

# LEVERAGING NORMS FOR CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS

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## WHAT ARE NORMS?

Norms are a set of agreed upon standards that provide clear expectations for classroom behaviors and interactions. Norms act as guidelines for classroom discussions.

## WHY SET NORMS?

Implicit norms surface in most classrooms. Essentially course participants decide what is acceptable and what is not in conversation even if conversation norms have never been named. Explicitly naming and generating shared guidelines, encourages transparency and offers clear expectations of appropriate engagement with the course content. When you set norms, the guidelines are openly known to everyone and everyone has an equal understanding of what is expected from the group.

## THE ROLE OF NORMS IN CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS

In most classrooms, a certain level of controversy will arise. In fact, faculty may intentionally elicit debate and interrogation of course content to deepen critical thinking. Conversations related to topic of diversity and identity

are particularly challenging given the range of experiences and backgrounds of both students and faculty. Norms can help facilitate such challenging conversations by directly addressing upfront guidelines for engaging with potential conflict, disagreement, or irresolution.

Specifically, establishing norms helps faculty and students engage in challenging conversations, by

(1) Providing students with a **common understanding** of the guidelines for engagement.

Norms help students answer: How do we engage others if we disagree? Should we participate if we feel uncomfortable with a point that has been shared?

(2) **Clarifying the value of diverse classroom perspectives.** Norms help students answer: What is the role of differing opinions in the course?

(3) **Attenuating anxieties** by creating a space where students and faculty have a sense of how conversations on challenging topics will be managed and what is expected: Norms help students answer: What if I think a classmate has violated one of our shared agreements?

## USING THIS TOOLKIT

In this toolkit, you can:

- Learn how norms assist with challenging conversations (*p.1*)
- Review example categories for norms and sample norms (*p.2*)
- Review example processes for setting norms in courses (*p. 3*)
- View strategies for addressing norm violations (*p. 4*).

### In the Appendix

- Explore the meaning of example norms (*p.5-6*)
- Review sample lesson plans for setting norms on the first day of class (*p.7*)
- Answer a set of reflective questions to help you decide on the norms you need in your course (*p.8*)
- View additional Resources (*p.9*)

## CATEGORIES OF NORMS FOR CHALLENGING CONVERSATIONS

*While norms may vary from classroom to classroom, challenging conversations are strengthened when students and faculty prioritize specific categories of norms as a starting point. The following section outlines these categories and offers a general explanation of each including a few example norms. For a detailed explanation of each sample norm please see the Appendix. It is not enough to ensure the class knows the norms, faculty must also ensure shared understanding about their meaning.*

**Respect for Self and Others.** Most productive conversations require a general level of respect for all participants. For consistent learning in challenging conversations, it is important for course communities to refrain from discourteous behaviors (e.g. interrupting, name-calling, using offensive language, or attacking character). Norms, under this theme, include these expectations for civil discourse. Respect for self and others may also include emphatic listening, and respect of privacy. Creating environments where participants can expect that conversations will be held in a respectful manner can encourage people to share and engage with differing viewpoints.

### SAMPLE NORMS

- Actively Listen
- Step Up/Step Back
- Maintain Confidentiality
- Anticipate Differing Journeys
- Challenge Ideas, Not People

**Accept Challenge & Anticipate Discomfort.** Conversations on challenging topics are first and foremost challenging! In order to fully engage in meaningful conversations around topics of diversity or controversial topics, faculty and students must agree to push their thinking and be open to sharing their ideas in a productive way. Creating norms that help students accept the challenge of challenging conversations can help a course interact critically with difficult ideas without shying away from the work of the conversation.

### SAMPLE NORMS

- Push Your Thinking
- Expect Disagreement
- Anticipate Discomfort
- Hold Yourself and Others Accountable
- Contribute to the Conversation

Challenging conversations also sometimes require that students and faculty expand their worldviews, shift their perspectives and think in terms of “both-and” instead of “either-or”. Challenging conversations can also make certain aspects of identities more salient than usual. As a result, challenging conversations can be uncomfortable. Discomfort that leads to greater learning however can be useful.\* It is important that participants are primed to anticipate and explore any discomfort to continually push their learning.

### SAMPLE NORMS

- Allow for Growth
- Stay Engaged
- Be Open to Changing your Mind
- Listen before Responding

**Keep an Open Mind.** A goal of challenging conversations is to keep the lines of communication open so that participants learn from each other. When students and faculty members approach challenging conversations with an open mind, participants are able to make space to hear each other, which helps minimize instances of feeling shut down, silenced, or invalidated. Being open allows participants to truly listen to each other and from there, build on each other’s comments and elevate the conversation.

### SAMPLE NORMS

- Give yourself room to be unsure where you stand
- Expect Uncertainty/ Embrace Non-Closure

**Embrace Uncertainty and Non-Closure.** Many topics that lead to challenging conversations cannot be resolved in one sitting. Additionally, students have a variety of experiences and backgrounds and thus diverse shares of knowledge. Given this, it is not always possible for challenging conversations to result in complete consensus. Knowing in advance that challenging conversations may not in a clear resolution can diminish anxiety and allow students to engage more thoroughly in the learning process.

\* Given the value of productive discomfort in the learning process and the documented disparities in who is more often than not asked to be uncomfortable in conversations specifically around diversity, there is controversy around the frequently used norm of creating a safe space in a challenging conversation. For more information on this discussion please see the TLL website.

## PROCESSES FOR SETTING NORMS

*Norms should be set on the first day of class although there is no right way to set norms. Yet, there might be a norm setting process that is better suited to your course than others. To choose the process that works best for you, consider the course content, the desired culture for the course community, and your personality. The following outlines three possible routes for norm setting.*

### (1) Assert the Norms

Faculty can choose to assert norms by selecting the ground rules independently. Instructors would identify norms that align with the course content and identify a set of norms to establish the kind of classroom climate that feels most appropriate. If faculty opt to assert the norms:

- Have a set of norms ready to present to the students
- Provide a brief explanation, rationale, and relevancy of each of norm verbally and in writing
- Make expectations of upholding norms clear and explicit, including how norm violations will be addressed.
- Ask students to take ownership of the norms presented. Ask if they have questions or concerns. Respond to inquiries.

### (2) Co-Construct with Class

Students can provide and set class norms. In this approach, a professor would solicit potential norms from students on the first day of class. Students generally offer norms salient to their own experiences and expectations for classroom discussions. Through facilitated discussion, students decided upon a shared set of norms, and thus have shared accountability. If you choose to derive norms from students:

- Explain the purpose and function of norms
- Allow students to offer and define norms (Consider setting a time limit for this). You might consider asking students: (1) What conditions do we need to have a positive and challenging learning environment? (2) What ground rules will help create those conditions?
- Help students to come to a general consensus about which norms to implement
- Have students strategize methods for dealing with norm violate

### (3) Assert and Co-Construct

Faculty can choose to combine both of the above strategies. For example, faculty members can provide a set of desired norms for the course and still source additional norms from students. In this instance:

- Faculty may assert specific norms
- Students may be asked to provide input to iterate or add norms
- Students can also discuss which norms resonate most and what norms might be missing

**For sample Lesson Guides to set norms on the first day, please see the Appendix (p.7).**

## RESPONDING TO NORMS VIOLATIONS

Implementing and maintaining norms can be challenging and even with the best norm setting and norms management, sometimes norms will be violated. There are things that faculty can do in advance to diminish the likelihood of a norm violation. This includes but is not limited to referencing the norms prior to a challenging conversation or even ensuring they are posted in the room during class. Yet, even with these factors in place, it is important to be prepared for how you will respond to a norm violation. When professors don't respond to violations of the norms or address norm violations, the value and purpose of norms diminishes. This section overviews a few strategies for mitigating norm violations and sample language for addressing norm violations.

### Mitigating Norm Violations

To prevent norm violations upfront, faculty can:

- Provide gentle recurring reminders of class norms and group commitment to positive and productive class climate.
- Consider restating norms before engaging in a challenging discussion.
- Identify, independently and with students' input, norms that were set but no longer seem relevant or new norms that need to be added
- Reflect on how your identity and positionality impact how you are maintaining norms
- Periodically asks class how the norms are working for the learning environment.

### ADDRESSING NORM VIOLATIONS

Action	Sample Language
Directly address specific norm violation	<p>“Because we want to maintain an open and collaborative dialogue, it is critical that we [insert specific norm/theme]”</p> <p>“How might we rephrase this statement, to ensure that we are [insert specific norm/theme]?”</p> <p>“Let’s pause for a minute, before we move forward, I just want to remind us of our norms...”</p>
Remind students of agreed upon norms	<p>“Let’s remember that at the beginning of the course we all agreed to _____, “</p> <p>“To keep the conversation productive, let’s make sure to [insert theme, or specific norm]”</p>
Emphasize group accountability	<p>“To maintain our agreed upon class climate, how might we...”</p> <p>“Let’s remember to push each other to uphold our standards”</p>
Help student rephrase or Rephrase for them	<p>“How might you rephrase your point to address the content?”</p> <p>Let’s reframe your comment in the context of the readings...”</p> <p>“I’d like to rephrase your question and pose it this way, ...”</p> <p>“Hmm. I think another way to ask your question, would be...”</p>
Seek clarification	<p>“What I think I hear you saying, ...”</p> <p>“I think your point was _____, is that right?””</p>
Offer students post-class debrief sessions and additional resources	<p>“I think there may be some lingering feelings in the room. I encourage you to meet with me to discuss this issue further.”</p> <p>“I know that today’s conversation was particularly challenging, so I encourage you to...”</p>

## APPENDIX: SAMPLE NORMS BY THEME

The section below offers course norms organized by category and an explanation of each norm. This list is not exhaustive or comprehensive. It is rather a sampling of possible course norms that faculty can choose from. In choosing norms, consider your course content, your pedagogy and your personal non-negotiables.

### RESPECT FOR SELF AND OTHERS

#### Sample Norm: *Actively Listen*

- Seek to understand others perspective as you listen
- Try to listen without thinking about how you are going to respond

#### Sample Norm: *Speak Your Truth*

- Honor your lived experience and perspective. Raise your reality.
- If something bothers you or feels confusing, speak on it and do not silence yourself
- Respect that individuals cannot speak for groups and that there are multiple within-group perspectives

#### Sample Norm: *Step Up/ Step Back*

- Contribute to the conversation by speaking up, take up space but remember that others need space too.

#### Sample Norm: *Maintain Confidentiality*

- Be respectful of other's privacy
- Leave the personal stories in the classroom, but take the learning with you

#### Sample Norm: *Expect Differing Journeys*

- Be cognizant of peers different journeys and experiences
- Consider what you can learn from engaging with viewpoints that do not mirror your own

### ACCEPT CHALLENGE & ACCEPT DISCOMFORT

#### Sample Norm: *Push Your Thinking*

- Engage critically with the content. Do not allow your first thought to be your only thought

#### Sample Norm: *Challenge Ideas, Not People*

- Interrogate the argument, not the individual. Challenge peers on the **CONTENT** of their comments.

#### Sample Norm: *Contribute to the Conversation*

- Challenge yourself to engage even when it is hard or uncomfortable. Every voice matters.
- Share your developing ideas and comments even though they may be incomplete or still forming
- Explore the difference between self-expression and expressing viewpoints for shared learning

#### Sample Norm: *Expect Disagreement*

- Know that conversations will engender diverse opinions.
- Engage with disagreements that arise. Work to see them as learning opportunities.

#### Sample Norm: *Hold yourself and others accountable*

- Own your mistakes. Don't be afraid to circle back and change your thinking.
- Be aware of the impact of your contributions
- Ask others to be accountable for their mistakes.

#### Sample Norm: *Expect and Accept Discomfort*

- Unpack what is uncomfortable and why
- Directly address the sources of your discomfort in order to shift and expand your worldview and assumptions

#### Sample Norm: *Engage with a "Both-And" Perspective*

- Hold up multiple truths at once
- Explore commonalities in seemingly opposing viewpoints
- Reframe your comments by including other's ideas and statements

## APPENDIX: SAMPLE NORMS BY THEME

### KEEP AN OPEN MIND

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#### Sample Norm: *Allow for Growth*

- Remember that everyone enters challenging conversations with different backgrounds and experiences
- Be respectful of other's journeys without expecting everyone to have the same levels of awareness and knowledge

#### Sample Norm: *Stay Engaged*

- Stay present in the room. If you find yourself disconnecting, push yourself to name and understand why.

#### Sample Norm: *Be Open to Changing Your Mind*

- Know that growing and learning means that you may shift your positions, revisit your assumptions, and advance your thinking

### EMBRACE NON-CLOSURE AND UNCERTAINTY

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#### Sample Norm: *Embrace Imperfection*

- Recognize that mistakes in challenging dialogue are inevitable. Forgive yourself for a mistake and forgive others.

#### Sample Norm: *Expect Uncertainty/ Embrace Non-Closure and Uncertainty*

- Understand that navigating challenging conversations is not a direct path
- Explore lines of thinking that are new and novel
- Engage with the content and ideas with the expectation that it is not always possible to reach a clear resolution

## APPENDIX: 45-MINUTE LESSON GUIDE FOR SETTING NORMS

### Overview

Setting norms or ground rules provides a foundation for establishing a productive classroom atmosphere. Here, Faculty can assert and/or co-construct norms with students to generate a shared and agreed upon set of standards to facilitate learning and promote productive discussions when conversations are challenging.

### Objectives

Students will be able to create and finalize classroom norms by addressing the following:

- Identify norms that will create a supportive and productive learning environment for all students.
- Work collaboratively with peers to select most important ground rules.
- Synthesize agreed upon classroom norms

### Materials

- Post-it Notes
- Markers, pens, pencils
- Chart paper

### Activities

Students work in groups to identify and generate norms. As a whole class, norms are synthesized and finalized.

1. Instructor introduces self, gives broad overview of norms, norm examples, why norms are necessary, and explains activity (3-5 minutes)
  - a. Class counts off from 1-4 to make groups of 3-4 students
2. Individually, students write 3-5 norms on sticky notes (5 minutes)
3. As a group, students share, combine, refine norms on chart paper to present to whole class (12 minutes)
4. Each group shares out collectively developed norms and instructor/student recorder documents each new norm (10 minutes)
5. Class works to synthesize norms into categories and generates a finalized list (10 minutes)
6. As a whole, class agrees to abide by norms (3 minutes)

### Adaptations/Evaluation

Use sample norms provided on pages 5 and 6 of this guide as ground rule examples. As needed, instructor can make any necessary amendments between class sessions and present to the group for final approval.

## APPENDIX: 20-MINUTE LESSON GUIDE FOR SETTING NORMS

### Overview

Setting norms or ground rules provides a foundation for establishing a productive classroom atmosphere. Here, faculty can assert norms and work with students to generate a shared and agreed upon set of standards to facilitate learning and promote productive discussions when conversations are challenging.

### Objectives

Students will be able to agree upon a set of classroom norms by addressing the following:

- Work collaboratively with peers to select most important ground rules from pre-defined set of norms provided by faculty
- Synthesize agreed upon classroom norms

Materials

- N/A

### Activities

Students work in groups to identify and generate norms. As a whole class, norms are synthesized and finalized.

1. Instructor provides an introduction and general overview of the purpose of norms and gives students a pre-made list of norms (3-5 minutes)
2. Individually students process and think about norms (3-5 minutes)
3. As a class, students and faculty share out and explore the following questions to refine list (5-7 minutes):
  - a. What norms to keep?
  - b. What norms to amend/change?
  - c. What norms are missing?
4. Instructor obtains class consensus of norms and willingness to abide by ground rules (1-3 minutes)

### Adaptations/Evaluation

Use sample norms provided on pages 5 and 6 of this guide as ground rule examples. Instructor can make any necessary amendments between class sessions and present to the group for final approval.



## CHOOSING COURSE NORMS - REFLECTIVE GUIDE

*Faculty and students come from a variety of backgrounds, have both shared and differing experiences, and will contribute different perspectives. Faculty and students also bring their multiple identities with them into the classroom. Our identities shape the courses we teach, pedagogical and instructional moves, classroom culture, and the norms we decide to set. The questions below may help you reflect on the norm setting process and assess how norms may function in your classroom.*

Are norms valuable to you and your classroom culture? If not, how do you plan facilitate challenging conversations?

Have you implemented norms in the past? Was the process successful? If so, why? If not, what could have been improved?

Consider your values and course content. What do you want your course to feel like and sound like? How might you engage with students when discussions become difficult?

Consider the categories of norms in this toolkit: respect for self and others, keep an open mind, accept challenge, expect and accept non-closure, anticipate discomfort and the listed norms associated with them. Write a list of 5-6 norms that you think would help your course feel/sound they way you described above?

If not included in this toolkit, what additional norms would be beneficial to your classroom?

Review your list. If everyone in your course upheld these norms, would it match your described vision? If not, what is missing that you need to address?

What is your comfort level facilitating challenging conversations, especially on topics of diversity? Do you have additional supports when discussions go beyond your comfort zone/ area or expertise?

### THINGS TO CONSIDER

How might my pedagogical preferences influence the norms set in my classroom?

How might my experiences and beliefs impact facilitation of challenging conversations in my classroom?

What assumptions do I have about the course content? How might that influence what we do and do not discuss in the classroom?

Do I feel comfortable managing classroom conflict?

How do my scholar and personal identities influence what I value in the classroom?

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

*Implementing norms can be a daunting, yet beneficial aspect of educational praxis to encourage and sustain a productive classroom community. Nationwide, colleges and universities are developing initiatives around appropriate praxis and general information about facilitating challenging conversations using norms. For additional resources and practical guides please visit the sites below.*

### **“Difficult Dialogues”**

**VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY**

***Center for Teaching***

<https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/difficult-dialogues/#tools>

Provides a basic overview of how difficult dialogues manifest in our classrooms, offers specific tools and strategies for facilitating such dialogues, and provides practical exercises to use in the classroom.

### **“Responding to Difficult Moments”**

**UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN**

***Center for Research on Learning and Teaching***

<http://crlt.umich.edu/multicultural-teaching/difficult-moments>

Includes planning guides for controversial topics, sample guides for class participation, and information on inclusive teaching.

### **“Difficult Dialogues”**

**UNIVERSITY OF ALAKSA**

***UAA/APU Difficult Dialogues Initiative***

<http://www.difficultdialoguesuaa.org/handbook/landing>

Includes a comprehensive difficult dialogue handbook that addresses establishing ground rules, the function of rhetoric and debate, as well as resources for recommended and further reading.

### **“Teaching For Inclusion”**

**UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA CHAPEL HILL**

***Center for Teaching and Learning***

<https://ssw.unc.edu/files/web/pdf/TeachforInclusion.pdf>

A comprehensive guide that addresses diversity in higher education. This guide provides curriculum development strategies as well as strategies for instructor self-reflection.

### **“Creating a Positive Classroom Climate for Diversity”**

**UCLA**

***UCLA Diversity & Faculty Development***

<https://equity.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/CreatingaPositiveClassroomClimateWeb-2.pdf>

Provides an overview of establishing a positive classroom climate and addresses: instructor classroom behavior, teaching methods, ground rules, and responding to ground rule violations.

### **“Establishing Ground Rules”**

**CORNELL UNIVERSITY**

***Center for Teaching Excellence***

<https://www.cte.cornell.edu/teaching-ideas/building-inclusive-classrooms/establishing-ground-rules.html>

Explores inclusive teaching strategies, classroom climate, and the importance of norms and ground rules.

## REFERENCES

*Aspects of this toolkit were adapted from the following resources:*

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