

Ground rules for civil discussion

A large portion of this class will include discussion. As a class, we will work to improve your ability to express complex ideas orally throughout the course of the semester.

Civil discourse, in both this class and in society in general, requires that you **work to be the best version of yourself you can be** and treat others with the same level of respect with which you would have them treat you. Keep the below guidelines in mind as a means to this end when we conduct our class discussions.

- **Employ active listening skills.** Listen to the person speaking and focus on his or her comments. Focus on the merit of the *ideas* presented and not on the *person* presenting the ideas. Discuss ideas and issues, not people, and speak for yourself, not others.
- **Try your best to *first understand then be understood*.** Try to understand the thoughts and ideas of others at least as much as you hope they try to understand you. Ask questions that help people define and clarify what they are trying to say.
- **Take the time to consider what others say.** *Respond*, don't just *react*.
- **Use "I" statements when commenting *and* responding, but also incorporate evidence when you are making an argument.** Quality discussions should not only be about beliefs but about evidence and analysis as well.
 - Examples of "I" statements: "I think..." "I believe..." "If I hear you correctly..." "I agree/disagree with you because..."
 - Rephrase and summarize what the other person is saying before responding. For example, "I understand you are concerned about...and that you feel it is important that...". Rephrasing or summarizing your understanding of the other's point of view or feeling shows you have listened and can see the other's perspective.
 - Cite your evidence. For example, "I can see why you interpreted [x, y, z] in...way, but when I examine [x, y, z] I conclude...based upon..."
- **Stay focused on the topic and avoid repetition.** The discussion will inevitably branch off in multiple directions. Each participant should work to stay on task and redirect the discussion when it meanders.
- **Encourage others to contribute to the discussion.** Try not to dominate the discussion. Ask what others think from time to time.
- **Learn to disagree without being disagreeable and be aware of your physical response as much as your verbal response.** Consider your posture: control facial and other gestures such as eye rolling, tense face, crossed arms, clenched fist, sarcastic expressions, or mimicking. Keep the tone of your voice civil and monitor the rate and volume of your speech. If you cannot maintain a relaxed, open posture and a civil, controlled voice then it's time to acknowledge you are too angry to discuss and you should request a break to collect yourself.

- **Keep (or develop) a good sense of humor about yourself.** At its best, humor is a tool that can help establish connections between people by recognizing that we are all human and often experience life in similar ways. Keeping a sense of humor about yourself is a sign that you have perspective, are able to laugh at your own foibles, and generally don't take yourself *too* seriously.

I agree to actively work in this course to improve my communication skills so that I can better understand what others are saying and better express myself to others. I also agree to do my part in this course to promote an atmosphere of trust, of mutual respect to feel safe to express ideas, opinions, and arguments.

Read all of the above carefully, print out a hard copy, date and sign on the line, and bring with you to the first day of discussion.