

# Suggestions for Minimizing and Responding to Student Incivility

Many factors may be at play when a student engages in challenging or disruptive behavior: a general malaise due to world events, personal difficulties that have nothing to do with you, interpersonal or executive functioning skills the student has yet to develop, and/or legitimate concerns that (if attended to) could help improve your course. While it's understandable to feel pressure to address things immediately, and sometimes that is what the situation necessitates, it can be helpful to step back and size up the situation so that you can identify options that may not be immediately apparent.

This guide provides the following:

- A description of four focus areas that can give rise to uncivil student behavior.
- A process for systematically reflecting on the factors contributing to the incivility that will help you identify options for the most appropriate way to address the concern.
- Course design and class planning strategies that *lessen the likelihood* of uncivil behavior.
- Suggested *options for responses* to problematic behavior should it arise.

## Where and Why Incivility Occurs

What do we mean by incivility? Most definitions of the word include ambiguous and subjective terms: rude, impolite, unsociable, and disrespectful. etc. The seeds of incivility are sown when instructor-student and/or peer expectations are misaligned. If left unchecked, these differences in perspective can escalate into open conflict that disrupts the learning experience for all.

According to Courtney Wright, student incivility is usually focused on one or more of the following three broad areas of expectations: classroom behavior, grading procedures and evaluation, and course content or credibility (2016, 2017). In addition, conflict can arise between students in class activities and assignments that involve group work.

For each of these areas, there are things that the instructor can do proactively, to lessen the likelihood of incivility, and there are strategies the instructor can use in response to incivility should it occur.

It is also important to consider *magnitude and evidence of intent* when deciding how to respond to incivility. Students may not fully recognize how they are coming across, your class may involve an approach to learning that is unfamiliar to them, or they may be under external stress that is compromising their ability to communicate well. Wright suggests the following questions:

What are my options for responding to the inappropriate behavior that will not escalate the situation? How might my interaction with the student become a “teachable moment” in which they gain insight and develop new ways of interacting with others? What might I do now to protect myself, should the incivility persist despite my best efforts? What supports are available to me? What supports are available to the student? (2016)

## Getting to the Root of Student Incivility

When it comes to conflict, things are rarely as simple as they seem at the outset. It can be helpful to reflect on the focus, magnitude, and potential contributing factors surrounding the behavior. This process of systematic reflection creates an opportunity for you to check your assumptions and gather additional information before determining a course of action.

Process for Reflecting on and Addressing Incivility				
Event	Focus / Concern	Magnitude	Potential Contributing Factors	Response Options
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individual behavior</li> <li>• Grading and Evaluation</li> <li>• Course content / credibility</li> <li>• Peers / groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indirect/direct</li> <li>• Passive/aggressive</li> <li>• Trivial/significant</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• World/local events</li> <li>• Personal difficulties, mental health</li> <li>• Interpersonal, functional skills</li> <li>• Valid concerns</li> </ul>	

**Example:** Perhaps a student believes the grade that they received was unfair (focus). How they *act* upon that belief may vary (magnitude). They may gripe about it to peers (indirect, passive), argue about it loudly with the instructor in class (direct, aggressive), or write a letter of complaint to the dean (indirect, aggressive, and significant). Indirect disgruntled behavior could potentially be surfaced and addressed by having students complete an anonymous survey or reflection in Canvas and then responding to the input you received in class. Aggressive behavior in class should be addressed through behavioral norm setting and de-escalation techniques. Complaints to the dean, as unsettling as they may be, create an opportunity for you to discuss your concerns with leadership and enlist their support.

Likewise, many factors can contribute to a student’s perception about the fairness of their grade. Perhaps personal challenges or poor study skills contributed to poor performance, but the student lacks self-awareness and externalizes their anger inappropriately (external factors and skills). In this case, an effective response might be to elicit more information in an office hour meeting, then determine if the student might benefit from study skills coaching, a referral to the writing center, or if needed connecting the student with mental health resources available through Northeastern. On the other hand, perhaps you discover confusion about the assignment and realize that, with just a few tweaks, the improved directions would benefit all students (validity of concern and course revisions). Taking a moment to unpack what is going on can reap tremendous benefits for both the student and the instructor.

## Deterring and Responding to Incivility

While no course plan guarantees perfect student behavior, there are certain things that you can do to *minimize the likelihood* of incivility. In addition, there are strategies and techniques you can use if, despite your best efforts, your students engage in unacceptable behavior. The following charts provide suggestions for proactive strategies and responses to incivility.

## Expectations for Individual Behavior

Proactive Strategies	Responses to Incivility
<p><b>Syllabus:</b> Share your expectations for appropriate behavior in the syllabus and discuss it on the first day of class.</p> <p><b>Video Introduction:</b> Record a 3-minute video in Canvas in which you describe the dynamic you hope the class will achieve. This can also be an opportunity to talk about your prior experience and expertise, share your interest in the course topic and why you think it's important, and tell them what excites you about teaching.</p> <p><b>Community Agreements:</b> In the first week of the course, ask students to describe the type of experience they <i>hope</i> to have in the class and what behaviors they want to <i>avoid</i>. Together, create a list of expectations.</p> <p>But don't just stop after you've compiled the list! Hold a discussion about what they want the class (you and students) to do if negative behaviors arise. Time permitting, role play scenarios in which someone violates an agreement and have students suggest responses.</p> <p>Incorporate the agreements into your session slides, reminding them at the beginning of each class, and display the agreements prominently in Canvas.</p>	<p><b>Model:</b> Keep in mind that "calm is contagious." Allowing a few moments of silence before responding also gives you time to collect your thoughts and may also help the student cool down. Begin by describing what you are observing in as neutral a tone as possible ("I see you are upset about your grade"). If possible, ascribe a positive motivation ("I imagine that you wanted to do well on the exam, and this is disappointing"). Enlist the student(s) in problem-solving. If things seem too hot, it could be in writing ("I'd like everybody to take 3 minutes to write several ideas for things they could do differently before the next exam that might improve their work").</p> <p><b>Reflect:</b> Open-ended questions can be a powerful strategy for helping students gain perspective on their behavior. What leads you to that conclusion? What did you hear me saying? How would you feel if someone said that to you? How do you think others in the class might see your behavior?</p> <p><b>Invoke and Direct:</b> Remind students of the community agreements and explain how the current behavior is in violation of the agreements. If the behavior persists, ask the student to leave the class. Follow up with an email describing the incident and why it was in violation of norms. Cite the code of student conduct if relevant.</p> <p>Invite the student to office hours for further discussion if you get the sense that the student can be reasoned with. For egregious cases, report the incident to leadership (e.g., program director, associate dean).</p>

## Expectations for Grading and Evaluation

Proactive Strategies	Responses to Incivility
<p><b>Transparency:</b> At the start of every major assignment, share a handout that clearly describes the assignment purpose (relation to course goals, skill development), the tasks or steps, and a rubric with criteria by which the assignment will be evaluated.</p> <p><b>Exemplars:</b> Provide deidentified examples of graded work to illustrate your expectations. The work should be graded with a rubric so that students can see how criteria for excellence are applied during evaluation.</p> <p><b>Scaffolded Design:</b> Assign interim deliverables, each with a round of feedback grounded in the rubric (e.g., project proposal, first draft, final submission), so there are opportunities for getting back on track. Strategic use of peer feedback can help make this approach scale to larger classes.</p> <p><b>Exam/Project Wrappers:</b> Have students write a study plan and then—after the work has been graded—reflect in writing on how the plan went, what worked, and what they’d do differently next time.</p> <p><b>Use The Canvas Rubric Tool:</b> Connect a rubric to the assignment and use it when grading. This reduces bias, makes grading more efficient, and supports follow-up conversations about the rationale for grades.</p> <p><b>Anonymous Grading:</b> Canvas supports anonymous grading (hides names). This can reduce bias and avert accusations of partiality. It may not work for multiple drafts but can be good for one-time assessments.</p>	<p><b>Prepare for the Challenging Conversation:</b> Conversations about performance should always take place individually, not in front of other students. If a student confronts you, explain that you want to maintain confidentiality in grading and invite them to meet with you in person during office hours or online in Zoom/Teams. If a student sends an angry email, indicate that it would be most productive to meet in real time to avoid misunderstandings.</p> <p>Review their performance and prepare notes before you have any substantive interactions about their grade. Determine if you have made any mistakes in calculations or overlooked something. Identify specific areas in which the student is underperforming and consider things they could do to improve.</p> <p>When you meet, begin by conveying your appreciation for their concern. Affirm their willingness to meet with you. Summarize the 3-4 biggest factors affecting their grade to avoid overwhelming them (e.g., unsubmitted work, missed classes). Ask them to suggest steps they might take to improve. Enlist them in strategy identification first before sharing your thoughts. Follow-up with an email summarizing the conversation.</p> <p><b>Have Them Self-Assess:</b> If a student challenges a grade on a paper, presentation, or project, require that they submit a grade petition that is <i>grounded in the assignment rubric</i>. Have them cite specific components in their work they believe should be reconsidered and why.</p>

## Expectations for Course Content / Credibility

Proactive Strategies	Responses to Incivility
<p><b>Review References.</b> Are certain authors underrepresented in course readings, such as women or people with minoritized identities? If so, augment or revise the material. If your course has a lead instructor model, ask what the options are for updating the content.</p> <p><b>Review Examples.</b> What do you know about your students (e.g., career aspirations and goals)? Reach out to department leadership if you're new to teaching in the program, or new to teaching students at a given site. Then look at the course materials. Are there opportunities to add or revise course examples to make them more inclusive and better aligned with student backgrounds and interests? If your course involves data sets, are there opportunities to make those more relevant to the student population?</p> <p><b>Review Assignments.</b> To what extent do students have a choice in selecting a topic or focus for major assignments? It doesn't have to be wide open – you can identify several topics from which they can choose. Providing students with choice can increase their engagement and motivation.</p> <p><b>Do Introductions.</b> Take time to get to know each other on the first day. Let students know how you would like to be addressed. Share stories of your firsthand professional and/or research experience, helping them develop an understanding of your background and why you are equipped to teach the course. Ask students about their professional aspirations to connect their self-interests to the course.</p>	<p><b>Content or Competence?</b> Sometimes challenges to course content take the form of questioning instructor expertise. Keep in mind that other students may not be comfortable with the challenging student's behavior. When you respond to the challenging student, you are also modeling professional, respectful behavior for the whole class.</p> <p>It's okay to admit that you don't have all the answers, especially in rapidly developing fields. But do so with confidence. Invite the student to share any additional resources they think might be valuable.</p> <p>While you are expected to be professional, you also don't need to put up with abuse. If students persist in insulting behavior you are entitled to enlist the support of program leadership, cite the student code of conduct, and <a href="#">report the student to OSCCR</a>.</p> <p><b>Transform Challenges into Inquiry.</b> If students complain about gaps or bias in course content, affirm their commitment to improving the quality of the course and engage the whole class in finding additional sources. For example, create a separate optional discussion in Canvas where students can recommend materials with an explanation of why they are relevant. Be prepared to award extra credit for this additional work, have it count toward participation, or be accepted as an alternative to one of the assignments.</p>

## Expectations for Peers / Groups

Proactive Strategies	Responses to Incivility
<p><b>Form Groups Intentionally.</b> When students form their own groups, they typically choose friends or people of similar identities. If you form the groups, you can attend to factors such as diversity of identities and strengths. This also prevents hurt feelings in people who are chosen last by their peers. Take physical or neurological accommodation needs into consideration as well to maximize inclusion.</p> <p><b>Support Formation and Bonding.</b> Engage groups in icebreakers, low-stake team-building exercises, and the formation of group agreements before they begin the work so they can develop familiarity and shared understanding of their process before the high-stake assignment work begins. Agreements should also clarify what will happen if a group member doesn't do their part.</p> <p><b>Identify Roles.</b> Articulate roles needed to do the work well (e.g., scribe, project manager, meeting organizer) and have groups identify who will play each role. For long-term projects or courses with more than one project, suggest they periodically switch roles for everybody to gain a variety of experience.</p> <p><b>Cue Group to Plan.</b> One group deliverable should be a plan that spells out who will be doing what, the project timeline, and when/how they report on project status.</p> <p><b>Make Individual Accountability Part of the Grade.</b> In longer projects, have the team members regularly evaluate each other, describing at least one thing they appreciate and one request they have for each of their teammates.</p>	<p><b>Encourage Problem-Solving Accountability.</b> If a group comes to you with a complaint about one member, begin by asking about what they have already done to address the problem within the group. Have they spoken with the person? What problem-solving strategies have they tried?</p> <p><b>Focus on Evidence and Observations.</b> Sometimes group members express their dissatisfaction by focusing on a person's personality or affect. Wherever possible, encourage them to stick to that which is observable, what has been tried and what happened. Focus your guidance on concrete strategies as well.</p> <p><b>Use the Agreements.</b> Have students leverage the agreements they formed at the outset to propose solutions to their problems. Have them develop a written plan for steps they will take to get back on track.</p> <p><b>Last Resort.</b> Sometimes an interpersonal problem is truly intractable (e.g., issues with anger management and harassment). If the situation is truly abusive it is okay to remove a person from a group, but only after other less dramatic options have been exhausted. Notify program leadership if it gets to this, so that you can be assured of their support. In addition, your alert may be valuable because the student may be acting out in other ways in other courses.</p>

## For Further Reading

- Center for Teaching and Learning. University of Washington. Dealing with Difficult Classroom Situations. <https://socialwork.uw.edu/sites/default/files/sswfiles/teaching/Dealing%20With%20Difficult%20Classroom%20Situations%202011.pdf>
- Center for Teaching, Research, and Learning. American University. Mac Crite and Shed Siliman. Supporting students and instructors in processing traumatic and hate-based events. [https://american0-my.sharepoint.com/:p/g/person/mcrite\\_american\\_edu/EZFwuXcOUztGiyKTBlgfiXAB1FnITi0aHjwGD4kn6-pFcQ](https://american0-my.sharepoint.com/:p/g/person/mcrite_american_edu/EZFwuXcOUztGiyKTBlgfiXAB1FnITi0aHjwGD4kn6-pFcQ)
- Center for Innovative Teaching. IU Bloomington. Managing Difficult Classroom Discussions. <https://citl.indiana.edu/teaching-resources/diversity-inclusion/managing-difficult-classroom-discussions/index.html>
- Center for Teaching. Vanderbilt. Difficult Dialogues. <https://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/difficult-dialogues>
- Center for Teaching Innovation. Cornell University. Getting Started with Managing Classroom Conflict. <https://teaching.cornell.edu/resource/getting-started-managing-classroom-conflict>
- A Time to Teach Center for Teacher Effectiveness. Crisis Prevention Institute. Rick Dahlgren. Remain Calm & Respond Right When a Student Challenges! [https://platform.crisisprevention.com/CPI/media/Media/Resource-Center/Free-Resources/PDF\\_AUCM.pdf](https://platform.crisisprevention.com/CPI/media/Media/Resource-Center/Free-Resources/PDF_AUCM.pdf)
- Eberly Center. Carnegie Mellon University. Group Projects. <https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/designteach/teach/instructionalstrategies/groupprojects>
- Eberly Center. Carnegie Mellon University. Grade Complaints. <https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/solveproblem/strat-complaininggrades/index.html>
- Harvard Business Publishing. How to Lead Uncomfortable Class Discussions. <https://hbsp.harvard.edu/inspiring-minds/how-to-lead-uncomfortable-class-discussions>
- Inside Higher Education. Identifying and Understanding Classroom Incivility. Courtney Wright. <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2016/10/04/identifying-and-understanding-classroom-incivility-essay>
- Inside Higher Education. Why Faculty Experiences with Incivility Matter. Courtney Wright. <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2017/02/01/exploring-faculty-experiences-incivility-help-deal-it-essay>
- Northeastern University. Code of student conduct. <https://osccr.sites.northeastern.edu/code-of-student-conduct>
- University of Texas Take 5 Blog. 10 Tips for Engaging Students in Discussion on Controversial Topics. <https://sites.utexas.edu/take5/2018/09/10/info-post>