



Anti-Israel Assignments

FROM PROFESSORS

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LAW

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A professor gives an assignment with the following prompt: “Write 600 words commenting on the ongoing destruction and genocide by Israel in Palestine.” Is this permissible under the First Amendment? Do you, as a student, have any rights here?

There is no black-and-white test, but there are some guidelines to help determine what you can do. In short, a professor’s right to **academic freedom** must be balanced with a student’s right to a **hostile-free learning environment**.

Academic Freedom

Under the First Amendment, a professor has the right to raise controversial topics or take objectionable positions related to the course material. For instance, a global studies professor may bring up Middle Eastern politics or ask provocative questions about Israel that some students find offensive.

However, a professor’s First Amendment rights in the classroom are **not absolute**. In general, a professor can raise controversial topics if they are related to the coursework or the professor’s subject matter expertise. For example, a math professor should not raise Middle East politics in class.



Hostile-Free Environment

Students have the right to learn in a hostile-free environment. This means they have a right to freely express opposition to a professor's opinions without fear of **harassment, grade retaliation, or other retribution.**

A professor may **not** give assignments that make some students feel coerced or compelled to agree with the professor's position, given the unequal power dynamic in the classroom. This is especially the case at a public university.

For instance, if a student can debate with the professor's position openly and comfortably, there is a hostile-free environment. But, if a student is afraid to disagree or speak up because they are worried their grade will be negatively impacted, they may be in a hostile learning environment. If a student feels compelled to parrot a professor's anti-Zionist views to complete the assignment and avoid an academic consequence, that is not lawful.

Similarly, a professor can pose a biased prompt in class (assuming it is related to the course itself). However, assignments that attack an integral component of a student's identity pose a serious risk of compromising the right to learn in a hostile-free environment. So, if a Jewish student is compelled to agree with an assertion designed to delegitimize their Jewish identity, that attack would be problematic.

What should you do if this happens to you?

First, document the assignment or writing prompt – take a screenshot, etc. If you are allowed to record in the classroom and the professor is sharing the assignment verbally, record it.

Second, determine whether the professor's assignment forces you into only one side of a controversial debate. Are you able to propose an alternative? Do you feel free to speak out without receiving a bad grade, or do you feel forced to go along with it? **Remember that there is a difference between being uncomfortable in an academic setting and being forced to take a position that is against your protected identity to avoid academic retribution.**

Has the professor or any teaching assistants implied in some way that there would be negative consequences for someone who disagrees with the position? **If so, document that clearly.**

Third, request a meeting with a dean to report your concern. This will also begin a trail of administrative accountability. After the meeting, follow up by email with a summary of the contents of your meeting. You may consider dropping the class if it is early in the semester. You may also want to file a bias report through your school if the professor's actions are particularly egregious.



For help, reach out to
campus@standwithus.com
or fill out an intake form at
[www.standwithus.com/
report-an-antisemitic-incident](http://www.standwithus.com/report-an-antisemitic-incident).