

Preparing to Read Student Comments in Student Experience of Teaching (SET) Surveys

Tip #1: Identify What You Want to Learn from the Data

Two purposes generally loom large in interpreting student comments: (1) From the student perspective, how effective was the teaching in this course? (2) From the student perspective, how effective was the learning in this course? However, you may have additional, more defined sub-questions based on your own professional development and interests, including past challenges or specific efforts you have made to change or improve your teaching. Identifying these purposes before reading student comments can help you get the most use out of these comments. Then looking for patterns of response rather than individual “outlier” comments will give you the most help in determining how effectively teaching and learning in your course actually occurred.

Tip #2: Prepare Yourself for the Emotional Dimension of Reading SETs

Reading SETs can be an emotional process—it is natural to feel hurt by critique, especially when you have put your best effort into developing and delivering a course. However, you can develop strategies to manage your emotions so that you can read your SETs relatively dispassionately and remain open to noting areas for improvement. One technique, advocated by Cedar Reiner of the University of Virginia in “[How I Read Student Evaluations](#),” involves reading SETs once to allow for initial responses to run their course, and then revisiting them a week later. As much as possible, try to remain focused on the question, “What can these comments tell me about teaching and learning in my course, and what specific strategies can I adopt to improve this aspect in my next course?”

Tip #3: Realize That Not All Comments Will Be Helpful

In reading SETs, we must not only remain open to useful critical comments, but must also learn how to identify comments that are not helpful. Comments may be off-topic, flippant, biased, highly personal, or mean-spirited. If a comment cannot tell you anything about teaching and learning in your course in general, it may not warrant your consideration. In response to these situations, the Stanford Center for Teaching and Learning offers the following advice: “Try to keep your perspective when reading negative comments. Under the protection of anonymity, students may write harshly negative comments that range from sarcastic to vicious. These comments may be motivated by pressures and concerns unrelated to your course. If you receive a number of negative comments among your evaluations, you may want to discuss them with a trusted colleague” (Stanford CTL, 2018)