A Guide to Civil and Productive Classroom Conversations

A resource for adult learners

Civil conversations help everyone feel respected, heard, and able to learn. These guidelines foster dialogue that is thoughtful, inclusive, and intellectually engaging, especially in diverse classrooms.

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1. Listen to Understand, Not to Respond

- Focus on the speaker rather than formulating your counterargument.
- Show active listening with eye contact, nodding, or brief verbal affirmations.
- Paraphrase what you heard ("So what you're saying is…") before responding.

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2. Use "I" Statements

Speak from your own experience rather than making general claims.

- "I've experienced…"
- "I think…"
- "From my perspective…"

This reduces defensiveness and keeps the conversation grounded in personal insight.

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3. Critique Ideas, Not People

- Focus on the argument or topic—not the person presenting it.
- Replace "You're wrong" with "I see it differently because…"
- Avoid labeling, stereotyping, or attributing motives.

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4. Respectful Turn-Taking

- Keep comments **concise** so others can contribute.
- If you tend to speak often, pause to make room for others; if you tend to speak less, consider pushing yourself to participate.

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5. Ask Curious, Open-Ended Questions

Inquiry promotes deeper understanding and reduces tension:

- "Can you tell me more about that?"
- "What experiences led you to see it that way?"
- "How does that connect to…?"

Curiosity fuels learning.

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6. Acknowledge Emotion, but Stay Constructive

It's okay to have strong feelings—but respond thoughtfully.

- Name your emotion if helpful: "This is uncomfortable, but I want to understand."
- Take a breath before you react.

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7. Be Open to Being Wrong or Changing Your Mind

Learning involves growth.

- Allow new information to challenge your assumptions.
- Celebrate moments when someone's perspective teaches you something new.

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8. Use Respectful Language

- Avoid inflammatory phrases or absolute claims.
- Steer clear of sarcasm, mockery, or dismissive comments.
- Opt for neutral, descriptive language overcharged or judgmental phrasing.

Civil discourse contributes to a productive, respectful, and supportive learning environment for everyone.

The above guide used a variety of resources, including:

Facing History & Ourselves – *Fostering Civil Discourse: Difficult Classroom Conversations in a Diverse Democracy* [facinghistory.org]; Harvard Safra Center for Ethics – *Civil Discourse Handbook* [ethics.harvard.edu]; Constitutional Democracy Project – *Conducting a Civil Conversation in the Classroom*; Teachers Institute – *Maximizing Engagement in Adult Learning through Discussion*