

# Classroom Management

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Elements of classroom management vary. In researching this topic, it is clear that a common understanding for the term *management* might be useful. For this purpose, management refers to issues of supervision, refereeing, facilitating, and even academic discipline. Not all student behaviors require intervention or confrontation while some are serious enough in nature to warrant formal disciplinary action. Rest assured that while there are current studies in higher education literature that suggest a growing trend of rudeness and even overt animosity towards faculty by students, the vast majority of classroom experiences are not dramatic.



Since many professors teach for years without encountering some of the management instances we discuss here, our intent is to move beyond identification of classroom problems to **suggest preventative strategies and practical solutions**. For some faculty, teaching comes quite naturally and the notion of management in the classroom is irrelevant. But situations within the classroom do occasionally occur that lead us to seek out advice in order to maintain the learning environment for students not to mention our personal sanity.

Typical classroom management topics are listed in faculty handbooks to reflect pragmatic concerns such as policies on classroom breaks, adds and drops, disruptive and dangerous students, emergency procedures including weapons and drugs in the classroom, location of phones, etc. Keeping essential records is a component of this topic and is addressed in the previous Read section.

A rule of thumb for faculty is to keep current on policies regarding student and faculty interactions as well as the role of your teaching assistants, if you have one. Know your college and state policy on student conduct.

As a new faculty member, I was terrified that I would not know how to handle students who were older than I. I wanted very much to hear "for instances" from other faculty. Serendipitously, our campus Staff Learning Department instituted an **online discussion forum where faculty could seek collective advice on issues of classroom management**. Your campus may use the services of the 4faculty discussion forums. If your campus doesn't utilize the 4faculty system, you might encourage them to do so or ask if you might work with your Professional Development Office or Information Technology to establish this valuable communication forum on your campus.

Some common conduct issues identified by Gerald Amada in his research for *Coping With Misconduct in the College Classroom* (1999) are listed in the table below. In discussing what constitutes problematic classroom behaviors with colleagues, I have decided to add to Dr. Amada's list. While his approach does not necessarily align with learner-centered teaching, his work does cover many sticky issues of navigating the uncomfortable situations that occur from time to time and suggests several strategies for working with student services and other administrators to remedy situations.

## Issues / Solution Suggestions Table

Issue	Solution
<b>1. Undermining the instructor's authority</b>	<p>This is tricky as it speaks to "attitude." A student might belittle the instructor or engage in a battle of the wills. This student would need to be privately told that their attitude was confrontational and asked how this might be resolved mutually.</p> <p>"Be careful not to read most questions about content, interpretation, or assignments as a challenge of authority. Acting as if they are <u>not</u>, even when you suspect they are, can convey a sense of confidence and control. Sometimes merely assuring the student, while smiling,</p>

	that you have indeed reflected on this issue at length and that they too will understand soon why the information or the assignment is valuable diffuses the situation. You may even want to encourage them to ask the question again at a later date if necessary."
<b>2. Leaving class too frequently</b>	Camps are divided as to whether or not students should ask for permission to leave for bathroom breaks or wait for a break in the class. I don't require my students to limit their bathroom breaks or ask permission, however, this is contentious for some faculty when breaks are taken too frequently. You might privately ask the student if everything is OK so that they know that you are concerned by their behavior. Don't assume disrespect – it might be a bladder infection or some other physical problem.
<b>3. "Spacing Out" or Sitting With Back to Instructor</b>	If this is a repeated problem, students need to know that their non-verbal behavior is perceived as disinterest. You might ask them after class if they need a more comfortable seat. Some students are extremely shy and it might take half of the semester before they open up enough to make sustained eye contact or face the instructor completely. Remember also that sustained eye contact is a culturally dictated practice that might not be feasible for some students.
<b>4. Poor hygiene (possible cultural considerations)</b>	Poor hygiene, too much perfume, cigarette odor or other strong odors can be distracting or even nauseating to students. The cause for the odor might be culturally based in bathing preferences between cultures. This can be a real problem for some faculty while others will never encounter the dilemma. I suggest letting the offending student know that in close quarters, some students have issues with strong smell. It might be suggested that for the course (not their outside of class lives) that the odor be masked in some way.
<b>5. Verbal or physical threats</b>	Verbal or physical threats are serious matters. They are discussed in detail by experts in the field in <i>"Handling Crisis."</i>  As a general rule consult professional experts for assistance immediately.
<b>6. Gum, Food, Pagers, and Cell Phone Disruption</b>	If decided upon by class, consequences for breaking this policy might range from the loss of participation points to the offender having to present on a topic of interest to the class. Some instructors allow pagers and cells to be on the vibrate setting as long as they are attended to at the break rather than used when it interrupts the class. Instructors need to abide by this rule as well and allow for at least one mistake per student as accidents do happen from oversight. The idea here is to prevent habitual disruption from gum popping and phones ringing.
<b>7. Monopolizing Discussions</b>	This is common but manageable. Many students are excited and talkative so it might be good to give them a few class periods to settle in. However, if it's evident right away that this is a trend, it's best to ask them to stay after class. You might approach them initially by saying that you are pleased with the amount of enthusiasm they have for discussion but were hoping that they have suggestions for getting the other class members equally involved. The student will most likely get your drift with minimal humiliation.

<p><b>8. Sleeping in class</b></p>	<p>Sleeping in class is usually considered rude. Most faculty believe it should not be tolerated and is best curbed up front by waking a sleeping student and asking them to step outside with you. Once there faculty often tell students that it's best for the rest of the class if they return when they are awake enough to be an active participant. This occurs from time to time and you obviously are the one to choose lenience or punitive action. If it's one of your more regularly involved students, perhaps give them an option of an extra credit research assignment they can bring to your next class period covering the subject matter they missed while they were sleeping.</p> <p>An alternative approach is to assume that the student does not feel well, was up most of the night with a sick child, or has some other condition that results in sleepiness when still for long periods of time. You might simply choose to wake the student and ask them if they are feeling alright. To pull this off you need to approach it with true concern for the student's health and well being. Most of the time, student's are so embarrassed and so appreciative of your genuine concern that they don't let it happen again.</p> <p>Encourage students to actively participate, take notes (explain that this is helpful to their learning as it stimulates memory in the brain) and in particularly long classes break up the session with activities or paired conversations about a topic to ensure that students stay engaged. Students don't learn much from listening, so remember that the more they "experience" the learning process the more you are really teaching.</p>
<p><b>9. Repeated Tardiness:</b></p>	<p>There should be clear parameters set around this issue up front – either in your syllabus or in the class decided norms. Stick to your guns on the policy. Some fair policies might include 3 tardies equals one absence.</p> <p>It might be best to discuss this with students individually; some are habitually late because they are dependant on bus routes or other drivers for transportation to school.</p>
<p><b>10. Refusal to Participate or Speak</b></p>	<p>We cannot force students to speak in class nor participate in group projects. This can be addressed and become a win-win situation by either giving the student alternative options to verbal participation (unless it's a speech class) or simply carefully coaxing some response out of them and praising whatever minimal effort you receive from them. Remember, some students are terrified to be in a class setting –especially if there are round tables rather than desks – allowing for little anonymity.</p>
<p><b>11. Sexual Innuendo, Flirting, or Other Inappropriate Suggestion</b></p>	<p>This behavior should be curbed as soon as it occurs. It's never comfortable to tell a student that they aren't being appropriate and if you are uncomfortable, a short, positive e-mail or phone call might suffice. Your response should be not judgmental and you might discuss it with your department chair or faculty mentor before broaching it with your student.</p>
<p><b>12. Sharing/Copying Work</b></p>	<p>In some cultures, students work together to produce homework. It may come as a shock to these students that they cannot submit identical work. This may also come as a surprise to couples, parent-child, siblings, or close friends. Be careful to give thought to how you will handle this before you encounter it and react as if it were</p>

	intentional cheating. This can also occur when the class does a great deal of group work. Make sure you are clear about what is individual vs. group work in your assignments.
<b>13. Plagiarism or Lying</b>	Depending upon the class and the student's prior knowledge of what plagiarism entails, some faculty issue an automatic F for the first instance, then expulsion from the class with a report to the department chair and division dean on a second instance. Most colleges have specific policies. Be sure to know you college policy before taking action.  <b><i>Plagiarism should be outlined in your syllabus with a reference for students to the college catalog for more information.</i></b>
<b>14. Too Much Chit Chat</b>	Give 2-minute chat times for groups or before class begins let them know that you have material to be covered and that their talking isn't helping you achieve your goals for the class. Know too that some students occasionally translate a word or phrase to a tablemate who might not have as strong an understanding of English, be patient and observant when curbing this behavior.
<b>15. Disrespectful Behavior</b>	The reality is that sometimes students just plain won't like you. You will find yourself in a conversation with yourself about why they don't like you and treat you with disrespect. Animosity will perpetuate itself so remember your role and look for a way to positively invite the student to engage more deeply in the class. Perhaps offer them a special task based on a self-disclosed talent; for instance, a student whose hobby is Origami (Japanese paper folding) might lead a lesson on the art of following instructions.

[Printable version of this table \( solutionstable.pdf \)](#)

#### **A few notes on confronting the behaviors listed above:**

Avoid calling a student to the carpet publicly. This can be humiliating and break down respect and the sense of a safe environment that students need in the classroom.

Start with a positive statement if possible: for example, if a student is monopolizing class discussion, you might start by saying, "I'm really pleased that you take such an interest in discussions and have a lot to share. But I was wondering if you might have suggestions to help others get equally involved?"

Document incidents that you feel might continue or are egregious enough to warrant a paper trail. Keep in mind that your dean will likely suggest you take a graduated approach: verbal warning, written warning, meeting with the dean, etc.

Remember that you were once a student. Think before you act. Take a deep breath if necessary before saying or doing anything you might later regret.

### **Setting the Classroom Atmosphere**

You may wish to revisit and reflect upon the importance of the [first day of class](#). A successful first day and week often contributes to a semester free of classroom management problems. Setting [ground rules](#), as discussed in Module 4, can be particularly helpful.

## Managing Tempo and Time

If you have an **early morning, after lunch, or after dinner class time**, you might notice some problems with rhythm and attentiveness. You might start these classes with brainteasers or wake up exercises that get students ready to focus. Being aware of circadian rhythm might save you some frustration in getting used to timing issues with your class.

New instructors often become surprised by how even the best-laid lesson plans go awry. It is often the case that students will lead the **discussion off topic** and the instructor, pleased to have such lively interaction, will not be able to bring the class back on track. As mentioned in [Making a Good First Impression](#), a handy practice is to have key phrases pre-planned to bring class back to topic such as "time to come together now, please wrap it up in 2 minutes."

Some classrooms don't have clocks where faculty can see them, so as is practiced in Toastmasters (the professional speaking organization) it might be useful to **select a timekeeper** whose function it is to notify you when discussion time is up and transition is needed. I often write a reminder to the class not to let me get off track or talk past a certain time amount when we have a good amount of material to be covered or group activities planned. With this **reminder written on the board** under the daily agenda, students aren't as hesitant to let me know that while they are fascinated by my words, I have exceeded a self-imposed limit.

Taking this a bit further, the act of student input into the pacing of the class adds to a sense of empowerment and lessens the sense that they are powerless to mood or whims of the instructor. Finally, if you have taken the advice to audio or video tape your instruction but still find that **you are prone to tangents**, you might bring a **kitchen timer** with a soft bell to keep track of time limits on lecturing or group projects. This is especially helpful with question and answer times following student presentations. With limited time allotted to groups or individuals to present, a timer can serve to maintain the sense of fairness.

## Making a Connection Between Faculty and Students:

Students can feel disconnected and disoriented in a new class. Returning students might feel self-conscious about their age and out of place returning to school while younger students might bring emotional remnants of negative high school experiences with them to their first college classroom.

**Breaking the ice** is essential in establishing this connection. In [Planning for the First Day of Class](#), you found solid advice for the first day of class. Some ideas for lessening the tensions that might exist from lack of familiarity include:

**Know your philosophy regarding education and tell your students** what it is. This can be an enlightening experience for them to realize that you consider your career to be deeper in meaning beyond merely collecting a paycheck.

**Take digital photos** (with permission) of the class to let them know that you value them and want know their names and faces as soon as possible. Other options are name tents in on their desk, or practice as a group with name memory tricks. Harry Lorraine is a memory expert whose video "*Memory Power*" teaches name and face recognition tricks. There is also ample information available on the Internet for getting students names learned quickly.

**Present a visual depiction of your life** such as a Power Point that contains family photos, pictures of a pet, a mission statement, examples of artwork, hobbies, short biographical sketch, etc. Allow students to ask questions within your comfort zone. I have found this to be a useful introduction to technology in presentations as well as breaking down

student-perceived barriers. [See Sample](#)

**Share an instance** when you struggled as a student and how you dealt with it.

**Share your memories** of your best and your worst instructors when you were a student. Let them know that you are evolving as an instructor and hope to develop into one that learns to meet student's expectations.

**Distribute a questionnaire.** I usually distribute a single-page (confidentially and with a clear statement that the decision to not answer the questions does not constitute lack of participation) for students' e-mail address, phone number, age, number of children, hobbies, favorite books, expectations about the class, favorite movies, music, number of hours worked, special information that would help them succeed in the class, favorite subject in high school, plan of study, and more. Answers to the questionnaire are later discussed with the class in terms of averages and areas of interest. Often students make connections with each other when they hear commonalities.

**Let the students know what you want them to call you.** "Miss," "Mr.," "Mrs.," "Ms.," "First Name," "Professor," or "Dr." are the choices most commonly agreed upon. Remember, some students will not feel comfortable being required to call you by your first name based on cultural background or prior educational experience, so it's recommended that they are not forced to do so. Conversely, be aware that some students interpret the informality of being on a first name basis or the discovery of commonalities as permission to try to bend boundaries or challenge standards. There is much to be gained from balancing friendliness with expectations.

**Announce your boundaries for communication.** Be it e-mail or talking after class, let them know what you will and will not accept. Tell students that you want to have outside of class communications but you need a certain amount of time for replies and need courtesy in communication. For example, I give a separate e-mail address to my students than my home address and let them know that they may not Spam me, add me to chain e-mail lists, send me unsolicited or unidentified attachments, nor add me to their instant message buddy lists without prior permission. Additionally, let them know that you want to be equitable in sharing your office hours with others students, so they might be asked to come to office hours with concrete questions or concerns.

**Walk your talk:** give students a list of things and behaviors they can expect from you. If you agree to give assignments back graded within one week, do so. Avoid contradicting yourself or appearing indecisive. Model the behaviors you expect of your students.

**Allow students to form a list of expectations they have for you, the instructor.** This can serve to empower students as well as provide a forum to discuss what their fears, concerns, expectations, and needs as students really are. This activity will most likely aid in the classroom sense of fairness and serve to prevent later challenges to fairness and or documentation issues by students.

## Making Connections: Student-to-Student

Research into student retention suggests that **students drop out of college most frequently citing lack of connection** as the key factor. With this in mind, it is good practice to pepper the first few classes of the term with connection building activities. Having established a connection amongst peers,

students will be more likely to contact each other outside of class for support, ask each other for missed notes, feel safer to offer answers aloud during discussions, and ask for advice regarding other academic and personal concerns. One of the most gratifying feelings as a new faculty was to witness my students staying after class to chat informally.

Some suggestions for fostering student connectedness are:

Pair off or small groups of three in which students find answers to questions written on the board such as "where were you born?," "why are you taking this class?," "what kind of car do you drive?," etc.

Scavenger hunts such as finding one person with 2 kids, one person who has a famous relative, one person who is born in January, 2 people who have unusual pets, etc.

For more suggestions, you might consult with your staff development office for books on team building exercises or search the Internet for "ice breaker" activities.

### Helping Students Learn to Be *College* Students

Distributing this list of desirable and undesirable behaviors can serve to avert management issues in that some students simply do not realize that their behavior is negative or disruptive to the instructor or to their classmates. The following table identifies some common positive and negative behaviors that provide students with a guide for managing themselves as students. You might wish to distribute this list to your class at the time you discuss your syllabus or set class norms as a group. Feel free to modify this list as needed for your students.

Positive Impression Givers	Negative Impression Givers
Book on desk, pencil or pens ready	Picking face, nose, grooming, knuckle cracking, nail filing or cleaning teeth
Note taking or recording the lecture/class with permission from the instructor	Heavy sighs, eye rolling
Ask questions that are appropriate	Laughing <b>AT</b> the instructor rather than <b>WITH</b> the class
Make an effort to maintain eye contact	Leaving early without letting the instructor know ahead of time
Sit where you can see and be attentive	Frequent tardiness or absences
Submit assignments on time, ask if there is supplemental material you can explore to better complete your assignments such as video titles or other materials	Distracting noises: foot tapping, nail biting, pen twirling/tapping, yawning w/o covering your mouth, mumbling, zipping up bags to indicate you want the class to end, paper tearing, paper toy making, etc.
Help your classmates whenever possible	Head on desk to indicate boredom
Make certain you understand assignments when assigned	Staring at the clock or your watch
Save announcements about necessary absences for before or after class	Skipping assignments and/or breaking assignment policy, handing in shoddy, unstapled,

	ripped out pages that show no care for the assignment
Refrain from doing other course work or paying bills in class	Refer to sexual situations inappropriately in assignments (unless it's asked for in the assignment such as a human sexuality class)
When using the Internet in class, stay on task rather than surfing for fun	Frequently forget text and notebook
Give the instructor the respect you wish to be treated with	Attempt to be class clown inappropriately; a joke here and there is fine, but repetitious clowning is distracting
Don't interrupt, belittle, or put down fellow students	Squinting or face making to show disapproval
Keeping an open mind when issues arise you disagree with. Disagreeing with dignity.	Note passing or hand signals to others
Make certain you pay your fees for enrollment and get your text on the first day of class	Interrupting the instructor to ask what you missed when you were absent or if you missed anything "important"
Be positive with expectations of success in the course	Acting as if the class or topic of discussion is irrelevant or stupid – if you really feel so, drop the class
Know the instructor's name and call them only what they prefer to be called – ask if necessary	Leaving your belongings where they inconvenience others
Spell the class, instructor, and assignment name correctly on all submitted work	Tipping in your chair