

This is an excerpt from *Facilitating Political Discussions*, a facilitation training guide written by Nancy Thomas and Mark Brimhall Vargas. You may copy and use this excerpt, but please credit the authors. For more exercises and tips on training people to engage in difficult discussion, go to <https://idhe.tufts.edu/resource/facilitating-political-discussions-facilitator-training-workshop-guide>.

Establishing Ground Rules

Time needed: 30 minutes

When to do this: After introductions and identifying challenges, but before any relationship-building or other exercises.

Rationale/discussion: Ground rules (also known as “agreements,” “norms,” and “guidelines”) help groups participate in productive, candid, civil conversations. Each group should set its own ground rules at the beginning—before much conversation occurs. These should be captured on newsprint and hung in a visible part of the room.

Some ground rules, such as “speak for yourself, not others” are familiar to many people. Others, such as “share air time” will need discussion and explanation.

Exercise: Begin by asking: How many of you have had experience with ground rules, norms of engagement, or agreements? (Most people on campuses will say yes.)

Ask people to pair up and discuss for a few minutes this question, “What norms could we create that would maximize your ability to participate?” See attached list for sample ground rules.

Ask for volunteers to share what they discussed. Make sure that the suggestions are concrete:

- ❖ What would that look like? What would I hear?
- ❖ What is important about that suggestion to you?
- ❖ What does it mean if we do not have this norm?

Direct the participants to the challenges they identified at the beginning of the day. Ask: Can you imagine needing particular ground rules to address these challenges?

Some ground rules might get missed. Consider proposing a few:

- ❖ **Silence**, making space for reflection. “As a facilitator, I am comfortable with silence. No need to always fill the air.”
- ❖ **Confidentiality** – get a special agreement on this. Themes and broad ideas can be shared outside of this room; personal stories and statements stay in this room.
- ❖ The idea of “safe spaces” can chill speech and probably isn’t enforceable. Find out why the group wants this ground rule and talk through what it actually means. Give some examples. Encourage

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the group to adopt a “**brave space**” alternative, one in which people can take risks and speak candidly, but also one in which people who need to say “that hurt my feelings” can also say so.

- ❖ We all **share responsibility** for the group’s success and experience.

Ask about enforcement of these ground rules.

- ❖ What should we do if our community norms are breached?
- ❖ What should I/we as facilitators do?
- ❖ What can we expect from you as the group?

Another issue worthy of special discussion is the tension between free speech, which is a normative value on all college campuses, and “triggers,” words or phrases that stimulate an emotional response because they tap into patterns of inequality and oppression. Examples might be, “I don’t see color. People are all the same to me.” Or “I think men are more suited to certain roles than women.” Invite participants to create a process for naming triggers without discouraging participation and candor. Encourage them to consider that they are in an academic setting and that no one promised them that they would be “comfortable.” College is a time when students can expect to be challenged to learn new knowledge and perspectives, even views that are unpopular or contrary to their life experiences.

You will also need to address the inevitability that the ground rules will eventually be breached. Probe into how to recover from this moment. Consider asking: “If the ground rules are breached, what do we need to do to welcome that person back into the conversation?”

Debrief: Before concluding, ask for visual confirmation (e.g., thumbs up) that the group will own the norms.

Takeaways: It’s important that groups come to understand why ground rules are important and how they will be used.

Note

As the facilitator, you will need to be able to refer to the ground rules periodically. Once established, ground rules can be amended by the group. Tell the group that they will be asked to reaffirm or tweak the ground rules as the dialogue continues.

Typical Ground Rules

- **Everyone has an equal voice.**
- **Listen for understanding.**
- **Assume good will.**
- **Suspend judgment.**
- **Create a brave space for candid conversations.**
- **Seek first to understand, then to be understood.**
- **Share air time.**
- **Ask questions.**
- **If you are offended or uncomfortable, say so, and say why.**
- **It's OK to disagree, but don't personalize.**
No name calling or stereotyping.
- **Speak for yourself, not for others.**
- **What's said here stays here other than broad themes—protect identities and people's stories.**
- **Share responsibility for making this dialogue work.**
- **Phones off!**