

Civil Dialogue Guidelines:

The “rules” of civil discourse used to be implicit. That means, they weren’t stated or written anywhere, but everyone pretty much shared the same values and understood what they were. For instance, traditionally, people were taught not to discuss politics or religion in “polite company”—such as, at a dinner party. It is still important to tread carefully when discussing these topics, since people tend to become defensive when discussing them. To deal with an increase in uncivil dialogue, here are some written, explicit rules on how to engage in civil conversations, in the classroom and beyond.

The basic rule of civil discourse is don’t make it personal. This means to stick to the issues. In a civil discussion, you use logic, persuasion, evidence, information and argumentation to make a point or defend a position, but you would not attack the other individual personally. Each person in a civil discourse is entitled to his/her own opinions and is entitled to be treated with respect and dignity.

Being disrespectful is not engaging in civil discourse. Here are some disrespectful behaviors that are typically considered out of bounds: profanity, name-calling*, derogatory terms (stupid, ignorant...), shouting or other attempts at intimidation, insulting body language (such as eye-rolling), insulting tone of voice (baby talk, speaking “down” to a person), open hostility, ridicule, biting sarcasm, any other disrespectful acts or ad hominem/ad feminem attacks (attacking the person instead of the argument), threats or implied threats, or any other behavior that could get a person banned from a social media site. A central theme of disrespectful discourse is that it employs tactics designed to dismiss the other person, rather than engage with the other argument.

[*Name-calling includes words ending in -ist, or -phobe or beginning with anti- and similar critical terms. Name-calling also includes derisive terms like “snowflake,” “crybaby,” “crybully,” or “feminazi.” These are modern, politicized variations on name-calling but the effect is the same; they are still labels that can be considered hurtful and counterproductive when used to condemn, insult, or demonize a person or their ideas. Name-calling is conversation-ending. Names diminish a person’s dignity while stifling the ability to engage in dialogue. Name-calling can be considered dehumanizing, judgmental, and an attempt to reduce and minimize a complex person to one diminished thing in order to then dismiss his/her argument without considering it. It is an attack on a person’s character. In a civil discussion, you may attack the argument, but never the person making it.]

If the other person violates any of these rules, the best response is to describe the offending behavior and its effects on you. Do not attack the other person back. For instance, if the other person calls you names, you could respond factually: “I don’t like being called names. That hurts my feelings. Please stop.”

Above all, remember the Golden Rule: Treat others the way you want to be treated.



At FIRE, we believe in civility as an ideal to be aspired to, but not to the point of censorship. We also believe that allowing others their freedom to speak is itself an act of civility and that it produces civility. Freedom of speech requires you to exercise restraint in allowing others to speak and to recognize and respect the rights of others to express themselves, even when you disagree.