

Class Discussion

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“We expect students to learn to use their voices publicly to explore and articulate ideas and to responsibly engage in dialogue with fellow students.”
Dean of Students, Lewis & Clark College, Portland

Since the heart of AP English is rich, ongoing classroom conversation about books and ideas, we all have to commit ourselves to keeping these discussions lively, thoughtful, and civil.

Our goal is to be able to talk about anything openly and honestly, to make sure our classroom is a flourishing marketplace of ideas, like the best college seminars. In a democratic intellectual community, we have the opportunity to have wonderful, thought-provoking disagreements. Yet we also bear a responsibility to make the discourse respectful, for the best thinking can't occur if the classroom feels unsafe or monopolized.

Here are some conversational habits we all need to keep in mind, behaviors that can help keep our discussions stimulating and effective:

When You Are Speaking

Don't just assert your ideas; explain them. Just because something is stated forcefully doesn't make it convincing.

Give reasons for your opinions. Make your case with evidence. In discussing literature, the best evidence is from the text itself under consideration—the passage, novel, or poem you're reading. Refer to the text often.

Be specific, not general. Specific examples are what convince.

It's difficult in a large class of verbal people to make sure everyone gets adequate air time for their ideas. We can explore various ways of allocating class time, such as: using the traditional method of recognizing hands, letting each speaker pick the next speaker, trying a fishbowl, employing the Native American tradition of a talking stick, letting anarchy reign, or whatever. However, no matter what we do, there most likely will be times when you feel slighted. We all know how frustrating it can be when the teacher somehow doesn't see your long-raised hand, or when your thought isn't fresh or germane anymore by the time the discussion works its way around to you. Patience is the main remedy, but we can also do a couple of other things to keep the conversation moving and astir with many voices.



First, please don't repeat something that has already been said. Your job is to add new spices to the conversational stewpot.

Second, please don't ramble or repeat yourself. This can be difficult, for we often discover what it is we mean by the very act of expressing it (As E.M. Forster asked, "How can I know what I think till I see what I say?") Certainly we all flounder a bit at times in conversation, and we'll be generous with each other about this. Just try not to go on and on. Saying a thing once and saying it well is the goal. Brevity, as Shakespeare put it, is the soul of wit.



When Others Are Speaking

Listen.
Think.
Don't interrupt.

If you disagree with a comment, tell why with a reason. Mocking, scoffing, hooting, or put-downs reflect

poorly on your point of view. The most effective rebuttal to an opinion with which you strongly disagree is an articulate counterargument.

Avoid ad hominem attacks. Don't jump the person; jump the idea.

As an old English-teaching friend of mine used to tell his students, "You must demonstrate real or simulated respect for other students at all times."

Be wary of mere labeling ("That's ridiculous." "You're just being politically correct." "That's so right wing.") A label isn't an argument. Make your point. State your reasons.

In Stephen Carter's book *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy* (1999: New York, Harper Perennial), the Yale law professor outlines his ideas for rebuilding a civil and humane society. In a civil democratic society, Carter says, conversation—not legislation nor adjudication—must be the preferred means of resolving differences. Many of his main points are pertinent to this discussion of discussions:

- Our duty to be civil toward someone else doesn't depend on whether we like the person or not.
- Civility doesn't require us to mask our differences, but to resolve them respectfully.
- Civility requires that we listen to others with knowledge of the possibility that they may be right and we may be wrong.
- Civility requires a commitment to be trustworthy and generous in working not only for the success of self, but also for the success of the community.