

Community Agreements

What is a Community Agreement? Why make Community Agreements?

A community agreement (also known as group contract, learning agreement or classroom agreement) is a shared agreement between learners about how we want to work together over the course of our time together. This can include guidelines for what it means to be respectful, expectations about turn-taking, or accessibility needs (e.g. please don't bring peanuts to class). Discussing and deciding on how the group will work together builds a collective responsibility to make the classroom a safer place and give students an opportunity to voice their needs in co-developing a productive and equitable learning environment. In building community agreements as a class, we have the chance to foster shared accountability and student buy-in to the learning process.

How to develop a community agreement?

During one of your first classes together, invite students to think about what they need in order to make the class environment safer, equitable, and productive for learning: What would help us work best together? You can do this through individual writing prompts, a think-pair-share, or another active learning strategy. After giving students time to reflect and discuss in small groups, collectively generate a list of agreements. You can also consider asking this question in advance through email or Quercus, and having students contribute digitally to the generation of ideas.

Make sure to clarify what each contribution means. For example, "being respectful" can mean different things in different contexts. Also check for active consent: are these the guidelines that people want to govern the group? Does anyone have concerns about them? Revise these guidelines until the class members are satisfied and feel ready to commit to the collective agreement.

You can also use group agreements for group project work. Allow each group time to develop their own agreements for how they will work together. This may help alleviate the stress of unclear expectations around group work, help students to advocate for themselves and resolve conflicts together.

Looking for suggestions on things to include in a community agreement?

- **Respect**—Give undivided attention to the person who has the floor (permission to speak).
- **Openness**—We will be as open and honest as possible without disclosing others' personal or private issues (e.g., family, roommates, friends). It is okay to discuss situations, but we won't use names or other identifiers. For example, we won't say, "My older brother...", instead we will say, "I know someone who..."
- **Right to pass**—It is always okay to pass (meaning "I'd rather not" or "I don't want to answer").
- **Nonjudgmental approach**—We can disagree with another person's point of view without putting that person down.
- **Taking care to claim our opinions**—We will speak our opinions using the first person and avoid using 'you'. For example, "I think that kindness is important", instead of "You are just mean".
- **Sensitivity to diversity**—We will remember that people in the group may differ in cultural background, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity or gender expression and will be careful about making insensitive or careless remarks.

- **Anonymity**—It is okay to ask any question by using the suggestion box.
- **Acceptance**—It is okay to feel uncomfortable; people feel uncomfortable when they talk about sensitive and personal topics, such as sexuality.
- **Have a good time**—It is okay to have a good time. Creating a safe space is about coming together as a community, being mutually supportive, and enjoying each other's qualities.

Also consider adding:

- **Step up and step back:** This is a tool for thinking about the ways that our participation in classes is often shaped by how we benefit from (or do not benefit from) social relations of power. This asks us to pay attention to how frequently, how long, and how quickly we participate, so that we can check our own (over participation) and step back, or we can notice how we don't take up space, and make an attempt to step up and make our voices heard, especially when we may not often do that.
- **Respect each other's personal space:** Ask for consent before touching another person, ensure that you are giving people their desired space.

How can you enforce a community agreement?

Sometimes participants do not abide by the community agreements they lay out for themselves and others. When that happens, having the agreements that everyone has actively consented to makes it easier to address a particular behaviour. As the tutorial leader or instructor, you can point out the lack of adherence and ask the class collectively how they would like to address it. Or you can point to the agreement and ask the person to change their behaviour so that it aligns with the agreements. Both are useful, and what you do will depend on how much time you have available and how pervasive the problem is. The more you can democratize the enforcement, the more buy-in you are likely to have, so think of this as an exercise in building shared accountability rather than in exercising your authority.

Interested in exploring further resources?

Guide to Implementing TAP: A Peer Education Program to Prevent HIV and STI (2nd edition), © 2002, Advocates for Youth, Washington, DC.

Seeds for Change Guide to Group Agreements: <https://www.seedsforchange.org.uk/groupagree>

For more information about group work contracts:

Hesterman, S. (2016). The digital handshake: A group contract for authentic elearning in higher education. *Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice*, 13(3), 1-24.

Oakley, B., Felder, R. M., Brent, R., & Elhaji, I. (2004). Turning student groups into effective teams. *Journal of Student Centered Learning*, 2(1), 9-34.

Making Group Contracts , Centre for Teaching Excellence, University of Waterloo:
<https://uwaterloo.ca/centre-for-teaching-excellence/teaching-resources/teaching-tips/developing-assignments/group-work/making-group-contracts>.

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