

# Balancing order and learning in classroom discussions

Different learning objectives require different rules for student participation. Make your expectations for each day's class clear to students — and to yourself!

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The rule was that if you wanted to speak, you had to raise your hand and wait to be called on — and *no one* hated the rule more than I did.

It's ironic, since I was the teacher. The rule I hated had been created by me.

But I felt I had to do it to maintain some sense of order during our lessons. I couldn't have students shouting out ideas, interrupting one another and drowning out their quieter classmates. On the few occasions when we tried a more conversational approach, I always ended up monitoring one exchange between a few enthusiastic participants while everyone else either addressed quieter comments to their neighbors or simply tuned out. Before long, there would be ten different conversations going on in the classroom (few of which remained quiet or on topic) and at least two students would use the chaos as cover while they fell asleep.

At least if I enforced the “raise your hand” rule, I could control the conversation. I could make sure everyone had a turn, that they could make their comments uninterrupted, and that those comments addressed the appropriate theme. The down side was that there were no real discussions. There were just a string of remarks, all addressed to the teacher. I wanted students to engage with each other, but how could they when they were all facing forward and waiting to be called on by me?

## Avoiding inconsistency

I wanted the best of both worlds. I wanted the free thinking that came from students engaging in real conversations without the aid of Ms. Moderator. But I also wanted the civil, class-wide, on-topic insights that came when the rules gave control of the behavior to me.

The result of these competing desires was inconsistency in our classroom. At the beginning of a class discussion, I would strictly enforce the “raise your hand” rule.

But as the conversation continued, some invested student would spontaneously react to a classmate, and I would appreciate the engagement just enough to allow it. Of course, the original student would respond, other students would jump in, and pretty soon we'd be drowning in conversational chaos.

Inevitably, I'd step in and reprimand whoever had made the loudest or most inappropriate comment. That student, hearing my reminder about seeking permission before speaking, would then express outrage: “Ms. Smith, everyone has been talking without permission! Why are you picking on me?”

## Seminar format

## Notes

As you read this essay, here are some questions for new teachers to consider and for mentors to discuss with new teachers.

## QUESTIONS FOR NEW TEACHERS

1. Could the seminar/lecture format work in your classroom context? Are there any ways you might modify it?
2. How could you apply this technique (flipping the seminar/lecture sign) to other classroom activities to clarify a shift in student behavioral expectations?
3. Are there other situations in your class in which you might be compromising learning for order? How might you adjust your approach to maximize learning?
4. Is there another visual system you might use in your classroom to cue students between learning environments?
5. Do you think varying student expectations of behavior between activities is appropriate? If so, what are the benefits of this approach?

I was frustrated, and so were my students. Fortunately, frustration can breed creativity in the classroom, and in ours it led to a system that provided structure while still allowing students to engage with one another a little more freely. They would have protocols to follow, but a little more room to breathe.

Our new system hinged on a sign I hung at the front of the classroom. On one side, in large letters, it bore the words “SEMINAR FORMAT.” I told the students that seminar format was a good thing. In seminar format, they could simply have a whole class conversation about whatever issue we were addressing, and we would stay in that format as long as they could manage three things:

1. No one was allowed to interrupt a classmate.
2. All comments had to be loud enough for the entire group to hear (no side conversations).
3. Every comment had to be in some way related to the topic we were discussing.

At any point, I could join the conversation to make a comment or to ask a quieter student what he or she thought about the topic. The students were required to learn the rules for seminar format, and reminders about those rules were posted in the classroom. If the seminar system was ever violated, I maintained the right to flip the sign over. On its other side, I had written the words “LECTURE FORMAT.”

## Lecture format

My students didn't like lecture format. They knew that if those words were visible, no one could speak without raising a hand and receiving my permission. The first person to speak out of turn would receive a warning, which was a reminder to that individual as well as the rest of the class. For the remainder of the time in lecture format, anyone else who jumped in without being called on would earn a detention. It was a very formal, controlled way of managing the group.

The contrast between seminar format and lecture format was intentionally stark, and the sign made clear which set of expectations had been established. My students appreciated the system because of its clarity; they always knew exactly what I was asking them to do. I appreciated the system for its powerful influence on student behavior. My students, who only weeks before struggled to have a civil, inclusive, on-topic, class-wide, seminar-style conversation, managed it perfectly when they knew the alternative was an official lecture-formatted system that came with formal detentions. I was amazed when, after a week of adjusting to the system, they kept one another on task during most class discussions.

“Andre!” a classmate would grumble., “No side conversations! As soon as you started talking, Mrs. Smith started walking toward that sign!”

My management had become a matter of motion. Andre spoke out of turn. I moved toward the sign. His behavior was corrected. We stayed in seminar format the rest of the day.

Lecture format was not all bad; it was not introduced as a punishment. Although students sometimes resisted it because they liked the freedom that came with the alternative, they recognized that there were times our work simply required a more structured approach. We used it on days when students were working independently, taking tests, listening to me address straightforward material very quickly, and on days when discussions centered around more controversial topics. As a history teacher, I facilitated conversations about world issues that were hard for some students to handle maturely. On those days, I insisted on lecture format to maintain a little more control.

## QUESTIONS FOR MENTORS

See our [mentor's guide](#) for suggestions on using this article in small and large group discussions.

1. How can you tell if a new teacher is struggling to manage discussions?
2. What observation data could you provide to prompt a new teacher to consider reviewing his or her discussion policies?
3. What are the benefits of varying student behavioral expectations between activities? Why might a new teacher be resistant to this approach?
4. What other systems for engaging in discussions could you share with new teachers?

## View this page in context

### The First Year

Essays on the author's experiences in her first year of teaching: the mistakes she made, what she learned from them, and how she used them to become a better teacher — and how other first-year teachers can, too.

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# A time for each format

In other words, we found a time and place for both discussion styles in our classroom. More importantly, we discovered a system that clarified expectations and allowed students more say in our classroom. They enjoyed knowing that for the most part, their behavior dictated which system we used and that with some attention to protocol, and they could keep the class in their preferred seminar format. It created positive peer pressure and a more responsible culture. It has also introduced the unwritten rules for engaging in civil discussions.

Understanding those rules will help them in college and in the real world.

So if you struggle to facilitate class discussions, consider introducing a similar format. There is an adjustment period, but there is also hope that students will learn a system that encourages them to learn from each other. Clear expectations allow for real conversations, and those conversations encourage students to engage and allow them to learn.

teacher needs not only to set rules but to build a sense of community and teamwork within the basic structure the rules provide.

- [Managing and improving behavior in inclusive educational environments](#) : This article presents research-based best practices in classroom behavior management. Topics addressed include the physical arrangement of the classroom, establishing effective classroom rules, creating a positive classroom environment, and using reinforcement to improve students' behavior.

## RELATED TOPICS

- Learn more about [classroom communication](#), [classroom culture](#), [classroom management](#), [discipline](#), [discussions](#), and [lectures](#).

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