

A Guide to Classroom Civility

As a teacher of higher education, you may have hoped that your classroom would be one filled with eager, polite students hanging on your every word. Unfortunately, as you well know by now, that is not always the case. While most students are well behaved and care about learning and acquiring an education, a few uncivil sorts can make the experience a negative one for all of you.

Anecdotal evidence has suggested that incidents of uncivil behavior in the college classroom are on the rise. Whether or not this is the case, you will surely experience undesirable behavior in your classroom at some point, if you haven't already. This guide will help you understand the meaning of uncivil behavior, why it occurs, and how you can discourage and respond to it.

Classroom Incivility: What is it?

Uncivil behaviors are those that are annoying, rude, or disruptive. They can be mild or more severe and can include, but aren't limited to:

- Arriving late or leaving early from the classroom
- Talking on the cell phone or text messaging
- Carrying on side conversations with classmates
- Sleeping
- Doing other coursework or reading materials not related to the course
- Packing up noisily before the end of class
- Speaking rudely or forcefully to classmates
- Speaking rudely or forcefully to the instructor, questioning the instructor's authority, expressing anger about a grade, or generally disrupting the instructor's ability to teach
- Dominating the class discussion by not allowing other students to speak

In its most extreme form, incivility can mean verbal threats or physical violence, though episodes of violence against an instructor or a classmate are rare.

Why it occurs

Theories abound as to why students are increasingly more uncivil in the classroom. Some say that large classes and large universities mean students feel more anonymous and therefore may have fewer inhibitions. Others posit that students see themselves as consumers; they have paid for their education and therefore expect to behave as they desire. They are of a generation used to multi-tasking, so texting during class may not seem unusual to them. Finally, some students may behave with incivility because they have unclear expectations. Perhaps because they have not been told otherwise, they think that their uncivil behavior is acceptable.

Of course, it's not. You have every right to demand a civil environment in your classroom. It is up to you to decide which behaviors you will tolerate and which you won't. Classroom disruptions can prevent other students from learning as well as make it difficult for you to maintain your instructional responsibilities, so it is best to set some guidelines as well as take measures to prevent them from happening in the first place.

Encouraging Civility

- Clarify your expectations. Write a statement on your syllabus at the beginning of the semester that lays the groundwork for the kind of behavior you expect in your classroom. Read the statement out loud as you go over the syllabus to ensure that the students understand what is expected of them.
- As an alternative, create a behavior policy with your students' help. Decide together, at the beginning of the semester, what does and doesn't qualify as appropriate behavior. Create a document that you have all agreed on and make a copy for each student.
- Start and end class on time.
- Establish a way in which students can air their grievances. Set up a suggestion box or an online comment section. Ask for feedback through mid-quarter or mid-semester feedback. If a student disagrees with a grade, have them write a note challenging the grade, which will give you time to consider it and build support for your decision.
- Treat students with respect. Understand and appreciate their ability and their desire to learn. Avoid sarcasm, talking down to students, and making judgments about them based on their appearance or age. Value their individuality and be open to their input.
- Decrease anonymity. Be approachable and provide as much personal access as possible—arrive to class early, stay late, sit in on section discussions or labs, respond to their emails, learn as many names as possible, and schedule office hours immediately after class if your schedule allows. Encourage them to get to know each other as well. Schedule group discussions and other methods for personal interaction.
- Encourage active learning. Give short writing exercises to stimulate thought, pair students to discuss questions or share responses, and assign short assignments to increase class preparedness.

Responding to Uncivil Behavior

Encouraging civility through the steps above will help reduce unwanted behaviors, but you will undoubtedly come across students who will nonetheless overstep the boundaries. Here we suggest ways to respond to specific behaviors.

Talking, inattention, minor disruptions

- Initially, call attention to the problem with a general statement, rather than focusing specifically on the offender(s). For example, "I'm concerned that not everyone is getting this information," or "Let's get the cell phones put away so that I know you're absorbing this."
- Make direct eye contact with the offending student, pausing your lesson if necessary, or walk over to the area where the offending student sits. Asking a question of a student who is sitting near the offender may also help. Or address the problem directly: "Please put down your cell phone." If those methods don't work, have the rest of the class do a short assignment while you talk to the student, or call them up after class.

Late arrival/early departure

- Designate an area near the classroom door for late arrivers and early leavers to sit.
- For smaller classes, consider asking for advanced notice if a student is going to leave early.
- If you have a TA in the classroom, require that the student tell the TA the reason they are leaving early.

- Use the last five minutes of class to ask a question about the day's lecture to curb students' temptation to start packing up their things.

Dominating discussion

Students who dominate class discussion often don't see themselves as rude; rather, they are genuinely interested in the topic, simply like to be more actively engaged, or feel they are "rescuing" you from other students who are not taking part in the discussion. Of course, some just love to hear themselves talk.

- Address the student politely, thanking them for their comments, but say that you'd like to include others in the conversation.
- Have the class write briefly on a topic you've discussed, then call on students to share what they've written.
- If the student still doesn't get the message, talk to them privately after class, keeping the conversation light-hearted. Tell them you appreciate their enthusiasm and participation, but that the more others participate, the more everyone will learn.

Challenging your authority

- Project confidence. Project your voice, dress appropriately, use large gestures, and move frequently around the room. The more you show your authority, the less likely students will challenge it.
- Don't get emotional. Respond honestly to the issue and explain—instead of defend—your objectives.
- If a student attempts to engage in a prolonged discussion on your knowledge of the subject or ability to teach, end the conversation. Tell them the classroom is not an appropriate place to discuss this and that you will gladly speak to them after class.
- If the student expresses something you feel is a grievance that might affect other students, have a class discussion about it, inviting others to weigh in.
- If you are feeling pressured to change your mind due to a student or students' complaints, tell them you need time to think about it and will discuss it with them soon.
- If you are meeting privately with an aggrieved student, let them express their point of view without interruption. Explain your policies but don't get into a long defense.

For repeated, serious behaviors:

- Discuss it with your department chair or a colleague who can help you devise a way to address the problem.
- Document all incidents, recording dates and witnesses, in case further action is needed.
- If you feel the student needs psychological help, refer them to your campus's counseling center.
- If the behavior is repeated and/or becomes verbally abusive or hostile, contact the campus police.
- If you feel the student poses an immediate threat to you or anyone else in the classroom, call 911.