

Ground Rules

What are ground rules?

Ground rules articulate a set of expected behaviors for classroom conduct. They can be set by the instructor or created by the students themselves (some people believe that students adhere more to ground rules they have played a role in creating).

How can we use them?

Ground rules should be established at the beginning of a course, and the instructor should explain the purpose they serve (for example, to ensure that discussions are spirited and passionate without descending into argumentation, to ensure that everyone is heard, to ensure that participants work together toward greater understanding rather than contribute disjointed pieces). Some instructors ask students to sign a contract based on the ground rules; others simply discuss and agree to the ground rules informally. It is important for instructors to remind students of these ground rules periodically, particularly if problems occur (for example, students cutting one another off in discussion or making inappropriate personal comments). Instructors should also be sure to hold students accountable to these rules, for example, by exacting a small penalty for infractions (this can be done in a lighthearted way, perhaps by asking students who violate the rules to contribute a dollar to a class party fund), by factoring conduct during discussions into a participation grade for the course, or by pulling aside and talking to students whose conduct violates the agreed-upon rules.

Sample Ground Rules for Discussions

- Listen actively and attentively.
- Ask for clarification if you are confused.
- Do not interrupt one another.
- Challenge one another, but do so respectfully.
- Critique ideas, not people.
- Do not offer opinions without supporting evidence.
- Avoid put-downs (even humorous ones).
- Take responsibility for the quality of the discussion.
- Build on one another's comments; work toward shared understanding.
- Always have your book/readings in front of you.
- Do not monopolize discussion.
- Speak from your own experience, without generalizing.
- If you are offended by anything said during discussion, acknowledge it immediately.
- Consider anything that is said in class strictly confidential.

Sample Ground Rules for Lectures

- Arrive on time.
- Turn your cell phone off.
- Use laptops only for legitimate class activities (note-taking, assigned tasks).
- Do not leave class early without okaying it with the instructor in advance.
- Ask questions if you are confused.
- Try not to distract or annoy your classmates.

A Method for Helping Students Create Their Own Ground Rules

1. Ask students to think about the best group discussions they have been a part of, and reflect on what made these discussions so satisfying.
2. Next, ask students to think about the worst group discussions in which they have participated and reflect on what made these discussions so unsatisfactory.
3. For each of the positive characteristics identified, ask students to suggest three things the group could do to ensure that these characteristics are present.
4. For each of the negative characteristics identified, ask students to suggest three things the group could do to ensure that these characteristics are not present.
5. Use students' suggestions to draft a set of ground rules to which you all agree, and distribute them in writing.
6. Periodically, ask the class to reflect on whether the ground rules established at the beginning of the semester are working, and make adjustments as necessary.

(Adapted from Brookfield & Preskill, 2005)