on your behalf if you are out of the country or otherwise unable to attend.