

Principles of Civil Discourse Primer



SPHERE
EDUCATION INITIATIVES

Table of Contents

Overview	2
Civil Discourse	3
What does successful civil discourse look like?	4
Essential Skills of Civil Discourse and Civility	4
Civil Discourse Starts with You	5
How do I contribute to conversations on sensitive topics?	5
How can I use AWARE in a conversation?	6
Bringing Civil Discourse to Your Community	7
How do I implement discussion norms for a school-wide community?	8
How do I implement discussion norms for my class?	9
Pedagogical Strategies for Engaging Students	9
Setting Up the Learning Environment	10
Preparing Yourself	11
Bridging the Gap to Sensitive and Challenging Topics	11
Advanced Approaches to Civil Discourse	12
Home-to-School Connection	13
Example Template	13
Parent Tip Sheet	14
Notes	16
About Sphere	18



Overview

Educational institutions are a vital part of teaching the next generation about civic values and democratic citizenship. As an educator, you are in a unique position to influence your students and inspire them to create change in their communities and beyond. To promote and preserve the foundations of a successful democracy, students need to learn key civil discourse skills that will help to build and reinforce civility, the respect for others in our society.

The aim of the Sphere Education Initiatives' Principles of Civil Discourse unit is to help empower you as an educator to foster civil discourse in your school community. In this unit, you will find a suite of materials you can use, including lesson plans, helpful handouts, and classroom displays. Each resource is designed to be interdisciplinary and adaptable for all learning audiences.

In this primer, you will find introductory information on skills, best practices for establishing discussion norms and brave learning environments for students, methods for encouraging civil discourse outside the classroom by establishing a school-to-home connection, and helpful tips for sharing the positive impacts of bringing civil discourse to your school community.

This toolkit is intended to support you in establishing a civil discourse framework to promote discussions of a wide range of topics, including those covered in our modules on Foundations of Civics and Economics, Policy and Current Events, and Human Progress. By creating a strong foundation for civil discourse about pressing issues and using viewpoint-diverse subject matter, you will empower the next generation to improve civic culture in America.

Civil Discourse

In the 17th century, English philosopher John Locke noted that while a group of individuals may agree to talk about a specific topic, their interpretations of it will inevitably vary. Being able to confer as citizens about subjects that may be divisive helps to advance the goals of a civil society. These discussions, known as civil discourse, are a foundational element critical to sustaining a democracy.

In the United States our governing documents protect the right to freedom of religion, assembly, publication, petitioning, and speech. That protection enables civilians freely to discuss government, injustice and justice, war and peace, freedom and power, and other topics concerning life “one amongst another.” Conversations may go awry when participants are so impassioned, they refuse to listen to one another. Therefore, we can view civil discourse as a strategy that takes practice and skill building.

As defined by the National Institute for Civil Discourse at the University of Arizona in 2011, civil discourse is the “robust, honest, frank and constructive dialogue and deliberation that seeks to advance the public interest.” However, to achieve a successful outcome, participants need to be willing to listen to another viewpoint. Civil discourse, then, is the mechanism by which people in a healthy society interact and overcome their inevitable disagreements in a peaceable manner.



What does successful civil discourse look like?

To build understanding, participants hold honest conversations to share respectfully their perspectives. It is not a competition about viewpoints but rather an opportunity to lean in and listen to a different point of view.

Civil discourse is:

- Factual and based on evidence
- Productive
- Based on knowing one's audience (keeping in mind their identities and experiences)
- Active listening
- Taken one topic at a time
- Based on the responsibility of participant to engage in good faith and to stay goal oriented to build mutual understanding

Civil discourse is not:

- Mere politeness and cordiality
- Focused only on persuading others to accept one's viewpoint
- Imposition of one's beliefs on others
- A debate or a fight (see pg. 11 for more about this distinction)
- A space to use stereotypes, name-calling, bias, or belittling to get your viewpoint across

As a habit of citizenship, civil discourse ought to occur in any setting where two or more people converse and disagree.

Essential Skills of Civil Discourse and Civility

Our Principles of Civil Discourse unit focuses on the following essential skills. These elements align with the C3 Framework and CASEL standards.

- Active listening
- Connection with others
- Reason and evidence for claims
- Stating perspectives
- Inclusion of all discussion members
- Respect

These skills highlight the concept of civility with a focus on inclusion and respect for others. Remember, engaging in civil discourse and being civil are not simply a matter of prioritizing politeness. They can lead to constructive disagreement, which is a productive framework for sharing ideas. For an educator, it is important to model the skills of civility so that others can learn from you. Learning these techniques will create a foundation for fostering civil discourse for your school community.





Civil Discourse Starts with You

As an educator, you interact with multiple stakeholders daily. At times, you may engage in conversations about sensitive topics. It is important to be proactive and to build self-awareness of how you share your views and how you react when you hear other perspectives on issues you are passionate about.

The Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts crafted a Civility Self-Reflection Exercise that can be used to gauge and better understand how you participate in difficult discussions. Reflecting on how you approach and respond to others about sensitive topics is a valuable start to building the skills for practicing civil discourse.

How do I contribute to conversations on sensitive topics?

A framework can strengthen and support you in approaching sensitive subjects with others. The American Psychological Association recommends the following tips to use as a strategy when participating in these conversations.

- Find areas where you agree
- Be open and kind
- Keep calm when tensions rise
- Have conversation goals
- Accept that you may not change the other person's mind
- Remember that disagreement is okay
- Know when to end the conversation

Being **AWARE** will help you remember this guidance and apply the skills of civil discourse when participating in sensitive conversations.

Assert: Assert your viewpoint with intellectual honesty, using credible facts. Find possible areas of agreement on the topic.

Wonder: Consider who the other participant is. Are they a colleague, friend, family member? What is their viewpoint and why do they have it? How have their identity, socialization, and experience influenced their perspective?

Accept: Accept that you may not be able to change the other participant's viewpoint and that yours might change. Acknowledge that this is an opportunity to share viewpoints rather than convince others you are correct. *Remember, disagreement is okay and is part of civil discourse!*

Respect: Respect the other participant. Do not use stereotypes, name-calling, bias, or belittling to get your point across.

Establish: Establish outcomes and keep your conversation goal oriented. Be proactive if the discussion is escalating; move to a different topic. Reinforce that you and the other participant may still engage in conversation and maintain the present relationship.



How can I use AWARE in a conversation?

In the following example, an English teacher receives an unprompted phone call from a parent asking why he or she is assigning a book. The parent is concerned that the content is graphic and includes themes that are inappropriate for their child's grade level. The English teacher believes the text is grade-level appropriate and a vital part of the curriculum.

The English teacher is **AWARE** and knows this is an opportunity to engage in civil discourse. The teacher can use the following sentence starters to frame the conversation. Please keep in mind that sometimes the order will need to be flipped for **Assert** and **Wonder**.

Assert: "I agree with _____ because _____. I hear you say _____ and I think _____. I think _____, and my evidence is _____."

Wonder: "Can you tell me more about your experience and why you feel the book is inappropriate? I want to better understand your ideas."

Accept: "I think _____ because _____. I agree/disagree on _____. However, I understand what you are saying about _____. I appreciate hearing your viewpoints on _____."

Respect: The English teacher does not use any expletives, name-calling, stereotyping, or aggressive terms to describe the parent, their parenting style, or their viewpoint. If the situation escalates, the teacher can directly **establish** an end to the conversation.

Establish: "I understand your concerns and want to remind you that I am a partner with you in your child's learning. May I recommend _____ resources that will provide context to the benefits of the text and why we chose it? I am interested in seeing resources you have and continuing the conversation because your voice matters and it is important that you feel supported in understanding our school curriculum."

The teacher in this situation remembered to be **AWARE** in this discussion with the parent. It is essential to remember that the intent of civil discourse is to not make it personal and to leave the door open for further conversation.

Bringing Civil Discourse to Your Community

Practicing civil discourse in your school community will have a positive impact in creating a space that fosters free speech in a respectful and civil manner. All school staff play an important part in modeling and encouraging civil discourse for their school community.

Creating brave learning environments encourages both students and staff to feel that they can bring their whole selves to a space. The strategy of our Principles of Civil Discourse unit is to enable you, as the educator, to promote civil discourse skill building to encourage viewpoint diversity and to help students use it as a framework to examine pressing issues.



Establishing universal discussion norms school-wide and at the classroom level is an important first step to creating a brave space for civil discourse to occur. Having universal discussion norms helps create efficient procedures and establishes clear expectations for students. We recommend the following rules in addition to some you may cocreate with students to support your school community's conversations:

- Actively listen
- Stay on topic
- Build on each other's ideas
- Do not interrupt
- Disagree respectfully
- Encourage everyone to speak
- Explain your thinking with reasons and evidence

How do I implement discussion norms for a school-wide community?

- Start by considering your school community. Do you have any discussion norms in place currently? If so, what works and what needs to be revised? Are there events that have happened that set a precedent for how discussions proceed?
- Discuss the benefits of implementing a universal school-wide approach with staff. Consider what is most important to include and set aside faculty meeting time to discuss. Refer to the classroom displays included in this unit to put in your school and adapt as needed for your community.
- Introduce to students at any point of the year in a school assembly or as part of a universal approach on a specific day by staff in every subject. Explain the importance of establishing discussion norms and why they will be helpful for the practice of civil discourse in school.





How do I implement discussion norms for my class?

Introduce the concept of discussion norms and their importance to your class. Invite your students to create a class contract that holds all participants—students and faculty—accountable for upholding the discussion norms. Such contracts may look different depending on grade and subject, but the intent is to invite students to be part of this conversation and have them take ownership of establishing a brave learning space.

Throughout the classroom, display the discussion norms posters supplied in this unit and additional norms your class brainstormed so students may refer to them throughout the year.

Pedagogical Strategies for Engaging Students

Our Principles of Civil Discourse unit lessons focus on the development of essential skills that align with both the **C3 Framework** and **CASEL** to help students communicate effectively.

As outlined previously, the following are the skills we focus on:

- Active listening
- Connection
- Stating perspectives
- Reason and evidence for claims
- Inclusion
- Respect

Students can develop these skills and apply them to discuss their conceptual knowledge of a topic with others during civil discourse. Those skills will help them in terms both of articulating their views and of listening to other perspectives so they can build greater understanding about the topic. Over time, such skill building will help students establish habits for healthy discourse about challenging subjects.

Each lesson is interdisciplinary and focuses on giving students opportunities to engage with each other through a variety of activities that practice the skills of civil discourse.

Remember that civil discourse is not the same as a debate or a group dialogue. The [University of Michigan's Program on Intergroup Relations](#) clearly outlines the differences between discussion, debate, and dialogue. The distinctions they identified include the following:

Discussion

- Is goal oriented and solution based
- Is viewpoint diverse
- Fosters understanding
- Involves active participation

Debate

- Focuses on success
- Is defense oriented
- Aims to counter other perspectives, not learn from them

Dialogue

- Learning from each other
- Aims to find commonality
- Requires active listening

Our lessons focus on discussion-oriented activities to help students practice civil discourse and articulate their ideas and back them with credible evidence. They are designed to help students build skills that will enable them to be confident and comfortable sharing their viewpoints in class. Note that this can take time and will require reinforcement as you enter discussions of topics that are sensitive or challenging in your subject-specific discipline or as a school community. This includes bringing the strategy of **AWARE** to students.



Setting Up the Learning Environment

As you prepare to bring civil discourse lessons to your school, consider the physical space in which you will be teaching. Ensure that you have the discussion norms displayed where all students can see them and remind students of these norms before you begin.



Consider the type of lesson you will be implementing for the day and set up your desks in a way that fosters communication to support your lesson. *If you change the seating arrangements, be mindful of student dynamics, cognitive levels, heterogeneous or homogeneous grouping, and the possible need to let students know ahead of time that their seats will be moved.* The Yale Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning outlines dynamic roundtable, horseshoe, and group desk setups to support discussion-based learning. Additionally, you may find the

fishbowl strategy with inner and outer circles of students or a “pairs to quads to whole class” method beneficial for engaging students in discussions. Depending on your space, any of these desk setups may be used.

Preparing Yourself

The lessons in our Principles of Civil Discourse unit are designed to help you concentrate on skill building rather than topics of conversation with your students. When ready, you can apply the skills from the lessons in the Civil Discourse unit to discussion of more challenging issues.

Bridging the Gap to Sensitive and Challenging Topics

Assess in advance what students know about a subject by using strategies such as a KWL (know, want to learn, learned) chart, and invite them to consider how they know what they know. Ask whether their reason is credible or what evidence they have to back up their opinions. Ask if there is any argument, fact, or evidence that might lead them to change their opinions. Spark inquiry by shifting their attention to generating questions about the topic and having them explore the various viewpoints. Invite students to share their views in discussion activities that strengthen their civil discourse skills. Ensure that pupils are given opportunities to reflect on their experience after the discussion is complete. As your students practice civil discourse skills, introduce opportunities for them to engage in conversation on matters in which they are well versed, as well as ones in which they are not. (That mirrors real life, in

which they will at times enter into discussions with little notice.) This will help to build healthy habits for the many scenarios they may encounter in life.

As an educator, you are responsible for knowing aspects of the subject matter, but it would be impossible to know everything. In facilitating civil discourse, the goal is to let students lead and to have them investigate the topics so as to craft their own point. From there, they can critically think and engage with others in civil discourse on a given topic.

Advanced Approaches to Civil Discourse

Establishing conversation norms with your class as a community early on and practicing civil discourse on less controversial issues will help position your students to have healthy and productive conversations on challenging or sensitive topics later. In crafting your conversation norms as a class and revisiting them periodically, remember to keep the norms structured around how to have healthy conversations respectfully, regardless of the topic.

A challenge you may face in fostering civil discourse in your classroom is that some topics may be deemed problematic or out of hand by various stakeholders. While many communities may do this to create a safe space for students, predefining dialogue that can occur can be problematic for encouraging debate and discourse. It is important to identify these topics and find space to discuss how students can have healthy meaningful conversations around topics that are sensitive or challenging.

Reinforce to your classroom community that the goal of civil discourse is to learn from others and to find mutual understanding, rather than achieving mutual agreement. It is vital to convey to your students the outcome: learning and mutual understanding. Invite students to consider other perspectives, to challenge their own, and to learn something new that helps them better understand a topic. Ultimately, creating a culture of civil discourse and curiosity among your students better prepares them to engage in conversation, debate, and



disagreements throughout their lives. Such habituation is crucial, as they will not have the benefit of your classroom and community in their daily lives or in their civic participation.

Home-to-School Connection

Building a home-to-school connection is a critical component of supporting students. Proactively fostering relationships with parents helps to invite them into the conversation, to build trust, and to demonstrate how you are reinforcing their child's learning. Sending an email to parents sharing discussion norms and resources that they may reference to continue civil discourse skill building at home, such as our parent tip sheet, is one positive way to involve them. In anticipation of lessons on challenging or sensitive topics, you can refer parents to the norms you shared with them previously to remind them of expectations you have for students involving civil discourse in school and how they can continue the conversation strategies at home.

It is important to know your student and parent populations before discussing a sensitive or challenging issue. While you may not be aware of all concerns ahead of time, you can be proactive by sending home information about the topic, including why it is salient to discuss, and letting students know in advance so they can prepare.

Example template

Greetings, Parents and Guardians.

As part of our unit on _____, we will be discussing _____ (insert topic here) on _____ (insert dates for lessons). This topic is a critical aspect of our unit because _____. In class, students will have an opportunity to learn about the subject through _____. Students will be expected to employ our discussion norms to practice civil discourse in our class conversations about _____.

Our discussion norms are attached to this email for your reference, along with a tip sheet you may use to engage your child in conversation about the topic. I invite you to also explore this great website on _____ (insert topic) to learn more about _____ (insert topic).

For more information on the lesson, please email me.

Thank you,

While engaging parents can be quite helpful, do not avoid these conversations with students even when you are not able to build those relationships with parents. As an educator, you are a role model for courageous conversations with civil discourse!

PARENT TIP SHEET

What is civil discourse?

As defined by the National Institute for Civil Discourse at the University of Arizona in 2011, civil discourse is the “robust, honest, frank and constructive dialogue and deliberation that seeks to advance the public interest.”

Civil discourse is:

- Factual and based on evidence
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Why is the practice being implemented in my child's classes?

Practicing civil discourse has a positive impact in creating a space that fosters free speech in a respectful and civil manner. Students will have an opportunity to build the skills of civil discourse, to apply the skills to analyze different viewpoints from class discussions and research, and then to use their critical thinking skills to evaluate the views and form their own viewpoint. Civil discourse helps to lead a meaningful life and to be a citizen of a constitutional and democratic republic. The intent is for this to not be just an activity in class but a practice that develops into a habit for life.



How do I support my child in practicing civil discourse at home?

Modeling civil discourse both at home and at school helps children further develop their skill set. You might discuss topics your child is learning at school and ask them to explain how they developed their viewpoint. Reinforce the importance of having credible evidence for their reasoning and spark their curiosity to learn more by engaging in discourse about the topic they are studying. We recommend implementing the following discussion norms and we invite you to add your own.

Civil discourse is:

- Active listening
- Connection with others
- Reason and evidence for claims
- Stating perspectives
- Inclusion of all discussion members
- Respect



About Sphere

Sphere Education Initiatives is a nonpartisan organization that works with grades 5-12 educators and administrators to provide them with the knowledge, experience, professional development, and viewpoint diverse resources to bring difficult conversations on the most pressing issues to the classroom and equip our country's students to engage in civil discourse.

For more information please visit sphere-ed.org/publication/principles-civil-discourse-primer or contact Allan Carey, Director, Sphere Education Initiatives at acarey@sphere-ed.org





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