# CLASS COMMUNITY COMMITMENTS: A GUIDE FOR INSTRUCTORS

Collectively formulating commitments - often referred to as "norms" - for how members of a class will interact articulates and records the class community's values and behavioral expectations of one another. It is an important step towards creating a respectful, supportive, and productive class learning environment. Keeping expectations implicit runs two significant risks:

1) individuals in the class might have different and incompatible expectations of one another
2) violations of expectations might lead to misunderstandings and a breakdown of trust among members of the class, which might adversely impact course learning.

Below you will find steps, tools, and examples to guide you through the process of formulating class commitments with your students.

## Contents

## Benefits of Formulating Class Commitments

Asking your students to formulate class commitments with you has many benefits:

- **Transparency**: instructors and students clarify expectations of each other
- **Equity**: making expectations explicit levels the playing field for all students
- **Gravity**: instructors convey the seriousness of class behaviors and their effects
- **Agency**: students help shape their desired learning environment
- **Representation**: all students help shape the class learning environment
- **Empathy**: instructors and students consider each other's perspectives
- **Accountability**: students share responsibility for their learning environment
- **Solidarity**: instructors and students are united in a shared project
- **Community**: instructors and students can develop mutual understanding and trust

## Steps for Formulating Class Commitments

To formulate class commitments, you can follow these seven steps in two phases: planning and facilitating.

# Planning

**Step 1: Timing**: Wait until you have a stable cohort of students in your class (e.g., right after 'shopping' period ends) to formulate class commitments. Incorporate ice-breakers and pair or small-group work in your class before you begin, so that students feel more comfortable with one another. Try to schedule activities that involve significant interaction, such as online discussion forums, class discussions on key topics, or group work, only after commitments are formulated.

**Step 2: Scope**: Decide which spheres of class activity should be considered when formulating class commitments, and whether a single set of commitments will cover them all, or if more than one set of commitments needs to be formulated. Options include:

- whole-class discussions
- breakout/small-group discussions
- discussion and work in sections
- group/team work inside and outside of class
- labwork
- peer feedback and critique

- Canvas discussion boards
- office hours

## Facilitating

**Step 3: Framing**: Explain to students the importance of formulating class community commitments. Include some generality in your explanation that allows students to transfer learning across courses and other contexts, e.g., mentioning some of the benefits canvassed in the first section of this document. Also include some specificity in your explanation that allows students to appreciate its importance in the class context. For example, will the commitments help to maintain respect and civility during charged conversations, equity during teamwork, or compassion and honesty during peer feedback?

Here is some sample language:

> *We can sometimes say or do things that are hurtful, offensive, or marginalizing to other people. This is true of students, and it's also true of instructors. If left unaddressed, that can negatively shape our experiences and learning in this class and beyond.*

> *In this course, we will be discussing socio-historical contexts for certain research questions still pursued today. The historical attitudes shaping the research might be upsetting, and the fact that the research questions are still pursued today might also be upsetting.*

> *So I want us to take time to reflect upon and discuss together how we are going to commit to acting towards each other so that we can have rigorous conversations and disagreements about research methods, while also being respectful and supportive of each other as whole people.*

> *We will start today, but this will be ongoing as we learn from our continued interactions with each other. My hope is that through this process, we will develop stronger mutual understanding and trust and that your class learning will emerge stronger as a result.*

**Step 4: Learning from the past**: Most students and instructors have had better, and worse, class experiences. Make time for students, as well as the teaching team (instructors, TAs, CAs), to reflect on their past experiences to inform new behavioral commitments that will foster a respectful, supportive, and productive class environment.

**Step 5: Adjudicating and refining commitments**: Class members clarify, explain, justify, and refine proposed commitments as needed. You should ensure that interpersonal commitments:

- specify visible behaviors (including speech)
- specify purposes
- collectively cover four directions of interaction:
  - 1) student-to-student

- 2) student-to-instructor
- 3) instructor-to-student
- 4) student/instructor to self.

**Step 6: Committing**: After you have refined the final set of proposed commitments and shared it with the class, every class member should record their consent and commitment; for example, by adding their name and the date at the end of a shared Google Doc.

**Step 7: Revisiting, and Evaluating**: Set dates with students on when during the quarter the commitments will be revisited, with the understanding that they might be revisited more frequently if needed. Also give students the opportunity to provide anonymous feedback on the effectiveness of having collectively formulated class commitments, at least once midterm and towards the end of the quarter. Finally, you might want to include the following statement in your syllabus on Stanford's Acts of Intolerance protocol and how students can report class incidents if they wish to.

*The University is committed to providing a safe living and learning environment in which every person is valued and respected, inclusion is assured, and free expression and debate are encouraged. The Acts of Intolerance Protocol establishes a mechanism for addressing situations involving intended or perceived acts of intolerance. In such instances, we wish to proceed thoughtfully, providing support to all of those affected, while also affirming that we value differences, free expression and debate as sources of strength for our community. Please visit* [intolerance.stanford.edu](intolerance.stanford.edu) *to submit a report.*

## Alternative Formats

Formulating class commitments can be done synchronously, entirely asynchronously and online, or through some mixture of synchronous and asynchronous components. Below you will find examples of how to conduct the seven steps reviewed above, in synchronous and asynchronous formats. The synchronous format is recommended for smaller classes, and sections within larger classes. The asynchronous format is recommended for larger classes; classes in which multiple sets of commitments need to be formulated, e.g., discussion sections as well as teamwork outside of class; and classes in which there is no synchronous component.

| | Synchronous (virtual, or in person) | Online, asynchronous |
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|---|---|---|
| **Timing** | ➢ Wait until you have a stable cohort of students<br>➢ Incorporate ice-breakers and pair or small-group work before formulating commitments | ➢ Wait until you have a stable cohort of students<br>➢ Incorporate ice-breakers and pair or small-group work before formulating commitments |
| **Scope** | ➢ Decide which spheres of class activity should be covered under commitments<br>➢ Decide whether a single set of commitments will do, or if more than one set of commitments needs to be formulated | ➢ Decide which spheres of class activity should be covered under commitments<br>➢ Decide whether a single set of commitments will do, or if more than one set of commitments needs to be formulated |
| **Framing** | ➢ Syllabus statement<br>➢ Email/Canvas announcement before class<br>➢ Instructor class comments | ➢ Syllabus statement<br>➢ Email/Canvas announcement<br>➢ Wording in discussion forum prompt or in student worksheet |
| **Learning from the past** | ➢ Individual reflection in class<br>➢ Individual reflection as a pre-class assignment | ➢ Individual reflection not shared |
| **Adjudicating and refining commitments** | ➢ Student discussion in small groups/breakouts, and then whole-group sharing and discussion of proposed commitments<br>➢ Small-group proposals in a shared worksheet, and everyone in whole group comments/votes on proposals<br>➢ Instructor reviews and refines to eliminate redundancy, and perhaps orders or groups commitments to increase clarity | ➢ Student proposals and responses in a Canvas discussion forum<br>➢ Student proposals and comments in a shared worksheet<br>➢ Student proposals and up/downvotes in PollEverywhere<br>➢ Instructor reviews and refines to eliminate redundancy, and perhaps orders or groups commitments to increase clarity |
| **Committing** | ➢ Instructor records the refined set of commitments somewhere accessible to the entire class, e.g., a sheet of poster paper, course Canvas page, or shared Google document.<br>➢ In class, students review the refined set of commitments, ask questions, and sign and date in the relevant place. | ➢ Instructor records the refined set of commitments somewhere accessible to the entire class, e.g., a course Canvas page, or shared Google document.<br>➢ As an assignment with a due date, students review the refined set of commitments, know how/where to ask questions, and sign and date in the relevant place. |

| Revisiting, and Evaluating | ➢ Set dates for revisiting commitments during the quarter<br>➢ On those dates, have students discuss in small groups how effective the class commitments have been and propose needed changes<br>➢ At least once midterm, and once towards the end of the quarter, request students to provide anonymous feedback on the effectiveness of class commitments, e.g., through index cards, an anonymous poll, or an anonymous Canvas survey. | ➢ Set dates for revisiting commitments during the quarter<br>➢ As an assignment due on those dates, have students reflect on the effectiveness of class commitments and propose needed changes, e.g., on a Canvas discussion forum or by commenting on the shared document where the commitments are recorded.<br>➢ At least once midterm, and once towards the end of the quarter, request students to provide anonymous feedback on the effectiveness of class commitments, e.g., through an anonymous poll, or an anonymous Canvas survey. |
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## Example Lesson Plan, and Worksheet Template

- If you are interested in formulating class commitments synchronously with your students, below is a 15-minute example lesson plan for a small class or section, adapted and shared with permission from Dr. Joey Nelson, formerly an instructor in VPUE's Thinking Matters program (now an Academic Advising Director).
- If you are teaching virtually, you might opt to combine synchronous class discussion with simultaneous use of an online student worksheet. Here is a worksheet template you can use for a 20-minute synchronous class activity, as well as for entirely asynchronous formulation of class commitments with students.

**Sample synchronous lesson plan for collaboratively creating discussion norms with students**

**Day 1 (Think-Pair-Share generation of content)**

- Students are prompted to reflect on a time when they had a productive discussion with anyone, and write down what made it productive (2 min).
- Students then do the same for an unproductive discussion (2 min).
- Students are then instructed to talk with their neighbor about the aspects of the discussion that made for productive and unproductive discourse, without revealing any identifying information (3 min).
- Then, the whole class comes together and shares aspects that will make for productive discussions throughout the course they are in; the instructor takes this opportunity to introduce their own ideas for class discussions and to probe students further on what they mean (more concretely) by their suggestions (8 min).
- Instructor annotates the slides as students speak (takes a picture of the board), writes up the collaboratively created discussion norms, and shares it with students (e.g., posts on the Canvas site, or prints out a copy for each student).

**Day 2**
- Instructor asks students to read through and mark what they really like and anything they have concerns about. Then students share their likes and express any concerns, which may lead to the group modifying the norms or ratifying it as is.
   - This revisiting reinforces the importance of a collaborative discussion environment where students have a stake in crafting the classroom culture.
   - Talking about any concerns allows the instructor to clarify expectations on students during class discussions.
- Instructor emails ratified list to students after class and/or posts it to Canvas.

**Later in the course**
- The instructor can revisit norms with the class at any point later in the quarter if discussions are lagging, too heated, uncritical, or even running well. Re-engaging students in dialogue about how discussions are going is particularly helpful when soliciting mid-quarter evaluations from students and/or giving students individual feedback on their participation.

## Prompts and Examples

Even after students have time to reflect on their past learning experiences, they might struggle to formulate commitments. Prompting them on what to consider, or providing them with a "starter set" of commitments to modify or add to, can help expedite the process. Prompts, examples from Stanford courses, and other examples are provided below.

*Two notes of caution*:

- We recommend that prompts and examples be given to students only after they have had a chance to reflect on their own, to avoid directing or stifling their initial thought.
- The benefits cited to formulating class commitments accrue only when students retain significant agency in the process. The more students are asked to agree to pre-formulated proposals, the more perfunctory, and less effective, the process is likely to be.

## Prompts to continue student reflection

Students might be asked to consider formulating commitments around:

*Discussions and short-term group work*
- methods for communicating how one wants to be identified and referred to
- [strategies](#) to ensure equitable participation
- guidelines for expressing disagreement
- methods for organizing and sustaining dialogue/work

*Charged conversations*
- not sharing identified course information beyond the course through video recordings, audio recordings, photographs, or text transcriptions
- boundaries around the instructor's roles and identities
- acknowledging discrepancies between intent and impact
- commitments to not shame, humiliate, or exclude those whose comments have upsetting impact
- deciding on terms that are so harmful as to never be uttered or written in class

*Teamwork*

- scheduling work sessions and deadlines convenient for everyone
- ensuring equitable workload and responsibilities
- determining accountability mechanisms

- devising roles and responsibilities that leverage existing strengths, as well as providing opportunities to practice new skills

*Peer review/feedback/critique/assessment*
- Attitudes to convey when giving, and receiving, feedback
- Balancing honesty with sensitivity
- Determining what to give feedback on
- Determining what to do with feedback once it's given

*Large (lecture) classes*
- minimizing disruption from late arrivals and/or individuals' current environments
- maintaining social connection while respecting people's unique circumstances (e.g., policies around keeping Zoom video on/off)
- breaks and self-care
- how/when to raise questions or comments
- how Zoom Chat should be used
- Sensory and technological accessibility of slides and other materials

*Office hours*
- under what conditions students can/should visit
- appointments versus drop-ins
- individual versus group conversations
- for group sessions, determining what to address, and in what order
- documenting office hour sessions for those unable to attend

*Online discussion boards*
- Word limits
- Anchoring to prompts/texts
- Critiquing ideas, and crediting people
- Responding to others so as to sustain dialogue

*All*
- [examples of microaggressions](#) to be recognized and avoided, and [examples of microaffirmations](#) to be enacted.

- how perceived violations of commitments will be signaled and addressed, by those involved and those witnessing
- persisting in the face of challenges, since respectful and productive interaction is a skill to practice and improve

## Examples

- Example Class Agreements from Stanford Courses gives examples from actual Stanford courses across classes of different sizes, and different kinds of class interaction.

- Lerman's critical response process is a method for giving and receiving feedback on work in progress and is a rich starting point for developing norms around peer review and feedback. It is commonly used in the creative arts, but can also be adapted to STEM and other course contexts.

- The Setting Norms entry in the Teaching Commons offers example norms for office hours and Canvas discussion boards, which are not covered in the Stanford examples.

## Stanford Resources and References

**Center for Teaching and Learning**

Implicit Bias and Microaggressions

Structuring Short-Term Group Work Online, with Zoom Breakout Rooms

Example PollEverywhere Activities

10 Strategies for Creating Inclusive and Equitable Online Learning Environments

10 Strategies for Collegial Videoconferencing

10 Strategies for Making Virtual Office Hours More Effective

10 Strategies for TAing Online

Teaching Consultations

**Additional**

[Protected Identity Harm Reporting](#), Dean of Students

[Creating an Online Classroom Environment to Support Open Student Conversations](#)

[Setting Norms](#) in [Stanford Teaching Commons](#)


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