Civil Discourse for Citizenship

CENTER FOR ETHICS AND HUMAN VALUES

Be Curious
Be Charitable
Be Conscientious
Be Constructive

Civil Discourse Resources from CEHV for Instructors and Student Program Directors

The 4Cs in your syllabi	CEHV encourages all instructors to link to "**the 4Cs of Civil Discourse**" in their syllabi and utilize them as a way of setting expectations for class discussion. We are happy to provide instructional materials and images, and to communicate about the 4Cs with your classes. Full details of CEHV's "Civil Discourse for Citizenship" program can be found **HERE.**
Online 4Cs training program	CEHV has developed a **free, self-paced online introduction to the 4Cs** with exercises and videos. Students, staff, and faculty may also access it through Carmen – whole classes have done so. Simply contact us to be enrolled. This could also be linked to in a syllabus.
Teaching Endorsement: "Ethical Disagreement and Civil Discourse"	A **4-session instructor training program** hosted by CEHV through the Drake Institute. Participants learn and share strategies for navigating disagreement and difficult conversations in the classroom. Focus is on the 4Cs, how to frame questions, and specific moves to create space for discussion. 29 instructors and program directors participated in Spring 2025. It will be offered both semesters in 2025-2026.
Tailored Small Group Workshops	CEHV offers three types of workshops to student, staff, and faculty groups upon request: 1. Introduction to the 4Cs of civil discourse 2. Facilitated dialogues on a topic challenging a group 3. Introduction to the Shared Values During 2025-2026, CEHV led 52 group workshops all across campus. As autumn semester approaches, we plan to offer some stand-alone sessions for instructors. Visit **cehv.osu.edu** for information.

To coordinate, contact Civil Discourse Program Director Kathryn Joyce (joyce.173@osu.edu)

Be Curious, Charitable, Conscientious, and Constructive

The 4Cs

Engaging others		Responding to others
Humility Try to identify conditions under which you would no longer hold your views	**be Curious** Assume that you have something to learn	**Receptivity** Try to understand how other people's views might inform your own
Empathy Try to describe other people's views in a way that they would recognize and accept	**be Charitable** Assume that each participant has good intentions	**Forgiveness** If someone offends you, be prepared to accept a sincere apology
Fairness Don't exaggerate the strengths of your views or the flaws of others'	**be Conscientious** Listen carefully and speak thoughtfully	**Resilience** Don't be hostile or defensive when your views are challenged
Practicality Look for opportunities to work toward common ground	**be Constructive** Remember that the goal is not to win, but to promote better understanding	**Flexibility** Be prepared to change your views

Civil Discourse for Citizenship

CENTER FOR ETHICS AND HUMAN VALUES

cehv.osu.edu/civil-discourse-citizenship

Be *Curious* ♦ Be *Charitable* ♦ Be *Conscientious* ♦ Be *Constructive*

The 4Cs Guide to Talking about Contentious Social and Political Issues

Navigating conversations on complex and emotionally charged topics is difficult. It can be challenging to separate dissenting opinions from personal attacks. According to Ohio State's Shared Values, being part of the university community means recognizing everyone's potential to contribute new ideas based on their background and experiences and actively engaging multiple perspectives in pursuit of learning and open-minded exploration.

Public universities are excellent sites for civil discourse, a valuable form of democratic engagement. The 4Cs (be Curious, be Charitable, be Conscientious, be Constructive) is a set of virtues that serve as a framework for engaging in civil discourse. The 4Cs can help us have respectful, productive discussions about contentious issues. Doing so is important for maintaining trust and our sense of community at Ohio State during times of political polarization.

Setting up the Conversation

Civil discourse involves explaining and critically examining our beliefs and values with others who may disagree with us. This might make us feel uncomfortable, threatened, or even angry. But it's important to recognize that having our beliefs challenged during civil discourse isn't the same as being silenced and questioning the truth of someone's beliefs isn't the same as questioning their right to hold them.

Productive discourse focuses on a well-defined topic that participants are equipped to explore together. It's important that all participants are clear on the issue or question under consideration. Otherwise, we run the risk of talking past one another, which can result in frustration and misunderstanding rather than progress. For example, rather than launching into a discussion on a broad, multi-faceted topic like "abortion," articulate specific questions like, "Should laws regulating abortion access be determined by states?" or "How should disagreements about the morality of abortion influence laws regarding abortion?" The topic must also be contestable, meaning that reasonable people disagree about it, and it must be articulated such that people with conflicting viewpoints feel comfortable engaging with it. For example, the question "should universities have fair and equitable admissions policies?" isn't contestable since reasonable people generally agree that they should.

Setting the stage for civil discourse also requires understanding its goal:

Goal of Civil Discourse
to gain a better understanding of a topic or of someone else's perspective by engaging in an inquiry together

Civil discourse is only possible when participants share this goal, recognizing that the aim is not to persuade, win, discredit an opposing viewpoint, or take someone down.

Engaging in Civil Discourse

Create an environment in which people feel safe and welcome to share their own ideas and relevant experiences while discussing political issues openly by being ***curious*** and ***charitable***. Discuss those issues fairly and productively by being ***conscientious*** and ***constructive***.

Be ***Curious*** by reserving judgment until you understand what others are saying. Curiosity is a mindset in which you assume that you have something to learn from people who disagree with you about an issue instead of assuming they are misinformed or that you already know what they are going to say. For example, imagine you are talking to someone who says: "we need immigration reform" or "our criminal justice system needs a lot of work." You might feel compelled to challenge the claims that you take these statements to suggest. Instead, respond with curiosity by reminding yourself that you don't yet know what they mean or why they hold their view. Invite them to explain and ask questions, listening to truly understand rather than to prepare a rebuttal.

Listening with curiosity doesn't mean you must constantly second-guess all your thoughts and beliefs. It means being open to the idea that you could learn something or that some of your views could change in some way, even if those changes are just about the reasons or beliefs of those with whom you disagree.

Tips

- Cultivate curiosity by recognizing that the truth is complex and human beings often get things wrong. Scrutinizing our beliefs from different perspectives helps us develop our own thinking about social/political issues, correct misunderstandings, and form better beliefs.
- Keep in mind that intelligent people of good will often disagree about what key concepts mean, how to evaluate relevant evidence, and how to weigh competing values against each other.

Be ***Charitable*** by assuming others have good intentions. People often feel nervous when talking about contentious issues because they are worried about saying the wrong thing, leading to hostile responses or being negatively perceived. We can help others feel more comfortable by being charitable in our interpretation of their words. Let others in the conversation know that you will give them the benefit of the doubt when interpreting their statements and motives—especially if they say something that seems offensive or harmful.

Being charitable involves showing empathy for others by considering how their perspectives are connected to their lived experiences, which might be very different from yours. If you find it difficult to empathize with people who disagree with you about an issue, think about the experiences and circumstances that influence *your* view on that issue. Then, try to imagine circumstances and experiences that would lead you to hold a different view on it.

Tips

- Keep in mind that people who disagree with you are also emotionally attached to their deeply held beliefs. When someone expresses a belief that conflicts with yours, don't assume that they intended to upset you. Consider the possibility that, for them, expressing it was a way of being true to themselves.
- Recognize that harm can occur without wrongdoing. When someone inadvertently upsets you by misunderstanding you or expressing a view that conflicts with yours, be prepared to accept a sincere apology that expresses regret for the negative emotional impact, even if you disagree about whether they did something wrong.
- When talking about political issues like abortion, crime, education, inflation, or immigration, there will be times when others fail to appreciate something that matters deeply to you, such as facts about a community that you care for or the implications of using specific terminology. Instead of becoming defensive or shutting down, give them the benefit of the doubt by gently inviting them to understand your perspective.

It's important to focus on understanding what others are saying, regardless of whether you think they are right or wrong. Demonstrate charity by summarizing what your interlocuter has said in your own words until they agree that you've got it right.

Be ***Conscientious*** by reasoning responsibly when making and evaluating arguments. Consider the merits of arguments for different political positions rather than rejecting or accepting them based on your feelings about them or desire for them to be true or false.

Tips

- Fairly evaluate evidence/reasoning for the views we agree with *and* the views we disagree with.
- Resist the temptation to pay attention to evidence that supports your beliefs while ignoring evidence that challenges them.
- Accurately portray evidence. Common ways of misrepresenting evidence include…
    - Oversimplifying evidence or presenting it as clear-cut, ignoring complexities
    - Using hyperbole or exaggerating what evidence shows, presenting things in terms of extremes
    - Relying on false background assumptions, like assuming that there are only two viable policy options when there could be others
- Recognize that, in these discussions, our ideas and beliefs will be questioned and challenged and prepare to be resilient instead of defensive.
- View challenges to your views as opportunities to…
    - learn from people who disagree with you
    - gain a better understanding of why you disagree
    - examine your own reasons for your beliefs
    - explain that reasoning in ways that are responsive to others' reasons for disagreeing or taking a different position
- Keep in mind that we can question the truth of someone's beliefs without questioning their right to hold them.

Be ***Constructive*** by staying focused on the goal of fostering greater understanding. Use that goal to evaluate the productivity of the conversation. Remember that civil discourse isn't about convincing anyone to endorse your position. Civil discourse is a success when participants gain a better understanding of the issue being discussed, the diversity of positions on that issue, and the strength of the evidence related to those positions. If you find yourself or an interlocuter deviating from the goal, take a step back to acknowledge that and see if you can find a way to return to civil discourse.

Tips

- Look for common ground by figuring out where participants agree and disagree.
- Don't assume that people in a different political party or on the opposite side of an issue have different underlying values.
    - When we disagree about a policy, we should explore the values and reasons underlying the disagreement.
    - Some political disagreements occur because people who hold the same values disagree about the relative weight or implications of those values in certain policy areas.
    - Alternatively, people who hold different values may favor the same policy but for different reasons. Often, different values can support the same policy conclusions.
- Don't assume that people who disagree about an issue are uninformed or misinformed.

    - Discuss the relevant empirical evidence for your opposing positions.
    - If your disagreement is about empirical facts, consider why you disagree about the empirical claims. Are you drawing evidence from different sources? Are you drawing on the same evidence but interpreting it differently?
- Instead of rigidly sticking to your beliefs, be flexible enough to change your mind about something if you encounter evidence or good reasons to do so.
- Engaging in constructive dialogue means being intellectually, emotionally, and practically prepared to change your mind. Even if you don't end up endorsing a different position, you might change your mind about the strength of argument for or against your position or the rationale or motives behind opposing positions.

When wrapping up the conversation, spend a few minutes taking stock of what you've achieved. Identify any new questions that have arisen, any points where participants have changed their minds, any weakness in arguments that have been identified, and any disagreements that have been clarified.

Additional Considerations and Tips

Discourse Across Hierarchies: It is inevitable that you will occupy positions in various hierarchies, regardless of whether these are informal social hierarchies or formal occupational ones. When you are seeking to engage in civil discourse with someone who occupies a lower position in a relevant hierarchy—suppose you are a teacher talking to a student in office hours or a workshop presenter talking to an attendee about a topic of mutual concern rather than simply imparting information to them—you must be especially mindful of the difference between persuasion and civil discourse. Be explicit in asking them to challenge your views (and even help them brainstorm objections) and be suspicious when they concede points too easily.

Emotionally Volatile Discourse: We should never discount the value of someone's contribution to civil discourse merely because they are having a strong emotional reaction to the topic, but we should also not pretend that a chorus of adversarial emotional outbursts is likely to be constructive. A good middle ground is to realize that people differ with respect to the degree to which they are emotionally connected to an issue as well as with respect to their capacities for emotional regulation. Once you realize this, you can seek conditions that allow the unique group of people in front of you to achieve civil discourse. One tip is to select a narrow sub-topic that the group is ready to discuss. Another is to always be ready to jump to a meta-question about how the discourse is going whenever things are starting to get heated. It may be the case that the most useful outcome of the present discussion is to set the stage for future discussions through such meta-reflections. For example, you might shift to discussing how to make discussions more productive or how to proceed when participants disagree about concepts or terminology central to the topic.

Civil Discourse for Citizenship
CENTER FOR ETHICS AND HUMAN VALUES

"Education for Citizenship"

The health of our society depends on continued efforts to learn from and understand each other better, even when we disagree about important matters. While civil discourse is not the only relevant form of democratic engagement, it is the aspect of democratic citizenship that universities are uniquely well-positioned to support.

To learn more about the 4Cs of Civil Discourse take a free online training through Scarlet Canvas.

Be *Curious* ♦ Be *Charitable* ♦ Be *Conscientious* ♦ Be *Constructive*

A Guide for Facilitating Civil Discourse in the Classroom

Civil discourse is dialogue that aims for better understanding among people who are looking for reasonable answers to important questions. Although it requires respect and inclusivity, it is not the practice of being polite or making sure everyone is comfortable. We engage in civil discourse when we discuss issues that matter to us in ways that expand knowledge and promote understanding—even if we don't end up agreeing. In addition to its importance to public life, civil discourse is also valuable in the classroom. Providing students with opportunities to learn and practice civil discourse prepares them to be engaged citizens.

Setting up Class Discussions as Inquiry Dialogues

When aiming for civil discourse, frame the discussion as an inquiry dialogue—be careful not to conflate it with these other dialogue types.[1]

Goals	**Types of Dialogue**
Sharing the burden of holding onto weighty emotions	Empathetic Care
Achieving cathartic release	Eristic Dialogue
Persuading someone or some group to accept your belief	Debate
Deciding on a course of action	Deliberation
Resolving conflicting interests	Negotiation
Imparting knowledge	Direct Instruction
Collaboratively searching for answers to philosophical questions	**Inquiry Dialogue**

Instead of discussing a general *topic* (e.g., immigration, healthcare, racial justice), the discussion should focus on a specific *question.* This is important for making progress and it indicates how students can contribute.

Questions for inquiry dialogues must be:

- *Central* to an important topic, debate, experience, etc.
- *Common,* in the sense of being accessible and relevant to all of the participants
- *Contestable*, in the sense of being open to reasonable disagreement

Questions should be formulated in a neutral way instead of in a way that suggests a "correct" or "virtuous" answer. Students shouldn't feel pressured or expected to give a certain answer. To guard against that, choose a question that you can imagine your students answering differently in good faith,

[1] This table and the majority of the material in this section was created by Dr. Aaron Yarmel, Associate Director of CEHV.

without fear of judgment. There are many different questions that can be raised about a topic. If you cannot come up with a neutral formulation of a question that meets the above criteria, the topic may not be appropriate for civil discourse in your classroom.

Here are some **examples** of inquiry dialogue questions related to controversial topics:

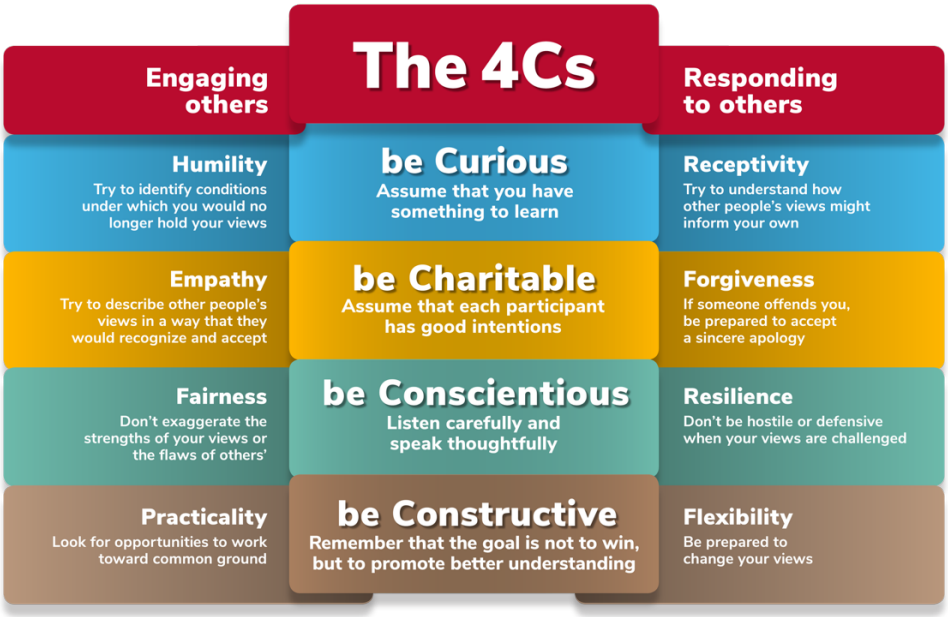
- What does "Zionism" mean?
- What is courage?
- What factors should states weigh when deliberating about whether to accept an asylum-seeker?
- Do animals have rights?
- Do fetuses have morally significant interests?
- Should transwomen be allowed to compete in women's sports?
- Is retribution a legitimate justification for prisons?

The **Text-Self-Inquiry** process is one method that you can use on your own or with your students to find an inquiry dialogue question:

- **Text**: ask a question about the meaning of something in a text (e.g., what were Dr. King's criteria for distinguishing between just and unjust laws?)
- **Self:** ask a question that relates the central text question to the self (e.g., what are rules that have impacted you that you think are unjust?)
- **Inquiry:** generalize the self-oriented question so it is contestable (e.g., what makes a rule unjust?)

Using the 4Cs of Civil Discourse to Engage in Class Discussions

The 4Cs (be Curious, be Charitable, be Conscientious, be Constructive) is a framework for engaging in civil discourse created by CEHV with input from OSU faculty, staff, and students.



For inquiry dialogues to be successful, students need to know how to participate. We suggest asking them to practice the 4Cs. Doing so helps keep the discussion respectful and productive. Additionally, the 4Cs is useful for diagnosing what is going wrong in discussions and provides shared concepts that you can use to get back on track.

Using the 4Cs involves striving to *understand* the ideas being shared before *responding* to or *evaluating* them (e.g., by expressing disagreement, raising an objection, or explaining one's own conflicting viewpoint).

You can introduce your students to the 4Cs by assigning a brief asynchronous training through Carmen Canvas (*instructions included below; link more information).* The "4Cs Guide to Talking About Contentious Social and Political Issues" (*included in this pdf*) is also a useful resource.

Suggestions for Practicing the 4Cs in Class:

Be ***Curious***

- Collaboratively identify the different positions one could take on the issue under discussion or the answers one could give to your inquiry dialogue question; Work together to come up with reasons why someone might endorse each answer or position; Consider reasons for rejecting each answer or position.
- Ask a student to summarize a point that you or another student made in their own words (don't let them just repeat it back in the same language). This challenges them to consider whether they really understand and helps them identify questions they might still have.
- When students disagree with claim X from a reading, don't just ask why they disagree--ask them to consider why someone might think X is true, or, if they agree with X, ask why someone might reject X.

Be ***Charitable***

- Ask students who disagree to summarize one another's views, clarifying and rephrasing until their interlocuter agrees that it is an accurate, complete description of their view.
- Reconstruct arguments or ideas from readings in the most charitable way possible.
- Explicitly compare different possible interpretations and discuss which is most charitable.
- Remind students to give each other the benefit of the doubt, especially when someone says something offensive.
- Introduce terminology so students can express their ideas without worrying that they will use the wrong words—it can be hard to give someone the benefit of the doubt when they use language that some find offensive or that has negative associations/hidden meanings.

Be ***Conscientious***

- Be sure to hold everyone to the same standard—it can be easy to accept poor reasoning or exaggerated evidence for views we accept while holding students who disagree to a higher standard.
    - Example: When students cite personal experiences to justify their positions or opinions, it can be tempting to treat some experiences as valid reasons while discounting others as mere anecdotes.
- Discuss good sources of evidence, reasoning skills.
- Call attention to common instances of bad reasoning.
- Explicitly tell students that *all* views expressed in class will be critically examined.
- Invite students to offer views for the sake of argument or to "test" them, regardless of whether they accept them; then defensiveness won't be their natural response.
- Be sure to challenge arguments, not people, even when discussing readings (when possible).

Be ***Constructive***

- Remind students that learning from one another and working toward reasonable answers to important questions is the main goal. In civil discourse, success doesn't depend on convincing anyone to accept our view, nor does it depend on whether the result is agreement or disagreement.
- Explicitly highlight what's been achieved (besides agreement or disagreement), e.g., a better understanding of the question being discussed, the diversity of viewpoints held by different participants, and the strength of evidence that relates to these different viewpoints.
- Be as precise as possible when making claims, explicitly consider options for understanding ambiguities (e.g., "the author's argument fails" could mean that the author's conclusion is *false* or *unsupported).*
- Highlight points of agreement and disagreement, try to pinpoint what underlies conflicting conclusions/viewpoints.
- Identify each reason for a conclusion and examine them individually to diagnose disagreements.
- Determine whether disagreements are about facts or values—ask students to identify values at stake and what facts are relevant to the question.
- Consider whether there are concrete points of agreement that are consistent with the underlying disagreement (e.g., we can agree on a policy for different reasons).

Additional Considerations and Tips

Keeping the following in mind can help you facilitate civil discourse in your classroom.

- Offense is not the same as harm (e.g., hearing someone defend their atheism may offend a religious student, but doesn't harm them); focus on preventing harm by asking questions that are genuinely open to *reasonable* disagreement by well-meaning people and keeping class discussions on track when emotions are running high.
- Discomfort is not always a bad thing.
- Be prepared to pivot to a more general question if a discussion isn't going well
    - Examples: Why is this topic so difficult to talk about? How should people talk about an important topic when they can't agree on appropriate terminology?

Civil Discourse for Citizenship

CENTER FOR ETHICS AND HUMAN VALUES

How to use CEHV's asynchronous training on the 4Cs of Civil Discourse in your class

1. Email your class roster to Kathryn Joyce (joyce.173@osu.edu) and request that your students be added to "Introduction to the 4Cs of Civil Discourse" on Carmen.
    a. Rosters must contain students' name.# in the first column. Instructors can obtain a roster in this format by selecting the relevant course in Aegis and selecting 'Export Roster.'

2. Instruct students to do the exercises in the 4Cs training on a separate document.

3. Create an assignment in the Carmen site for your course where students can upload the document with their exercises.

Be Curious
Be Charitable
Be Conscientious
Be Constructive