

THE *Laker's* **GUIDE TO** **CIVIL DISCOURSE**

An Honors Senior Project
by Samantha Johnson



Please understand that this guide is written with the intention of use when dialogue conditions are met. If certain conditions - like personal safety - are not met, these guidelines will not be applicable.

GVSU Mission

At Grand Valley State University, we empower learners in their pursuits, professions, and purpose. The university enriches society through excellent teaching, active scholarship, advancement of equity, and public service.

GVSU Vision

Grand Valley State University will prepare globally-minded citizens for the future they face and the communities they shape. Our community of educators create and employ innovative approaches to liberal education and professional programs that center on and prepare students for a lifetime of continual learning and growth.

“Let us remember that at the end of the day, we all belong to one another. It is our shared responsibility - as members of the Laker community and the human family – to continue to dialogue, to ask questions, seek solutions, and look for the best in each other. As we do so - across differences, and with respect and dignity for each other – we will become smarter, stronger, better and more human, together.”

- GVSU Dean of Students Expressive Activity Policy

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1	IMPLICATIONS OF 'CIVIL'
2	WHAT DO WE MEAN BY CIVIL DISCOURSE?
3	CIVIL DISCOURSE GUIDELINES
4	MORE TIPS & TRICKS
5	PREPARE, ENGAGE, EXIT
7	EXPERIENCES INFORM PERSPECTIVES
8	BRAVE VS SAFE SPACES
9	WHAT IF...?
11	PERSONAL REFLECTION PROMPTS
12	GLOSSARY OF TERMS
13	GVSU RESOURCES
15	SOURCES

IMPLICATIONS OF THE WORD

”CIVIL”

Definition *civ·il*

civilized: adequate in courtesy and politeness (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

Q: So I should put on my best ‘West Michigan Nice’ voice and not share what I really think for the sake of civility and politeness?

A: Nope! Everyone deserves to be heard and respected, and also to feel safe in their own identities. While that sometimes makes disagreements complicated, it doesn't mean we should minimize or silence our own values for civility's sake. Rather, civil discourse is about a commitment to listening and recognizing our shared humanity.

So... What do we mean by civil discourse?

It is **not** about...

Polite conversation

Agreeing to disagree

Tone-policing people

It **is** about...

Listening across difference to
increase shared understanding
around a public issue



CIVIL DISCOURSE GUIDELINES

- Listen to understand
- Use 'I' statements
- Speak from lived experience; tell stories
- Avoid 'but' and fighting words
- Speak to grow the conversation: connect what you say to what the other person just said and build on each others' perspectives
- Rather than focusing on points of disagreement, focus on the values behind each person's perspective
- Consider your own gray areas or any mixed feelings/uncertainty you might have about an aspect of your position. Talk about each others' gray areas. These are conversation openings.
- Remember "each person has something to teach me," even if it is hard to recognize
- You have a right to be understood and so does the other person—remain curious about the other person's perspectives (why does this person hold this position? Why do you hold yours? What are the life experiences that have shaped people's positions?). If possible, share about your life experiences.
- Accept that you are trying to be understood, not trying to change the other person's mind. Let this sentiment guide what and how you share.
- Know when to 'hit pause.' Whether it's taking a deep breath, a break, or ending the conversation for the moment, sometimes the most constructive choice is to pause the conversation until emotions simmer down.

Padnos/Sarosik Center for Civil Discourse



MORE TIPS & TRICKS

Consider expressing humility

A recent study by the Center for Media Engagement at University of Texas at Austin found that adults were more willing to engage in divisive political conversations with commenters who expressed a higher degree of humility. The study's definition of humility includes "language that acknowledges other perspectives, displays openness to differing opinions, and admits to limitations of one's own views." This does not mean that one should downplay their own expertise or knowledge, but rather admit to potential 'gray areas' and communicate a willingness to engage (Murray, Duchovnay & Stroud 2021).

In response to hateful and offensive speech, take an approach of 'more speech rather than less'

The ACLU put it well when they said, "being an advocate: speaking out and convincing others... confronting, hearing, and countering offensive speech is an important skill." While it might be our first instinct to want to ban or shut down offensive speech, practicing engaging in these conversations when in brave spaces can help to combat social issues more thoroughly than restrictions (ACLU 2021). That said, always put your personal safety first!

Check your unspoken communication

While the words we say are essential, how we deliver them can be equally (if not more) important. Our body language and tone of voice can communicate an energy of openness or one of distaste and annoyance. It's important to make sure you are demonstrating your willingness to engage by exercising actions like leaning forward, using open gestures, and maintaining a warm facial expression with eye contact. Behaviors to avoid include squinting your eyes, crossing your arms, and pursing your lips (Kuhnke 2016). Non-verbal communication can have cultural implications, too. Reflect on the conversation you are entering and how your non-verbal cues might be perceived.

Prepare

What support do you need heading into this conversation?

If you know a challenging dialogue is approaching, try taking a mental inventory of your conversational skills and tools. Consider how you're feeling in general, and how that might affect how you engage with someone else. Anticipate where you might struggle and consider how you will respond in that situation.

What can you do to try to keep an open mind as you engage in the conversation?

Try repeating some phrases to yourself to prepare for the dialogue: "Everyone has something to teach me. This person's lived experiences helped to form their perspective. We are all members of the human family." Try your best to keep an attitude of openness and to assume that the other person will also follow conversation guidelines.

What knowledge do you need as you head into the conversation?

When engaging in conversation about complex issues it can be helpful (and even essential) to come prepared. There is no need to be an expert on every issue, but it helps to do some quick background research on the topic to support your perspective... And who knows - your research may even end up changing your mind on the issue!

Engage

How can you be an active listener?

Practice showing up to the conversation in an open and respectful way by using 'listening body language.' Turn toward the other person. Make eye contact with them. These steps will not only help to communicate your openness to the conversation, but help you to focus as well. Also, focus on what the other person is saying to you rather than formulating your next response. Try setting a goal for yourself to be able to mentally repeat the other person's last sentence to be sure you are focusing on their words (Center for Creative Leadership 2019).

How can you share your perspective constructively?

This is where the 'I' statements come in. When it's your turn to speak, focus on sharing your own values and experiences instead of dismantling your conversation partner's opinions. If they said something you agree with or understand, acknowledge that. If you feel that you share common ground with this person you can mention that too.

How can you remain curious about the other person's story?

Curiosity does not have to mean adopting someone's point of view as your own, just acknowledging the shared humanity between you. Try asking open-ended questions to hear more about your conversation partner's lived experiences and how those have influenced their perspectives.

Exit

How do you know if you need to leave a conversation?

Because civil discourse situations don't have an objective of convincing the other party, conversation endings can feel rather unclear. Remember, the point of civil discourse is to increase shared understanding. If you feel this goal has been sufficiently met or has been abandoned, it may be time to leave the conversation. It is always best to leave a conversation if you feel dialogue conditions are not being met.

How can you practice self care after an emotionally draining conversation?

Civil discourse can be hard work, and can be particularly exhausting when engaging in discussions that affect you. It is important to give yourself grace and to have a plan for how to care for yourself after particularly taxing conversations.

EXPERIENCES INFORM PERSPECTIVES



(Perhamus 2019)

A tree is a good symbol to explain where our values and perspectives come from. We each have lived experiences that have influenced what we believe today. Through this realization we can begin to recognize our shared humanity. Focus on sharing stories rather than winning a debate (Perhamus 2019).

SAFE SPACE VS BRAVE SPACE

(Arao & Clemmens 2013)

Safe Space

- Defined by comfort
- Risk of disagreement and challenge is limited
- Unlikely to lead to controversy and contradiction
- Politeness for civility's sake

Brave Space

- Supports the challenge of authentic engagement
- Welcomes challenge and disagreement, but not violence
- Defined by authentic emotions which can lead to feelings of discomfort at times
- Requires courageous conversation

Courageous Conversation Commitments

1. Stay engaged
2. Speak your truth
3. Expect to experience discomfort
4. Expect and accept a lack of closure

(Singleton & Hays, 2008)

OK, but what if...

Someone made me feel physically and/or emotionally unsafe?

Your safety should be your top priority. While it is okay (even encouraged) to feel a little uncomfortable when engaging in a difficult conversation, you shouldn't feel unsafe or threatened. If this happens, the best thing to do is exit the conversation. Assess the situation as best you can in the moment to determine if this is someone you'd like to continue speaking with later. If so, you can say that. If not, find the safest way to leave. If you feel comfortable, tell your conversation partner you feel unsafe and need to exit. If this feels unsafe, come up with a more generic excuse, like needing to go to work or do some homework.

Professors are people too! They shouldn't expect you to agree with everything they say. At a teaching university like GVSU, professors should generally always be willing to engage in a respectful dialogue about their course content. If you want to talk to them during class, it might be helpful to try framing your disagreement as curiosity. Ask a question like, "It's interesting you say that, Professor, could you tell me more about how you came to that conclusion?"

I'm in class and a professor said something I strongly disagree with?

OK, but what if...

I feel really outnumbered by my peers, and am afraid no one will agree with my point of view?

Civil discourse is not a war that's meant to be won. It can feel really overwhelming to be the only person in the room that thinks a certain way.

Now might be a good time for a quick personal safety assessment. If you feel that you are physically and emotionally safe, try pushing yourself to engage even if you feel a little uncomfortable.

Educational environments especially should be brave spaces where we take on a bit of vulnerability in order to reach a greater level of understanding with one another. (Singleton & Hays

2008)

The internet tends to make dialogue even more challenging. Here are some tips to keep in mind when engaging on the internet: 1. Don't say anything you wouldn't say in real life. If you can, post your reply using your name rather than anonymously 2. Respond thoughtfully rather than from immediate emotional instincts. Take a few minutes to decide what you want to say in response. 3. Have the conversation in person (if you can reasonably and safely do so). The internet gives us access to lots of new people and ideas, but if you disagree with someone you know in real life, research shows you might find the conversation more fulfilling offline. (Leavitt & Peacock 2014)

Someone posts something on the internet that I find incorrect or offensive?

PERSONAL PROMPTS

Use these thought prompts as a starting place for thinking about your values and reasons for engaging in dialogue

What are your values today? Have they always been the same or have you experienced change over time? If so, what led to those changes?

What is one topic you have very strong opinions about and are unlikely to compromise on? How did you develop such strong views?

What is one topic you'd like to learn more about and are open to considering different viewpoints on? How can you communicate this openness in conversations with others?

Reflect on who you are as a cultural being. How does culture influence your beliefs and communication styles? What can you do to be better equipped for cross-cultural communication?

Think about someone whose ways of communicating you admire. This could be someone you know or a public figure. What makes them effective? What can you learn from this speaker in building your own voice (The Project on Civil Discourse)?

How do you want your peers to perceive you when it comes to engaging in complicated dialogue? What can you do to achieve or maintain that reputation?

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Conversational Safety:

a polite conversation space with a guaranteed lack of dispute, challenge, and discomfort; nonessential for engaging in dialogue, limited opportunity for true civil discourse; see safe vs brave spaces (Arao & Clemmens 2013).

Dialogue:

a conversation which elevates lived experience and listening across difference to increase shared understanding (Padnos/Sarosik Center for Civil Discourse 2021).

Dialogue Conditions:

allow for a baseline acknowledgement of a need for personal safety and respect for shared humanity.

Lived Experience:

personal knowledge about the world gained through direct, first-hand involvement in everyday events (Oxford Reference).

Personal Safety:

physical and emotional protection from threats and harm; essential for engaging in dialogue.

Tone-Policing:

the action or practice of criticizing the angry or emotional manner in which a person has expressed a point of view, rather than addressing the substance of the point itself (Biddle & Hufnagel 2019).

GVSU RESOURCES

Padnos/Sarosik Center for Civil Discourse

gvsu.edu/civildiscourse

The Padnos/Sarosik Center for Civil Discourse is a resource for students and community members to promote the concepts and tools of civil discourse. The Center runs a selection of civil discourse classes, hosts community events and programs, offers workshops and trainings, and shares free resources.

Community Service Learning Center

gvsu.edu/service

The Community Service Learning Center provides information and opportunities for students to engage within the community. They host events both at GVSU and in the community to foster civic engagement, and offer resources and learning opportunities to prepare students to become active global citizens.

Social Justice Centers

gvsu.edu/intersections

GVSU has five social justice centers that offer resources for various campus communities. These are:

- Campus Interfaith Resources
- Disability Support Resources
- Center for Women and Gender Equity
- LGBT Resource Center
- Office of Multicultural Affairs

Together, these centers form Intersections, a campus initiative that seeks to help students “examine various identities, [and] come to a deeper understanding of how they differently situate people in the economic, political and social world. This analysis also provides opportunities for participants to consider how privilege advantages certain groups of people while disadvantaging others.” Intersections connects students to the various social justice centers and lists essential dialogue spaces, events, and resources.

GVSU RESOURCES

Hauenstein Center for Presidential Studies

gvsu.edu/hc

The Hauenstein Center offers programming for leadership development. Many of their events, but especially their Common Ground series, offer opportunities to learn and engage with community members and other students who share different perspectives on a wide range of issues.

Office of Student Life

gvsu.edu/studentlife

One of the best ways to practice your civil discourse skills is to get involved! The Office of Student Life offers services that connect students to hundreds of involvement opportunities on campus through student organizations, Greek Life, civic engagement, and more.

Koeze Business Ethics Initiative

gvsu.edu/seidman/ethics/

The Koeze Business Ethics Initiative, housed within Seidman College of Business, examines the role of business in public life with a focus on fostering discussion and collaboration. They host thought-provoking and dialogue driven events that contemplate the part that business play in the lives of West Michiganders and the world. They also provide resources about business ethics from multiple perspectives.

Other Helpful GVSU Links:

Counseling Center <https://www.gvsu.edu/counsel/>

Student Ombuds <https://www.gvsu.edu/ombuds/>

Campus Events Calendar <https://www.gvsu.edu/events/>

Campus Climate Concern Form <https://www.gvsu.edu/ccf/>

SOURCES

Arao, B., & Clemens, K. (2013). From Safe Spaces to Brave Spaces. In *The Art of Effective Facilitation*. Stylus Publishing, Llc.

Biddle, C., & Hufnagel, E. (2019). Navigating the “Danger Zone”: Tone Policing and the Bounding of Civility in the Practice of Student Voice. *American Journal of Education*, 125(4), 487–520.
<https://doi.org/10.1086/704097>

Building my voice. (n.d.). American University. Retrieved October 21, 2021, from <https://www.american.edu/spa/civildiscourse/building-my-voice.cfm>

Center for Creative Leadership. (2019). *Active Listening: Improve Your Ability to Listen and Lead, Second Edition: Vol. Second edition*. Center for Creative Leadership.

Civil discourse guidelines—Padnos/sarosik center for civil discourse—Grand valley state university. (n.d.). Retrieved October 21, 2021, from <https://www.gvsu.edu/civildiscourse/civil-discourse-guidelines-32.htm>

Context for expressive activity—Dean of students office—Grand valley state university. (n.d.). Retrieved 6 April 2022, from <https://www.gvsu.edu/dos/context-for-expressive-activity-8.htm>

D, December 24th, D. R. |, & 2008. (2008, December 24). Appreciative inquiry. *NCDD Resource Center*. <https://ncdd.org/rc/item/1579/>

Horton, L., Corbitt, D., & White, B. (2021). Tough Talks: Student-Led Programs to Facilitate Civil Discourse. *Honors in Practice*, 17, 109–118.

SOURCES CONTD.

Kuhnke, E. (2016). Body language. [electronic resource]: learn how to read others and communicate with confidence. Capstone.

Leavitt, Peter and Peacock, Cynthia. (2014, August). Improving Civil Discourse. Center for Media Engagement.
<https://mediaengagement.org/research/online-discourse/>

lived experience. Oxford Reference. Retrieved 25 March. 2022, from <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100109997>.

Murray, C., Duchovnay, M., and Stroud, N. J. (December, 2021). Making your political point online without driving people away. Center for Media Engagement. <https://mediaengagement.org/research/political-posts-with-humility>

Perhamus, Lisa M. 2019, Experiences inform perspectives, Padnos/Sarosik Center for Civil Discourse, Allendale, accessed 6 April 2022

Singleton, G. E., & Linton, C. (n.d.). Courageous conversations about race: a field guide for achieving equity in schools. Corwin Press.

Speech on campus. (n.d.). American Civil Liberties Union. Retrieved 6 April 2022, from <https://www.aclu.org/other/speech-campus>

Mary-Frances Winters. (2020). Inclusive Conversations: Fostering Equity, Empathy, and Belonging Across Differences: Vol. 1st edition. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

THE *Laker's* GUIDE TO CIVIL DISCOURSE

An Honors Senior Project by Samantha Johnson
For more GVSU civil discourse resources, visit
gvsu.edu/civildiscourse

