

Establishing Classroom Etiquette and Dealing with Disruption

The tone of the classroom has a significant impact on the educational environment. These days, the pervasive use of devices such as cell phones and the fact that some students may be unaware of University behavioral standards or the impact of their actions on others can lead to repeated distractions and interruptions. University of California Standards of Conduct for Students provide that students may be disciplined for “disruption or obstruction” of teaching or other University functions, and for failure to identify themselves or comply with the directions of University officials, as well as other violations of conduct standards (see UC Standards of Conduct at <http://studentconduct.ucmerced.edu>).

Set the Stage for a positive classroom experience by:

- Stating reasonable and clear expectations in advance.
- Defining conduct standards and discussing rules of etiquette in your syllabus and during class.
- Giving examples of desired conduct as well as unacceptable behavior.
- Explaining the reasons for your classroom expectations and inviting student comments or suggestions.
- Being a role model for expected behavior and keeping your relationship with students friendly and professional.

What is disruptive behavior?

Depending on the size and nature of your class, what is considered “disruptive” may vary. In general, disruption and obstruction include behavior that interferes with, disrupts, or prevents normal classroom functions or activities. Disruptive behaviors can range from mildly distracting to clearly disorderly, violent or dangerous.

Depending on the course rules set by the instructor, disruption in the classroom may include:

- Side conversations, ringing cell phones or using a cell phone to talk or send text messages.
- Interrupting the instructor or other students.
- Monopolizing class discussion and refusing to defer to instructor, or listen to others; persisting when the instructor has indicated that the student’s remarks are off topic and it is time to move on.
- Entering late/leaving early, moving about the classroom.
- Filming, photographing or taping the class.
- Yelling, arguing, swearing, bullying, or other intimidating behavior.
- Reading, sleeping, eating, drinking, or not paying attention.
- Shuffling through paper, cleaning out a backpack or purse during lecture.
- Showing up to class under the influence of alcohol/drugs.

Who decides what is disruptive?

Faculty have the authority and discretion to set rules that favor student learning. As a matter of academic freedom, these rules can be tailored to the subject matter and the instructor’s teaching methods and learning objectives. For these reasons, **the course instructor is the one who makes a determination about what constitutes disruptive behavior.**

Responding when disruption occurs:

- If you believe inappropriate behavior is occurring, **start by cautioning** the whole class, rather than warning a particular student. A technique is to stop class, calmly indicate the problem (e.g. side conversations, cell phones) and state that class cannot continue until the behavior stops. Before resuming, enlist the support of others by reminding the class that the disruptive behavior is taking away from class time and may result in some exam material not being covered in class.
- Students also have academic freedom, so it is important to exercise authority with compassion and self-restraint. It is best to **correct innocent mistakes and minor first offenses gently, without ridiculing students’ remarks.**
- If it becomes necessary to **speak to an individual student about disruptive behavior, do so after class** in a discreet manner. If the situation requires an immediate response in class, calmly and courteously ask the student to stop the conduct and to talk to you after class or during office hours.
- **You may want to inform the class that students may be disciplined for disrupting class,** and to reiterate that message if you talk with an individual student outside class because of his or her behavior. **Remind the student that continued disruption may result in permanent removal from the class.**
- **A student should be asked to leave class if he or she engages in disruptive behavior that impedes your ability to teach the class productively.** You have the right to contact the police if the student refuses to leave. If the student’s refusal to leave creates a safety risk or makes it impossible to continue class, you may also dismiss class for the day. If this happens, immediately contact the Office of Student Conduct (OSC).
- If the student is persistently disruptive refer him/her to OSC for disciplinary action. **However, a disruptive student cannot be permanently removed from a class without a formal review, either through the student disciplinary process or through the academic channels including the department and dean’s office.**

For more information about confronting cheating, the disciplinary process, or about the Academic Honesty Policy, please call OSC at (209) 228-5433 or see our website at studentconduct.ucmerced.edu.

Suggested Expectations to Include in a Syllabus

The following expectations are to enhance your ability to learn in this class, to avoid disruption and distraction, and to improve the quality of the classroom experience. Repeated failure to meet these expectations may result in a lower grade for the course.

Entering / Exiting Class:

- Please arrive on time to class and stay for the entire class period. Late arrivals and early departures are disruptive.
- If despite your best effort you arrive late, please quietly take a seat at the back of the classroom. Similarly, in the rare event that you must leave early (e.g. for a medical appointment), email me in advance to let me know, then sit close to the rear door and leave as unobtrusively as possible. If you can't be there on time or must always leave early because of a class or work conflict, either seek specific permission from me or do not take the class.
- During exams, ask permission before leaving to use the restroom. Try to use the restroom *before* coming to class.

Noise:

- When class begins, please stop your conversations.
- Wait until class is completely over before putting your materials away in your backpack, standing up, or talking to friends.

Electronic Devices:

- No taping, filming, or photography in class without my prior permission (whether by camera, cell phone, or other means). These activities are distracting and inhibiting to faculty and other students, may infringe upon privacy or copyright, and have a chilling effect on classroom discussion.
- Cell phones should be turned off. No talking on cell phones, text messaging, or emailing on laptops during class. Wait until after class to return any calls received.
- No listening to iPods or other electronic recording devices during class.
- No computer use not directly related to class activities. For example, instant messaging programs (like Google Chat), Facebook, My Space, or other social networking sites, Internet surfing, and similar activities should not be performed during class time.

Email Etiquette:

- You are expected to write as you would in any professional correspondence. Email communication should be courteous and respectful in manner and tone. Do not send emails that are curt or demanding.
- Do not expect an immediate response via email (normally, a response will be sent within two business days). If your email question is sent at the last minute, it may not be possible to send you a response before an assignment is due or a test is given.
- Do not post personal information about yourself or others to the class list serve or CROPS site. For example, if you are having trouble with a lab partner, you should see the instructor in person to discuss the specifics of the issue.

Participation:

- [If participation is used as part of the calculating of the student's grade] Because participation is counted as part of your grade, missing class could negatively impact your grade. Disrupting class could also lower your participation grade.
- Keep on the topic at hand. If you have questions off the current topic, address these outside of class at office hours or by email with the TA or instructor.
- Do not talk out of turn. Wait to be recognized before speaking and do not try to dominate a discussion with your questions or comments – give others a fair opportunity to participate.

Common Courtesy:

- Do not read the newspaper during class. The shuffling of pages can be very distracting.
- Food and drink are discouraged in class. There may be times that you need a beverage or small snack during class. Avoid bringing in large meals or food that is noisy when unpackaged or chewed.
- Show respect for fellow classmates and me. Do not interrupt another who is speaking. It is okay to disagree with an idea but not okay to ridicule or make fun of another person and his/her ideas. Raised voices, derogatory language, name-calling, and intimidating behavior will NOT be tolerated.
- Do not disturb others by engaging in disruptive behavior. Disruption interferes with the learning environment and impairs the ability of others to focus, participate, and engage.