

An Argument for Accepting Late Work

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With over a decade in training and management of college teachers, I saw late policies ranging from “not one second late, period” to “any time before the last day of class, no penalties.” It is easy to do a Google search and see a plethora of comments at both ends of the spectrum, and most folks are pretty convinced their individual strategies work. What I have noticed in my administration experience, and some 19 years in the classroom, is that balance leads to a better experience for both the students and faculty.

With that in mind, I proffer several principles for accepting late work and address two concerns of the “no late work ever” folks. Additionally, I share an epiphany one of my faculty members had after changing her policy.

A Standard Policy

First, I am not suggesting accepting late work of *any* kind in *any* subject. There are many assignments that build on earlier work, and there would be no sense in accepting an outline after the actual paper is submitted. I am addressing assignments where each one is a stand-alone effort with a specific learning goal that does not impact later papers or essays. I am also not suggesting zero penalties. My standard policy is 10 percent deduction for tardiness; this seems enough to reinforce the need to be on time but not enough to discourage completing the work.

For any written assignment the primary goal should be learning. I teach philosophy, critical thinking, and humanities, and my papers are designed to reinforce the learning of tricky concepts, philosophies, or historical developments. If I deny a student the opportunity to do a paper, I am denying them the opportunity to learn. This seems like a paramount goal. I do realize that different subject matters might require different types of learning, but if there is learning to be had, it would be counterproductive to deny the student the opportunity to research and contemplate the themes involved in each assignment.

Relationship Building

A second reason for accepting late work is relationship building. As a teacher, should there not be some compassion for students in need? While some excuses are bogus, most are real, and if you take into consideration that many students are working (maybe full-time), taking several classes, dealing with families, and perhaps handling other obligations, these students need a bit of compassion and empathy. Knowing that the instructor is looking out for the student's best interest can go far in terms of building long-lasting relationships. One can hardly expect time conscientious students if the student is delivering a baby, helping a significant other in the process, or after losing a loved one.

I have lost both of my parents and know I would not have been able to do my best work shortly after each event. Additionally, many students I teach are active military, and when they get the call to deploy or go on an unexpected mission at sea or in the field, expecting timelessness is impossible and perhaps unpatriotic.

Best for Last

Lastly, I find I get some of my best papers when they are submitted late. I have no empirical evidence to back up this claim, but when the pressure is alleviated, the penalty is seen as fair, and when they are allowed to complete the research, thinking, and writing, the work is often better. I let students know I would rather have a late paper they are proud of, than an on-time and incomplete paper.

Some of the main reasons offered by the "no late work ever" folks imply matters of fairness and teaching responsibility. I will concede the notion of fairness, but that is why there should be a late penalty in effect for assignments where the student did not have an adequate reason or seek an extension before the due date. In comparison, I do not recall ever hearing of a person who got fired the first time they had a flat tire on their way to work.

A Successful Penalty

At one time, one of my best HR faculty held fast to the draconian "no late work ever" thinking for the few years she was teaching for me. We talked about how this impacted students' GPAs, but she held fast to the idea she was "teaching responsibility." I convinced

her to take one class and modify it to have a 10 percent penalty for work that was up to one week late. Even before the class was over, she commented on how much happier the students seemed and how much better they seemed to master the material. She learned that if a student could not devote enough time to create a good paper under her old system, they simply didn't try and no learning took place. As this continued, she also saw that some of the late work was stellar.

While there may be some reasons or subjects where the "no late work ever" thinking might be better, in many subjects, in order to maximize learning, foster better relationships with students, and allow struggling students the chance to do research and write stellar papers, accepting late assignments is the way to go.

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