

Setting Policies for Civility in Your Syllabus

Setting policies addressing course conduct, including them in your syllabus, and reviewing the policies with your students—as part of your online orientation—are key to establishing expectations for civility. Be sure to check with your institution about any required language you may need to include.

When developing your expectations, take time to recall situations that have disrupted your online course and write expectations designed to proactively address those situations. Areas to address include, but are not limited to, academic honesty, appropriate participation in live sessions, and showing respect for other students and diverse viewpoints in discussion forums.

Include a statement regarding what your students can expect from you. An example follows:

- What you can expect from me: I will be present in the course and maintain a civil learning environment for all. I will respect you and your opinions.

Examples of Behavior Expectations for Online Courses

- You are expected to do your own work. Cheating, plagiarism, and any other form of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated and will result in (include consequences).
- Meaningful and constructive dialogue is encouraged in this course and requires a willingness to listen, a tolerance for different points of view, and mutual respect from all participants.
- Attendance at live sessions is a necessary part of this course; therefore, (include specific requirements and any impact on grades).

Sample Syllabus Language

General Statement: This syllabus contains the policies and expectations that have been established for this course. These policies and expectations are intended to create a productive learning atmosphere for all students. Please bring any concerns you may have to my attention.

To create and preserve a course atmosphere that optimizes teaching and learning, all students share the responsibility of creating a positive learning environment. Students are expected to conduct themselves in a manner that does not disrupt teaching or learning, and they are expected to follow these standards:

Course discussions should be civilized and respectful to everyone and relevant to the topic we are discussing. Discussion forums are meant to allow for a variety of viewpoints. This can only happen if we respect one another and our differences.

I will begin online live sessions promptly at the designated time and students are expected to be on time to these sessions. In addition, class will end at the designated time. Please refrain from engaging in other tasks during the online session as it is disruptive to me and to others around you.

Sample Netiquette Discussion Forum Guidelines

Netiquette guidelines address communication behaviors that are particular to an online environment. Below are some general netiquette guidelines for online discussion boards.

- **Be inclusive.** It is important to be intentional about making sure we “see” each other in an online community. You can do this by making sure that everyone has at least one response.
 - **Tip:** If you are unsure who to respond to, try looking for posts that have not yet received a reply. Also, be sure to reply back to people who post questions or comments to you.
- **Be on time.** Your contributions to our discussions are important, but our learning community will not benefit from them unless you post on time.
 - **Tip:** Set calendar reminders to make sure you contribute on time.
- **Disagree respectfully.** Disagreement and different ideas are essential parts of learning, problem-solving, and creativity. However, in order for different ideas to be heard and shared, it is important to maintain a respectful stance even through vehement disagreement; otherwise communication may break down.
 - **Tip:** You might start the conversation with a question to clarify or get more information before you explain your different perspective. For example, “Nathan, can you tell me more about what you meant when you said that recycling programs are a poor use of public resources?”
 - **Tip:** Refrain from using judgmental evaluations of what someone posted, and instead present your own perspective supported by factual information. For example, instead of “Jamal, your analysis makes no sense,” you can say, “Jamal, I interpreted the results of the study differently. As I see it, there was no statistically significant difference in the children’s test scores, which implies that the new program is not working.”
- **Be concise.** Lengthy paragraphs are difficult for readers to digest. Keep your paragraphs short and your writing concise.
 - **Tip:** Consider using bullet points to help highlight your main points or headings if your post needs to be lengthy.
- **Stay on topic.** Off-topic comments can derail our conversation. You can post off-topic comments in our open discussion forum or one of the other communication modes we are using in the course.
- **NO YELLING.** When you write in uppercase letters in online communication, it is usually interpreted as yelling.
- **Add some emotion. :-)** Sometimes it helps communicate the tone of your message when you add an emoticon. However, only do so as necessary for it can also be annoying to readers if you use too many (which is probably the opposite of your intention).
- **Use humor carefully.** Sarcasm in particular does not translate well in an online environment. It is best to avoid the potential pitfalls of misunderstood messages.

Model and Reinforce Civil Behaviors and Professional Expectations

Just like in a classroom setting, instructor behaviors can have a big impact on the online course environment (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016; Nilson & Goodson, 2018; Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Stavredes, 2011). The online environment can leave a lot of room for conjecture (e.g., you do not reply to an email because you are busy; the student interprets the lack of response as not interested or caring). Therefore, it is important to be conscientious about the various ways you communicate and model civility. The online environment is also a good place to connect expectations with the professional behaviors students will most likely be expected to exhibit in the work environment.

As you consider ways to model and reinforce civil behaviors and professional expectations, first take the time to complete a self-reflection. The list of questions below is a good place to start. Then consider the opportunities you have to model and reinforce these behaviors for your students.

Questions for Self-Reflection

- How do you encourage students to reach out to you with their questions or concerns?
- How do you communicate and what tone do you use to ensure that students know you are truly interested in their learning and in the course topics?
- How do you ensure that students do not misinterpret the timing of your responses?
- How and how often do you reply to questions posted in online discussion forums?
- How do you respond to negative and/or disruptive behaviors?
- How closely do your expectations mirror workplace expectations?
- How often do you remind students of the connection between the expectations in your course and professional behaviors?
 - Do you explain the importance of checking for tone in an email?
 - Do you provide feedback on how a student communicates with you electronically?
 - Do you set expectations for participation in online classes and explicitly share how and why these expectations are required in the workplace as well?
 - Do you hold students to those professional expectations in online meetings and classes?
 - Do you provide feedback to students on how well they are meeting the professional expectations?

Tips for Instructor Behaviors That Positively Impact Online Civility

- **Be approachable.** Frequently remind and encourage students to take advantage of your virtual office hours. The more they hear you say it, the more likely they will be to take advantage of your availability. The more opportunity you have to connect with your students one-on-one, the better you will be able to understand and address difficult behaviors they may exhibit (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016).
- **Check for tone.** Always reread messages and discussion board posts to try to ensure that you are striking the right tone. Remember that humor can be difficult to communicate in a text-based format and can be easily misinterpreted. On the flip side, a serious tone can come off as more serious than intended. Always strive for an encouraging tone, even when dealing with difficult situations.
- **Commit to a response time for questions and emails.** Let students know how quickly you will respond to their questions and emails (within 24 to 48 hours is best) and then be sure to live up to your commitment. Failure to address student concerns in a timely fashion can send an unintended message that you are not interested in or supportive of them.
- **Connect expectations to professional behaviors.** When possible, remind students of the connection between the civil behaviors expected in your course and the behaviors they will be expected to display at work.

Sources

Boettcher, J. V., & Conrad, R.-M. (2016). *The online teaching survival guide: Simple and practical pedagogical tips* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Nilson, L. B., & Goodson, L. A. (2018). *Online teaching at its best: Merging instructional design with teaching and learning research*. John Wiley & Sons.

Palloff, R. M., & Pratt, K. (2007). *Building online learning communities: Effective strategies for the virtual classroom* (2nd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.

Stavredes, T. (2011). *Effective online teaching: Foundations and strategies for student success*. Jossey-Bass.

Work With Students to Create Norms for Online Civility

Engaging students in a discussion about online communication norms and guidelines at the very beginning of a course helps to foster community and create a productive learning environment (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016; Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Stavredes, 2011).

Although instructors should include general expectations for online communication in the syllabus by providing a set of netiquette guidelines, you may also have students collaboratively create community norms and guidelines that are more personal and specific to your course's online learning community. Involving students in these discussions raises their awareness and helps them to more effectively adhere to guidelines regarding online civility. It is also a great way to start building community at the very beginning of the course. Below are two activities for engaging students in these important discussions.

Activity 1: Collaboratively Creating Guidelines

1. In a text or video announcement, explain the need for community norms and guidelines in an online environment and the importance of creating those norms together as a group. For example, you might write:

Every single one of us brings a wealth of knowledge and ideas from the perspective of our own lived experiences. Although some of our experiences and backgrounds might be similar in some ways, I can guarantee that there are just as many differences. And that is a good thing! It means we have a lot to learn from one another. In fact, the success of this course depends on every individual contributing their ideas and perspectives to our online discussions. To this end, we first need to set some ground rules or norms that will foster the kind of online space where engaging, respectful, and thought-provoking discussions can occur. Please proceed to the online discussion on Creating Community Norms and post your contribution.
2. Next, create a discussion forum that asks students to respond to the following prompts (and consider giving some participation points):
 - a. What kinds of behaviors make people feel like their ideas and contributions are valued and respected in an online discussion?
 - b. What kinds of behaviors make people feel like their ideas and contributions are not valued and respected in an online discussion?
3. After all students have posted, have students propose one community norm/guideline to a group workspace with the following instructions:
 - a. Read through your peers' comments about respectful and disrespectful online communication.
 - b. Based on what have been identified as respectful and disrespectful online discussion behaviors, propose one guideline or norm that would contribute to an environment in which we can have meaningful and respectful online discussions.
 - c. Post your guideline to our Community Guidelines Wiki. You can post a new guideline or suggest a revision/addition to a guideline you already see posted. You are free to make comments on any posting, but please do not delete anything that someone else has posted.

4. After all the students have given their input, clean up the document, ensuring the capture of all the ideas without unnecessary repetition. Using the announcement tool or a new discussion board, post the proposed guidelines with a brief note. For example:

Thank you for the thoughtful discussion on our learning community norms and guidelines for communicating with one another! This list represents what you have identified as important guidelines for our online discussions; these guidelines are our commitment to one another. So, please keep them in mind in all your discussion postings. I may occasionally provide a reminder, and you can also remind one another. In addition, please remember the netiquette guidelines in our syllabus. Abiding by these norms and guidelines will help you learn more through the high-quality discussions we will have. This is why the participation portion of your grade is high and worth 20% of the overall grade for the course.

Activity 2: Netiquette Guidelines Discussion

Another way to discuss online communication norms and expectations in an online environment is to provide a basic list of netiquette guidelines and ask students to reflect and comment on them.

For example:

1. As part of the orientation module, ask students to read the guidelines and post a response to the following questions:
 - a. How do these online netiquette guidelines contribute to a positive online learning environment?
 - b. Are there any netiquette guidelines that might present challenges to some students?
 - c. Are there any netiquette guidelines that we should consider adding or changing?

After all of your students have posted their comments, integrate any appropriate changes into the guidelines and post a finalized copy explaining any changes you have made. Let students know that by participating in this course, they are opting in to abide by these guidelines and they need to hold themselves and others accountable. For example:

Thank you for the thoughtful comments on the netiquette guidelines. Now that we have everyone's input, the netiquette guidelines I have posted, taking your comments into consideration, are our commitment to one another. So, please keep them in mind in all your discussion postings. I may occasionally provide a reminder, and you can also remind one another. Abiding by these norms and guidelines will help you learn more through the high-quality discussions we will have. This is why the participation portion of your grade is high and worth 20% of the overall grade for the course.

Sources

- Boettcher, J. V., & Conrad, R.-M. (2016). *The online teaching survival guide: Simple and practical pedagogical tips* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Nilson, L. B., & Goodson, L. A. (2018). *Online teaching at its best: Merging instructional design with teaching and learning research*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Palloff, R. M., & Pratt, K. (2007). *Building online learning communities: Effective strategies for the virtual classroom* (2nd ed.). John Wiley & Sons.
- Stavredes, T. (2011). *Effective online teaching: Foundations and strategies for student success*. Jossey-Bass.

Responding to Minor Disruptions to the Online Environment

Incivility can take various forms in an online course environment, ranging from minor to disturbing (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). Although preemptive measures such as creating community norms and including activities that build community will likely reduce incivility, instructors still need to be prepared to handle minor disruptions such as sarcastic posts, posting off-topic comments, or distracting behavior during a live session, as well as more serious challenges to the learning environment (Galbraith & Jones, 2010).

If left unaddressed, these behaviors can detract from a positive and productive learning environment. At the same time, instructor responses are most effective when they are well aligned and proportionate to the problematic behavior. It is also important to try to keep the offending student(s) engaged in the learning process. Because most of these behaviors occur in discussion forums or live sessions, your response often needs to address the full group and may or may not require a separate communication to the individual.

Basic Guidelines for Addressing Minor Disruptions

Minor disruptions include behaviors such as posting off-topic comments, writing in all caps, using sarcasm, etc. Usually this behavior is unintentional, but you should reassure students that you are paying attention and are committed to ensuring a productive learning environment. You also want to ensure that the offending student remains engaged.

- **Response to full group:** Remind the entire group of the netiquette guidelines and/or group norms discussed at the beginning of the course. Be sure to refer to the specific norm(s) that applies to the situation.
- **Response to student:** Follow up with a private email to the offending student to make sure that they got the message, but also to try to keep them from checking out. Consider the following strategies:
 - Reframe the negative behavior by thanking them for the opportunity to remind the other students of the importance of the guidelines.
 - Encourage them to remain engaged in the discussion by highlighting the things they are doing well in the course.
 - Ask if they would like to schedule an online or phone meeting to discuss further.

For example, in a response to a sarcastic post, you might write:

- **Response to full group**
 - *Hi all, I just wanted to remind everyone about our community norms and guidelines. In order to make sure our ideas are received and considered in the way we intend, it's important that we remember our community norm to avoid sarcasm in online discussions. Even if the intention may be humorous, text-based communication leaves too much room for misinterpretation. That's all from me for now. This is a great conversation so far; I look forward to reading the rest of your posts!*
- **Response to student**
 - *Hi Aden, I just wanted to reach out to you about my comments regarding your post on the discussion board. Although you likely meant no harm, as we discussed when we developed our community norms, we all have to take extra care to create a productive learning environment if we want to be successful in this course. You have contributed some fantastic ideas to our discussions, and I don't want to see that diminish. I just ask that you be a little more mindful about our communication guidelines. Please let me know if you'd like to talk about this a bit more. I'm happy to schedule a phone call or Skype meeting with you. Thanks again for your contributions to our learning community!*

Sources

Boettcher, J. V., & Conrad, R.-M. (2016). *The online teaching survival guide: Simple and practical pedagogical tips* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Galbraith, M. W., & Jones, M. S. (2010). Understanding incivility in online teaching. *Journal of Adult Education*, 39(2), 1–10.

Responding to Major Challenges to the Learning Environment

Incivility can take various forms in an online course environment, ranging from minor to disturbing (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016). Although preemptive measures such as creating community norms and including activities that build community will likely reduce incivility, instructors still need to be prepared to handle minor disruptions as well as more serious challenges to the learning environment such as aggressive emails to the instructor, offensive or belittling remarks toward another student, or offensive language or terminology used in posts (Galbraith & Jones, 2010).

If left unaddressed, these behaviors can detract from a positive and productive learning environment. At the same time, instructor responses are most effective when they are well aligned and proportionate to the problematic behavior. It is also important to try to keep the offending student(s) engaged in the learning process. Because most of these behaviors occur in discussion forums or live sessions, your response often needs to address the full group and may or may not require a separate communication to the individual.

Basic Guidelines for Addressing Major Disruptions

Major disruptions include direct attacks on what another student wrote; insults or offensive remarks toward the instructor, course assignments, another student in the class, a person outside the course, or a group of people; and offensive or politically provocative language. Instructors should immediately reach out to the offending student to discuss your concerns. It may be that the student is passionate about the issue but does not have the skills to effectively communicate their ideas. It is also important to remember how little we may know about some students, their troubles, or in some cases their mental health. The best-case scenario is that a student might just need some additional support. The worst-case scenario is that they could be a danger to themselves or others.

These behaviors also require a response to the full group and, if the disruption involved an insult or attack on another student, the instructor should follow up with that student as well.

You should first reach out to the offending student:

- Describe the incident and let them know that you are going to post a response to the full group on the discussion board to ensure that the other students do not assume that the behavior is appropriate.
- Remind them of their commitment to the community norms and guidelines. Be sure to refer to the specific community norm or guideline that was violated.
- Schedule a follow-up conversation in person or by a phone call or a virtual meeting.

Next respond to the full group:

- Depending on the degree of severity, you may want to remove the post immediately. In these cases, you should ensure that students who may have seen the offending post know that you are handling the situation. You may send an email or post a comment referring to the specific community norm, the course guidelines, and any other campus policies that might apply.
- When possible, describe the inappropriate behavior without mentioning the student's name.
- If applicable, provide additional information that may clarify any misconceptions about what the student wrote.
- When possible, use the disruption as a teachable moment for the entire class by acknowledging the issue out in the open. Name the specific problematic behavior and refer to the relevant community norms and their importance for the learning process.
- Guide the discussion back to the course content and discussion prompts.

Finally, have a follow-up conversation with the student:

- Express your concern for the student as well as for the impact of their behavior on the class.
- Ask a question to open the conversation, such as “What is your understanding of the problem we are here to discuss?”
- Provide an explanation of why the behavior was problematic and refer to the community norms that were violated.
- Ask if the student has any suggestions on how to resolve the issue. For example, they may suggest apologizing to the community as well as directly apologizing to impacted students.
- End the meeting with clear next steps and be sure to follow up with an email outlining next steps for both you and the student.
- Share the information with the student’s advisor, as well as your dean or department chair. It may be that the student is having similar issues in other courses, which can be a sign of a bigger problem.

Example of an Email and/or Script for a Phone Call

Hi Sherry,

We need to talk about what happened this week on the course discussion board. As you know, the use of racial slurs is completely prohibited in our learning community. This language is hurtful to your peers and destructive to our learning process. Just like you, everyone has the right to a respectful learning environment.

Although you have made some important contributions to our discussions, I’ve also spoken to you a few times about how your tone and use of sarcasm can sometimes be off-putting. Your use of racial slurs is an escalation of inappropriate behavior and crosses a line.

That said, I would like to work with you to remain in the course, which would include some work to repair the impact of your behavior on our learning community, such as an apology to the group and rewriting your post in a respectful and thoughtful way. Please let me know if you are willing to discuss this further.

In either case, I will be notifying your academic advisor so she can follow up with you and see if there are other support resources that might be helpful to you.

Response to Full Group

Dear Class,

I want to be clear why I removed Sherry’s post. The issue was not that she disagreed with the policy of creating “Sanctuary Cities” to stem the mass deportation of undocumented immigrants. In fact, it is really important that we examine the issue from all sides so that when we develop policy recommendations, our ideas address the complexity of the issue. My concern with Sherry’s post was that it used a term that is dehumanizing and hurtful in reference to a specific group of people.

So, I thought this would be a good time to remind everyone to abide by the community norms we all created, and agreed to, at the beginning of the course, including our agreement to avoid language that belittles, demeans, or disrespects any person or groups of people. We all agreed that respectful language was essential for having productive discussions about contentious issues.

I would like for us to continue this important discussion and dig deeper into the readings as we grapple with different social, economic, and political aspects of this issue.

Thank you

Sources

Boettcher, J. V., & Conrad, R.-M. (2016). *The online teaching survival guide: Simple and practical pedagogical tips* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Galbraith, M. W., & Jones, M. S. (2010). Understanding incivility in online teaching. *Journal of Adult Education*, 39(2), 1–10.

Coaching Students to Manage Challenging Conversations

Look for teachable moments to help students learn how to address challenges with fellow classmates. Small-group work and communication missteps in both live and asynchronous discussions may lead to tension between students. If these arise, there is an opportunity to coach students to help them gain skills to effectively address their concerns with their classmates. The skill to handle crucial conversations will also serve them well in their future.

Handling a Challenging Conversation

- **Help your students manage their emotions.** According to Kerry Patterson, the author of *Crucial Conversations* (2002), an important first step is to deal with the emotions a student is feeling by asking the following questions:
 - What emotions are you experiencing? Are you angry? Frustrated? Disappointed?
 - What story has led you to these emotions?
 - What facts do you have that support this story?
 - Can you retell this story using the evidence that you have? What information is missing?

These questions will help the student understand what, if any, assumptions they are making about the situation and will help them clarify what information they will need to know. For example, they may be feeling frustrated because a fellow group member missed an online meeting and may assume that the student just forgot about it. However, the student may have had an emergency that caused them to miss the meeting.

- **Ask questions to help them create a plan of action.** Asking questions about what the student wants to accomplish with a conversation will help them gain a better understanding of the reasons for the conflict and help uncover the goals they have for resolving it. Encourage them to think about the situation from the other student's point of view by considering what that student may expect to get out of the conversation as well.
- **Practice the conversation.** Role-playing the plan of action can build your student's confidence and help them learn how to think on their feet and respond to different scenarios that may arise.
- **Model active listening.** Using interested facial expressions and body language and rephrasing their responses will not only support your student, but also models the skill of active listening.

Coaching your students through challenging conversations can give them skills that will serve them well not only in your course, but also in future courses and careers.

Source

Patterson, K., Grenny, J., McMillan, R., & Switzler, A. (2002). *Crucial conversations: Tools for talking when stakes are high*. McGraw-Hill.