# **Student Conflict in the Online Classroom**

**“Broadly defined, classroom incivility is any action that interferes with a harmonious and cooperative learning atmosphere in the classroom. Uncivil student behavior not only disrupts and negatively affects the overall learning environment for students but also contributes to instructors’ stress and discontent.”**

– The Center for Teaching & Learning, UC Santa Cruz

## The Basics of Classroom Incivility

Instructors identify various student behaviors as annoying, rude, and disruptive; these are the most common we’ve noticed at CCCOnline:

Dominating discussion—The student who won’t let anyone else engage in discussions, or always responds to everything.

Aggressive challenges to the instructor—The student questioning your authority, expressing anger about grading, or generally undermining your ability to teach.

Disputes between students; demeaning comments—When classroom discussion gets out of hand, or a student uses demeaning or stereotyping language.

### Why Incivility Occurs

Anonymity of online courses which may lead to students not viewing their professors and classmates as “real people.”

Different expectations of so-called millennial students, who see themselves as “consumers” of education.

It can often be driven by stress over financial concerns.

Younger or new students may not be accustomed to more rigorous standards in college courses.

### Dealing with Incivility

It is reasonable for you to expect students to behave in a civil manner towards you as well as towards their classmates.

Remember – you control your class. You will have to decide which behaviors you can tolerate or adapt to, and which are unacceptable in your class.

Constant disruptions prevent others from receiving an education, interfere with your ability to carry out your instructional responsibilities, and create a negative work environment for you.

### What’s the Official Word?

We are here to help you!

[CCCOnline Mutual Respect Policy](http://www.ccconline.org/ccconline-mutual-respect-policy/)

The [CCCOnline Student Guidebook](http://www.ccconline.org/is-online-for-me/student-handbook/) outlines student expectations and consequences. Students are sent the link to the guidebook at the start of EVERY semester.

For student misconduct (incivility) issues:

You will be asked to try and resolve the conflict with the student. If this is unsuccessful, you should contact your CCCOnline Department Chair and then your Associate Dean (AD).

If the issue is not resolved at the AD level, the CCCOnline Chief Student Affairs Officer (CSAO) will have the final decision. This decision will be communicated to you and the student.

At the jurisdiction of the CSAO and/or for repeated student misconduct offenses, the CSAO will contact the student’s home college and notify the appropriate person(s) of the student’s misconduct.

## Preventing and Resolving Incivility in Your Online Classroom

### Be Aware of What Might Cause Conflict

Within the course you are teaching, it is a good idea to be cognizant of areas of potential conflict students might encounter – conflict that is interpersonal or even internal (Kelly, 2013).

As you anticipate areas of interpersonal controversy, inform students in clear terms about your expectations regarding appropriate discourse and classroom behavior (Kelly, 2013). Again, our [Mutual Respect Policy](http://www.ccconline.org/ccconline-mutual-respect-policy/) might be a helpful reminder.

During the course, you may see signs of conflict or, at least, unease. Outside of the obvious heated discussion board posts, other discussion board behavior may reveal that students are internally conflicted or have strong emotions about a topic (Kelly, 2013). Long posts, for instance, “may indicate a student’s attempts to come to terms with a controversy,” while short posts “may indicate a reluctance to discuss a particularly difficult issue.” And of course, some students may contact you and tell you they are upset, in which case your role is to be supportive (Kelly, 2013).

If your course will include group work, it would be helpful to emphasize conflict and disagreement within a team are normal by-products of teamwork, and “a sign of learning and growth” (Morrison, 2014). Still, certain foundational steps may prevent the kind of team conflict that is counterproductive, including, again, clear expectations; a clear purpose and significant grade percentage associated with the group work in the syllabus; and a “team charter” developed by the students themselves (Dool, 2007). For more useful tips on the topic, see [Mitigating conflict in online student teams](http://elearnmag.acm.org/featured.cfm?aid=1229760).

### Make Expectations Clear

Write a statement for the syllabus, framed as positively as possible, communicating the civil behavior you expect of students, and refer to the Student Guidebook for support.

Where possible, you may wish to have students create their own “rules of engagement.”

### Do Your Part to Create a Civil Climate

Treat students with respect. Treat them as adults. Respect their ability to learn.

Establish a method for airing grievances.

Reduce anonymity in the classroom.

### Responding to Specific Kinds of Incivility

Dominating Discussions

These students often don’t see themselves as “uncivil.”

They may perceive themselves as “rescuing” you from a bad discussion.

If it happens:

Stay positive in your comments. For example: “Thanks, < >, I’d like to bring more people into the conversation.”

If it persists, contact the student directly: say how you appreciate their eagerness and involvement, but that more learning can occur if more people participate.

If they are or become aggressive or rude, see the following sections.

Aggressive challenges to the instructor

These, along with bullying behavior are, unfortunately, becoming increasingly common. These students can identify and exploit the instructor’s insecurities.

The sense of anonymity of online courses can increase these tendencies in students.

Being very organized and prepared can reduce perceptions of insecurity among the students.

If it happens:

Don’t get emotional!

If it’s about a specific issue (e.g., grade problem) contact the student directly.

If they are challenging your authority, avoid discussing with them within the class; contact them directly.

If the challenge concerns wider issues (e.g., policies) you may want to ask the rest of class if this is an issue for them as well.

When contacting the student directly:

Try to identify the specific issue and stick with it.

Express an interest in the student’s point of view.

Be sure to give them a chance to reply.

Try not to be defensive.

Explain policies, grading, etc., but don’t get into a long defense.

If you’re wrong, admit it gracefully.

If you’re feeling pressured, take some time to respond.

If it becomes serious or you are unsure how to proceed, contact your chair, AD or Student Affairs.

Don’t suffer in silence!

Keep a record of correspondence with the student.

If you need to delete inappropriate student posts in a discussion, we recommend following our [guidelines for removing posts from student view](https://kb.ccconline.org/article.php?id=308) while retaining the ability to view them yourself.

If you talk with them by phone or in person, follow it up with email summarizing what was said.

We CAN remove a student from a class if necessary.

Finally, if a student threatens to sue (which is more common than you think), have them contact CCCOnline Student Affairs.

If they threaten to go to a president, state rep, gov, etc., they can, and will likely be referred back to CCCOnline Student Affairs.

### Disputes Between Students

Remind student of policies for respectful communication, and ask them to read over the CCCOnline Student Guidebook.

State clearly that you will not tolerate demeaning comments of any type.

One way to help a student out of a dispute is to use the following phrase: “I think many of us interpret what you said as meaning x. Is that what you meant?”

Remind students that getting passionate about an issue is great, but comments must be constructive and personal attacks should be avoided.

Be aware that disputes can escalate to include other violations (e.g., sexual harassment or civil rights violations).

## In Conclusion

Preview your course to be aware of what might cause conflict (among or within students).

If you have a disruptive or uncivil situation arise, don’t panic!

Your chair, AD and CCCOnline Student Affairs are here to help!

At any time, if you feel uncomfortable dealing with student incivility, contact your chair, AD or Student Affairs!

If you ever have any questions or concerns, please feel free to contact the CCCOnline Student Affairs office at [advising@ccconline.org](mailto:advising@ccconline.org).

References

Dool, R. (2007, February). Mitigating conflict in online student teams. ELearn Magazine. <http://elearnmag.acm.org/featured.cfm?aid=1229760>

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Morrison, D. (2014, February 17). Five Essential Skills Instructors Need to Facilitate Online Group Work & Collaboration. Online Learning Insights. <https://onlinelearninginsights.wordpress.com/2014/02/17/five-vital-skills-instructors-need-to-facilitate-online-group-work-collaboration/>