

Classroom Civility

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What is Classroom Incivility?

Instructors identify various student behaviors as annoying, rude, and disruptive. These may be classified on a scale of relative severity:

- **Annoyances, minor disruptions**—Arriving late and leaving early, talking on cell phone, reading newspaper, side conversations, packing up noisily before end of class. Together, these offenses can add up to more than just an annoyance.
- **Dominating discussion**—The student who won't let anyone else talk.
- **Aggressive challenges of teacher**—The student who takes up class time questioning your authority, expressing anger about grading, or generally undermining your ability to teach.
- **Disputes between students; demeaning comments**—When classroom discussion gets out of hand, or a student uses demeaning or stereotyping language.

Why incivility occurs

Complaints about student incivility are as old as education itself, but many faculty feel incidents are increasing. Many theories have been advanced for this perceived trend. Some cite the anonymity of large classes and large universities, which may lead to students' not viewing their professors and classmates as "real people." Others cite the different expectations of so-called millennial students. Millennials have more of a tendency to see themselves as consumers of education; at the same time, many feel under enormous pressure to succeed. This may make them more demanding than previous generations of students. And millennial students really do multi-task, so they probably see reading email during class as an efficient use of time.

Nevertheless, it is reasonable for you to expect students to behave in a civil manner towards you as well as towards their classmates. You will have to decide which behaviors you can tolerate or adapt to, and which are unacceptable in your class. Constant disruptions prevent others from receiving an education, interfere with your ability to carry out your instructional responsibilities, and create a negative work environment for you.

Encouraging classroom civility

Responding to classroom incivility starts with prevention. Here are a few general approaches to encouraging appropriate behavior.

Make expectations clear.

- Write a statement for the syllabus, framed as positively as possible, communicating the civil behavior you expect of students. Be sure to set aside some class time to go over the statement. [Click here](#) to see several sample statements of classroom behavior.
- In smaller classes, particularly those that involve a lot of discussion, you may wish to have students as a group create the “rules of engagement.” Have them brainstorm reasonable discussion and classroom behavior in groups, then get together to create a document that has wide consensus. Be sure to print it and give a copy to each student.

Do your part to create a civil climate.

- Treat students with respect. Treat them as adults. Respect their ability to learn. Avoid sarcasm, dismissing their abilities, or making assumptions about them based on their age, appearance, etc. Make it clear that you value them as individuals. You can’t expect them to respect you and your classroom, if you don’t treat them with respect.
- Establish a method for airing grievances. Set up a suggestion box or a comment space on the course web site; gather [mid-quarter feedback](#); ask for student volunteers to act as liaisons; encourage TAs to pass along comments.
- Reduce anonymity. Even in large classes, you can encourage students to get to know one another and you. Visit section meetings, or schedule time for groups of students to meet with you. Learn as many names as possible. Have students interact with neighbors. Tell them something about yourself.

Responding to specific kinds of incivility

Creating a positive classroom climate and communicating expectations will help reduce uncivil tendencies. But even with the best intentions, you will probably encounter students who just don’t get the message. This section suggests specific preventive measures for each level of incivility, and how to respond if it happens.

1. Annoyances, minor disruptions

a. Prevention---

- Publish behavior expectations in syllabus and on course web site (see above).
- In a large class, have a designated area of the classroom near the door for late/early students to sit.
- In smaller classes, you could require notice in advance for any early departure.

b. If it happens---

- Initially, refer to the problem behavior in general, rather than calling attention to specific offenders. (“It’s really hard to have a class discussion with side conversations going on.” “Please don’t pack up yet. There is still 5 minutes of class and I intend to use

that time.” “I’m going to get started on lecture now, but first I need the newspapers put away and cell phones turned off.”)

- For persistent offenders, several options: (1) Pause and wait for students to become quiet; if necessary, look at students who are talking. (2) Ask them to see you after class. (3) Walk over close to where offense is occurring. (3) Ask a question of someone sitting next to talkers/sleepers/newspaper readers, moving the discussion to that part of the room. (4) Politely, not sarcastically, ask talkers to share with entire class. (5) Directly ask the student(s) to stop the behavior (“Please put down that newspaper.”)
- If someone is persistent and pointed in rude or disruptive behavior, see section [3c](#) below.

2. Dominating discussion

These students probably don’t see themselves as “uncivil.” In fact, many are genuinely trying to help: they can’t tolerate silences in discussion, and they perceive they are ‘rescuing’ you from other students not participating. Others, of course, simply have an inflated sense of their own importance.

a. Prevention---

- Use discussion-leading techniques that encourage more people to participate (see Teaching Tips on Getting More out of Discussion.
- Give discussion guidelines at the beginning of the term.

b. If it happens---

- “Thanks, [name]. I’d like to bring more people into this conversation. I’m going to ask you to hold your comments for a while.”
- Stop discussion, ask class to write briefly on the discussion topic, then call on people to share what they’ve written.
- Have 2 – 3 students act as “process observers” for a day. At the end of the class session, have them report on their observations of how the discussion went, what problems they noticed, and what suggestions they have.
- If the problem persists, ask the student to see you after class so you can discuss the issue privately. Try to keep it good-humored: you appreciate their eagerness and involvement, but more learning will occur if more people participate.
- In rare cases you may have to limit the discussion-dominator to 2 comments per class meeting, give him/her tokens, or something like that.
- If the discussion-dominator is aggressive or rude toward you or other students, see sections [3](#) & [4](#).

3. Aggressive challenging of teacher

a. Prevention---

- This behavior may be difficult to prevent (but fortunately occurs rarely). Even faculty who do everything they can to create a positive classroom climate may find themselves

faced with a student who has aggressive tendencies, is emotionally unstable, or for some other reason is constantly challenging the teacher.

- Sometimes students pick up on the insecurity of a newer teacher, and those with bullying tendencies are inclined to take advantage of him/her. If you find you are subject to frequent challenges to your authority, you may want to think about ways you can behave in a more authoritative manner. Suggestions often include projecting your voice more, moving around the room and using larger gestures, dressing somewhat more formally to increase the “distance” between you and your students. Being very organized and prepared also reduces students’ perceptions that you may be unsure of yourself.

b. If it happens---

- Don’t get emotional. Try to get at the underlying issue as it relates to the class.
- If it’s an individual issue (e.g., the student feels his test was graded incorrectly), ask him/her to see you after class.
- If the student is challenging your authority, knowledge of the subject, or ability to teach, try to avoid a prolonged confrontation during class time. Tell the challenger this is not an appropriate place for the discussion, and you will discuss it with him/her later.
- If the challenge concerns wider issues that might affect other students (e.g., class policies) you may want to ask the rest of the class whether this is an issue that is concerning them as well. If it is, go ahead and have a class discussion about it, inviting the others to express their views. If other students say it is **not** of concern to them, point out to the student that it is an individual issue, and he/she can come see you during office hours.
- In any discussion outside of class, try to identify specific issues and stick with them. Express interest in the student’s point of view, and be sure you give him/her a chance to talk without interrupting. Try not to be defensive. Explain policies, grading, etc., but don’t get into a long defense.
- If you are wrong, try to admit it gracefully. . .the sooner the better. However, if you’re feeling pressured, it’s legitimate to tell students you need time to think about the issue, and you wish to return to it at the next class period.
- For grade challenges, require students to put their reasons in writing. This gives everyone a cooling off period, and communicates that your decisions will be based on evidence, not emotion.

c. If the behavior is serious or repeated:

- Don’t suffer in silence. Discuss the problem with your department chair or another trusted colleague, and ask them to help you develop a plan for dealing with it. Other campus resources that may be able to help include [Counseling](#), [Student Judicial Affairs](#), the student’s college provost, or the [Title IX/Sexual Harassment office](#).
- Keep a written record of dates and what happened, as well as any witnesses. This will be crucial if judicial action becomes necessary.
- If you suspect the student has psychological/emotional problems, you can refer him/her to Counseling Services.

- If a student engages in repeated disruptive, challenging behavior, and the situation cannot be resolved by the instructor and the department chair, the Campus Judicial Officer should be notified.
- If you feel a student poses an immediate threat to anyone in the room, call 911 to summon campus police.

4. Disputes between students; demeaning comments

a. Prevention---

- See "[Encouraging classroom civility](#)," above.

b. If it happens---

- Remind students of classroom rules for respectful behavior.
- State very clearly that you will not tolerate demeaning comments, especially those based on race, gender, or sexual orientation.
- If appropriate, you can offer the offending student a graceful way to backtrack. Say, "I think many of us interpret what you said as meaning x. Is that what you meant?" or "It sounds like you're attacking Joe personally. Can you restate your views so that you're addressing the issue?" Then remind students that you know they sometimes get passionate about issues, but that they must keep their comments constructive and avoid personal attacks.
- Stop discussion and ask all students to write briefly about what just happened, and what they think should be done about it. Depending on the situation, you may then call for discussion, or ask students to anonymously turn in their writing, and you will share their thoughts with the class.

Additional resources

***Successful Beginnings for College Teaching*, by Angela Provitera McGlynn (Atwood, 2001).**

LB2331 .P768 2001

This book provides excellent ideas for creating a positive classroom climate and getting students jointly engaged in learning. It includes a chapter on "Dealing with Incivility in the College Classroom."

***Engaging Large Classes*, ed. Christine A. Stanley and M. Erin Porter (Anker, 2002).**

See esp. Ch. 4, "Promoting Civility in Large Classes," by Mary Dean Sorcinelli.

***McKeachie's Teaching Tips*, 11th ed., by Wilbert J. McKeachie (Houghton Mifflin, 2002).**

See Ch. 11, "Problem Students (There's Almost Always at Least One!)"

Web site on Classroom Management

<http://www.4faculty.org/includes/108r2.jsp>

***The Chronicle of Higher Education* (1998) -- Colloquy: Is rudeness on the rise?: Responses**

<http://chronicle.com/colloquy/98/rude/re.htm>

Sample civility statements for syllabi

Adapt these according to your preferences and to fit the type of class you are teaching.

#1 Civility in the classroom and respect for the opinions of others is very important in an academic environment. It is likely you may not agree with everything which is said or discussed in the classroom. Courteous behavior and responses are expected.

#2 To create and preserve a classroom atmosphere that optimizes teaching and learning, all participants share a responsibility in creating a civil and non-disruptive forum. Students are expected to conduct themselves at all times in this classroom in a manner that does not disrupt teaching or learning.

- You are expected to be on time. Class starts promptly at x. You should be in your seat and ready to begin class at this time. Class ends at x. Packing up your things early is disruptive to others around you and to myself.
- Classroom participation is a part of your grade in this course. To participate you must attend class having prepared the materials for the day. Questions and comments must be relevant to the topic at hand.
- Raise your hand to be recognized.
- Classroom discussion should be civilized and respectful to everyone and relevant to the topic we are discussing. Classroom discussion is meant to allow us to hear a variety of viewpoints. This can only happen if we respect each other and our differences.
- Any discussion from class that continues on any listserv or class discussion list should adhere to these same rules and expectations.
- Electronic devices such as cell phones and pagers must be turned off during class, unless you have informed me ahead of time that you are expecting an emergency message.

#3 The classroom is a special environment in which students and faculty come together to promote learning and growth. It is essential to this learning environment that respect for the rights of others seeking to learn, respect for the professionalism of the instructor, and the general goals of academic freedom are maintained. Differences of viewpoint or concerns should be expressed in terms which are supportive of the learning process, creating an environment in which students and faculty may learn to reason with clarity and compassion, to share of themselves without losing their identities, and to develop an understanding of the community in which they live. Student conduct which disrupts the learning process shall not be tolerated and may lead to disciplinary action and/or removal from class.

#4 Any successful learning experience requires mutual respect on the part of the student and the instructor. Neither instructor nor student should be subject to others' behavior that is rude, disruptive, intimidating, or demeaning. The instructor has primary responsibility for and control over classroom behavior and maintenance of academic integrity.

Instructor responsibilities:

- Start and end class on time.
- Treat all students with courtesy and respect.
- Be open to constructive input from students in the course.
- Ensure that opportunities to participate are enjoyed equally by all students in the course.

Student responsibilities:

- Come to class on time, and refrain from packing up belongings before class ends.
- Turn off all electronic devices that might create a disruption in class.
- Be quiet and give full respectful attention while either instructor or another student is speaking.
- When speaking, use courteous, respectful language and keep comments and questions relevant to the topic at hand.