

Compassionate Communication in Practice: “Before and After” Examples

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Compassionate communication is an approach adopted by institutions to improve their interactions with students. It involves clear, empathetic, and supportive communication and is aligned with the values of kindness, respect, timeliness, and inclusivity.

This resource has been developed through contributions made by staff and students from across Scotland’s colleges, universities and sector bodies. These examples of wording are based on the experiences of individuals currently working and studying in the sector. The aim of the resource is to highlight practical examples of language that practitioners have found to be useful when communicating compassionately and effectively with students.

The suggested wording is intended as a guide rather than a set of prescribed phrases. We encourage those using the resource to adapt these examples to suit their own contexts, communication styles, and circumstances.

Before	After	Commentary
We need an explanation.	We'd like to understand what's been happening.	Demanding an explanation may suggest that a judgment has already been made and that the student has done wrong. An emphasis on wanting to understand what has happened, without having made prior assumptions, allows the student to share their perspective and to generate a mutual understanding of the situation.
You are failing this course.	Right now, your current progress means you're at risk of not passing this course. We'd like to meet with you to explore what's getting in the way and what support might help.	It's important to still be clear and unambiguous with a student if they are in a situation where they are at risk of not passing a course. However, it's important to convey this information as early as possible and at a stage where support can be offered and, ideally, this trajectory avoided.

Before	After	Commentary
You are late.	The essay is late.	Describe the situation, not the person. Person-focused language can feel accusatory, and this can be unhelpful in terms of finding a constructive way forward. You don't yet know why the essay is late, so focus on the problem that needs addressing and in doing so with an open mind, rather than making the student themselves sound like the problem.
Voluntary suspension.	Voluntary leave of absence/pause of studies,	The word 'suspension' can have negative connotations. Students may be taking a pause from their studies for many reasons and in many cases it is a positive choice for the student which will allow them to undertake their learner journey at a pace and format that suits their circumstances at the time. The 'after' text uses wording which sounds less punitive and doesn't imply the student has done something wrong.

Before	After	Commentary
[To prospective applicants] You do not meet our entry requirements.	Your current/predicted grades do not meet our entry requirements. You may wish to discuss the options available to you with your guidance teacher or our admissions team [email address].	The 'before' text closes the door on any further conversation. The prospective student is left with no further avenues. Signposting to further support and guidance gives the individual the chance to discuss their situation in more detail and, hopefully, to find an option for future study which suits them.
I have been appointed to investigate allegations of misconduct which have been made against you.	I am writing to let you know that a concern has been raised which we need to look into under the University's Code of Student Conduct. I understand that you may be feeling worried about this process, so I want to explain clearly what is happening and what you can expect. Please be assured that no decisions have been made about the incident at this stage.	'Concern', 'report' or 'issue' are all potentially more neutral words to use instead of 'allegation'. It is also important to acknowledge that being contacted about a case of misconduct can be a stressful and upsetting situation – institutions have a duty of care to all parties in these cases. It is also important to emphasise that no decisions have been made at this stage, so that the student feels that they have a right of reply and a chance to share their own information about the situation.

Before	After	Commentary
Your complaint is not upheld.	Based on the findings of our investigation, your complaint has not been upheld. I understand that you may be feeling disappointed. If you feel you need support, you may find the following resources useful: [insert resources].	It can be emotionally impactful when a complaint is not upheld. It is important that students are signposted onto resources and or/next steps if any remain.
Your submission has been reported for plagiarism.	The lack of references and quotation marks in this submission can be interpreted as poor academic practice. I would like to discuss the work in person to clarify your contributions. This is not an assumption that you have done anything deliberately wrong. Sometimes these matters arise from misunderstandings about academic practice, and this is your opportunity to explain what happened in your own words.	When a student may have omitted references or used sources inappropriately through poor paraphrasing, it is important to give them the opportunity to discuss the matter further. By emphasising that poor referencing practice isn't always deliberate, this gives the student the opportunity to be honest about their writing and to have an open conversation, particularly if this is the first time it has happened.

Before	After	Commentary
This is not meeting the standard.	Thank you for your work on this. I've noticed a few areas that need adjustment. Let's look at them together and discuss how we can strengthen it.	The 'after' example offers a collaborative approach to improving the piece of work, which takes some of the pressure off the student. Thanking the student for their work also acknowledges the effort they have already put into it, which may be a significant amount of time and energy even if the output isn't currently at the level it needs to be.
Your application has been rejected.	Your application has been unsuccessful on this occasion.	'Rejected' is an overly negative word. 'Unsuccessful on this occasion' suggests that this decision be different if the student was to apply again following feedback. If appropriate, the communication could go on to provide more detailed feedback and steps the student could take to be successful in the future, as well as signpost to any alternative opportunities to which the student may be eligible.

Before	After	Commentary
[At the beginning of an email] As an international student, you must comply with UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) requirements...	We hope you are settling into life in [place] and that your semester/term is going well. As an international student, you are required to comply with UK Visas and Immigration (UKVI) requirements...	Some processes involve the use of mandatory language set by an external body, such as a regulatory body or Government. In some cases, this language may feel particularly formal and potentially feel intimidating or cold to students. By adding some introductory text which is more personal, this sets a friendlier tone and may act to put the student more at ease.
You didn't attend an exam.	Our records show that you did not attend the exam on x date. I'd like to arrange a chat with you to discuss what happened and to talk through next steps, including any support we can offer you.	If a student has missed submitting an assignment or attending an exam, it is important to discover why this is the case and to check that the student is safe and well. If the student doesn't respond to the email, alternative communication methods may be appropriate, such as a phone call or text.

Before	After	Commentary
There might still be options [when you know there aren't]...	We have now explored all the options available to us. We understand this may be disappointing... [offer of support].	Sometimes, in trying to be kind we can inadvertently cause false hope. Students need to know when an issue has reached the final stage and there are no further options available. It is important to be clear about this, while also acknowledging disappointment and signposting to support.
Consequences.	Outcomes.	The use of the word 'consequences' can carry negative connotations. 'Outcomes' allows for a range of options (some of which may be positive). Use the word 'outcomes' instead of 'consequences' and then go on to be specific about what the specific range of outcomes are dependent on what is available to the students.
We understand this outcome will be upsetting for you.	We recognise this may not be the outcome you were hoping for.	Don't make assumptions about how someone is feeling but do acknowledge that the news they are receiving may not be what they wanted.

Before	After	Commentary
Discipline process.	Conduct process.	The word 'discipline' is associated with negative connotations of punishment for wrongdoing. 'Conduct process' is still clear, while providing more neutral language.
We're ever so sorry to hear that this has happened, it's really awful and you must be so upset. I'm so sorry.	I'm sorry that this has happened.	It is fine (and, in many cases, important) to apologise or commiserate when a situation has not gone well. Using the word 'sorry' is not an admission of liability and can demonstrate empathy for the student at a time when they most need to hear it. However, it is not helpful to be overly verbose with these commiserations, as it can remove focus from the issue and, in some cases, centre the emotional impact on yourself rather than the student.

Before	After	Commentary
It's a shame...	Unfortunately...	Phrases such as 'it's a shame' can be unclear for some students, particularly those with English as a Second or Other Language. Avoid colloquialisms or phrases which could be interpreted negatively by an individual who is less familiar with the English language.