

Establishing Classroom Ground Rules

To promote an environment of inclusion and respect for all contributions

Developed in collaboration with the Washington University Standing Committee on Facilitating Inclusive Classrooms

Establishing ground rules for classroom interactions and discussions can help to promote an inclusive learning environment for all participants. Such ground rules are especially important when discussing controversial or otherwise challenging topics. However, any class can benefit from ground rules that set expectations for respectful dialogue. Establishing such ground rules at the start of the semester provides a common framework that will be very helpful if it becomes necessary to talk with the class, or with individual students, about any conduct that could be negatively affecting the learning environment.

If you have a small class (e.g. 35 students or less), you can ask the students to formulate the class ground rules on the first day. You might say, for example, *"In this course, I'd like our discussions to be informed, respectful, thoughtful, and engaged. What are the ground rules we should follow to make this happen?"* Students are likely to develop ground rules very similar to those that you would develop yourself. However, if they have a hand in developing these ground rules, students will be more motivated to stick to them throughout the semester.

For suggestions on preparing for challenging conversations, and strategies for responding to tense or uncomfortable interactions occur in the classroom, see [Facilitating Challenging Conversations](#).

[<https://teachingcenter.wustl.edu/resources/inclusive-teaching-learning/facilitating-challenging-conversations-in-the-classroom/>]

Sample Classroom Groundrules

(may be adapted for different courses, levels, topics etc.)

- Show respect for others as individuals by learning and using their preferred names and pronouns. (Preferred Name Policy, Tips for Faculty [<http://registrar.wustl.edu/student-records/name-ssn-changes/preferred-name-policy-student-information/>])
- Respect the speaker, even when you do not agree with or respect the point the speaker is making.
- Listen carefully; do not interrupt—even when you are excited to respond.
- Try not to generalize about groups (even groups with which you identify) and do not ask another person to speak as a representative of a group.
- Keep an open mind—enter the classroom dialogue with the expectation of learning something new. Look forward to learning about—and being challenged by—ideas, questions, and points of view that are different than your own.
- Do not “monopolize” the conversation; give others a chance to contribute to the discussion.
- Support an atmosphere of learning and growth. Approach discussion as a means to “think out loud.” Allow others (as well as yourself) to revise and clarify ideas and positions in response to new information and insights.
- Bring out ideas, perspectives, or solutions that you think are not yet represented or haven’t yet been adequately discussed.

- Support your arguments with evidence. Be honest when you are not sure if you have enough evidence to make a strong argument or when your thoughts about a topic are still speculative or exploratory.
- Try not to make assumptions; ask questions to learn more about other perspectives, especially those that are different from your own.
- Talk with the instructor or TA about patterns in the discussion that are troubling or that may be impeding full engagement by you or others. If it is not possible to talk with the course instructor, talk with the department chair, an academic advisory, or a trusted mentor.



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