

Getting Started on the Right Foot



Setting Classroom Ground Rules

Establishing a classroom or tutoring environment that welcomes student participation, sets up a culture of learning, and defines expectations and boundaries takes planning and foresight. Use your first class or tutoring session to establish ground rules to help you to get started on the right foot. Later, if conflicts arise, you will have the tools needed to effectively manage your classroom or tutoring situation in a professional, positive manner.

The process for establishing ground rules makes conscious and explicit the environment in which people say they learn best. All (instructors *and* students) participate in creating a learning community and share responsibility for maintaining that environment.

Setting ground-rules should be one of the first things instructors do after making introductions and engaging in some ice-breaker to help people relax and start to feel comfortable. Tutors should discuss ground rules with students during the first session or two.

The purpose of ground rules is to set up a safe, inclusive, learner-centered, purposeful climate from the get-go, so that students start to bond, see their path, and feel safe to take learning risks.

How to Set Ground Rules (one example for Classroom Instructors)

Shash Woods, former Professional Development Coordinator for the Office of Adult Basic Education, developed these steps for establishing ground rules.

- Tape chart paper on the wall. You'll be referring to these classroom ground rules later, so it's important to record them on paper and not the whiteboard.
- Ask people: **What kind of environment do you need so you can learn well?** Or: **What does our classroom need to be like, so you can learn?** Or: **How would you like us to be, and treat each other, so you can learn?** Phrase the question in a way that is comfortable to you, and appropriate to student level.
- This is a brainstorm. Take people's suggestions and write them verbatim on the chart.
- If, after awhile, there are some people you have not heard from, ask them if they have anything to add, but make it clear that it is OK to "pass".
- If there are considerations that are important to you as the teacher, remember: you are also part of this learning community, so also add your items. Usually, it is better if the teacher does not add their pieces until the class is done contributing. That way, the students are the first owners of the rules. An

exception might be with a very silent group, where a teacher might write one or two ideas on the chart just to get the ball rolling.

- Rewrite the chart so that any negative suggestions (i.e. no talking when someone else is talking) are reframed as positive suggestions (i.e. listen when others are talking). Try to have the students develop the re-phrasing, rather than the teacher.
- Ask whether there are any ground-rules on the brainstorm that people want to delete – that they really don't agree with or can't live with. Have some discussion before deleting.
- When the chart is finished, ask people if it does indeed describe an environment they think they can learn in. Modify if necessary. If they agree, you are done.
- Keep the chart posted in the classroom at all times. Tell students that this is a living document, and if they think of something they want to add later, it can be added.
- Thank them for participating in designing their learning community!

Later, if a student (or teacher) disrupts the learning environment, the ground-rules can be used as a touchstone for discussion about why the particular behavior is not helping everyone learn, and what can be done to return to the agreements.

One possible follow-up activity can be to write or talk about what it was like in other schools people attended, both as children and adults. Education is a culture in itself, with many interpretations. We all make assumptions based on previous experience, and these assumptions may or may not be useful. When people share their experiences, it is easier to understand and not misinterpret behavior, and to negotiate shared norms that work for the current situation.

Examples of possible Ground Rules

- We will both come ready to participate
- We will listen to one another without interrupting
- We will be respectful, even if we disagree
- We will allow enough time to do the work
- We will turn off our cell phones
- The tutor will give directions clearly
- The student will ask questions if he/she doesn't understand
- We will have fun!

Some Communication Tips

Advanced ESL Class Agreement
Spring 2008 • Mondays 7:00-8:30 • Instructor: Ai

This is our class agreement.
Please sign your name if you agree to...

- Arrive on time
- Be ready to participate
- Do your homework
- Bring ideas
- Turn off cell phone
- Only English
- Only quiet snacks (and share!)
- Have a positive attitude
- Respect other students
- Raise your hand before interrupting
- Have fun!

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- **Be explicit about what you want or need.** Giving clear directions can be one of the hardest parts of teaching, especially with non-native English speakers. Some people don't act as you expect in a learning situation because they really didn't understand what they were supposed to do, or why.
- **Be purposeful in framing your activities.** Show students what's in it for them to learn this particular thing, and how they can apply or adapt it to real life situations. Many people get distracted or bored when they don't see the point of the lesson.
- **Model the behavior you want yourself.**
- **Avoid shaming and humiliation.** That is not respectful and not safe. You work hard to create a bond of trust so that people will take risks and learn. Shaming and humiliation break that bond and trust, and are usually irrevocable actions. Remember that as adults, you are peers.
- **Don't assume. Avoid attributions. Ask questions.** Try to recognize your own "hot buttons." For example, don't automatically attribute "disrespect" or "not on task" to behaviors that may be:
 - Learning disabilities, learning styles, or previous experience with formal schooling. For example, a student may need to move to think or perform skills (kinesthetic learning). A student with ADD may get easily distracted or use pencil-tapping or other actions to stay focused. Another student may have difficulty getting or staying organized.
 - Past cultural experiences of many kinds.
 - Not making eye-contact. In some cultures, not making eye contact with elders or people with more authority is regarded as respectful behavior.
- **Debrief and discuss.** Invite your student(s) to look back at the challenge. How could you address or re-frame the challenge to make them enhancements to a classroom or tutoring situation? For example, teaching and modeling experiences around the relationship, communication, and organizational skills we know are helpful to people at school or work.

In cases where the ground rules are not working, or other difficulties arise, check with your partnering organization to be clear on their specific policies, guidelines and procedures.