



# Let's TALK

LEADER MODERATION  
GUIDE



## Leader Moderation Guide

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The goal of every Let's Talk group is to promote civil discourse to a larger audience. With your leadership, your group will engage students in thorough, constructive, and vibrant discussion about tough issues in a healthy atmosphere. You will help students practice and develop their skills as conversationalists in an **informal** and **exploratory** forum. Discourse groups allow various viewpoints to come together for inquiry through collegial discourse and dialectic, allowing members to learn as much as possible about other people's positions, experiences, and ways of thinking.

A key part of being a Let's Talk leader is recognizing when to intervene during a heated discussion. FIRE has created this guide to prepare leaders for their role as moderator and to give them the tools to diffuse tensions in conversation.

# General Rules to Know Before Engaging in Discussions

Consider printing out these rules for your cohort and reading them aloud before each meeting.

In *The Coddling of the American Mind*, FIRE President Greg Lukianoff and psychologist Jonathan Haidt draw from the expertise of psychologist Adam Grant on how to direct productive discussions:<sup>1</sup>

- 1 “Frame any discussion as a [debate](#), rather than a conflict.
- 2 Argue as if you’re right, but [listen as if you’re wrong](#).
- 3 Make the [most respectful interpretation](#) of the other person’s [perspective](#).
- 4 Acknowledge where you *agree* with your critics and what you’ve [learned from them](#).<sup>2</sup>

**A FIRE Top Tip:** Remember that you can be a positive role model for other people on how to engage in civil dialogue. By treating the other person with respect, even if they don’t respond in kind, you increase the odds of having a positive encounter with them in the future.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting up a Generation for Failure* (Penguin Books, 2018), 240.

2 Adam Grant., “Kids, would you please start fighting?” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Nov. 4, 2017. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/04/opinion/sunday/kids-would-you-please-start-fighting.html>.

3 “Helpful phrases to use in practicing civil discussions,” *FIRE*, December 18, 2019, <https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/guidance-lets-talk-leaders>.

# Discuss What Free Speech Means With Your Members

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You should know which speech is protected and unprotected in your discussion group and on campus. Protected speech may be different if you attend a private institution. Familiarize yourself with your school's speech codes and the difference between [unprotected](#) and protected speech. You can use [our Spotlight Database](#) to see how FIRE rates your college or university's free speech policies.

## The First Amendment [states](#) that:

- “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

In fact, this applies not just to Congress but to government agencies at all levels — including public colleges and universities — and not just to laws but to rules and regulations. But what does this mean in practical terms? What can you actually say — and what can't you say? Drawing from [FIRE's materials](#) as well as those of the official [United States Courts](#) website, here's a quick cheat sheet on the issues most likely to arise in your group, with some foundational court cases cited for those who want to do further research:

## Freedom of speech includes the right:

- Not to be compelled to profess beliefs you do not actually hold.  
*W. Va. Bd. of Educ. v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943)
- To engage in symbolic but non-spoken expression, such as wearing an armband to protest a war, even on school grounds, *Tinker v. Des Moines Indep. Cmty. Sch. Dist.*, 393 U.S. 503 (1969).
- To burn a flag, including the American flag, as a means of expression (if burning an item is otherwise lawful), *Texas v. Johnson*, 491 U.S. 397 (1989).
- To gather or associate with others in order to communicate a message.  
*Healy v. James*, 408 U.S. 169 (1972)
- To use certain offensive words and phrases to convey political messages.  
*Cohen v. California*, 403 U.S. 15 (1971)
- To espouse offensive or provocative ideas.  
*Papish v. Bd. of Curators of the Univ. of Mo.*, 410 U.S. 667, 670 (1973)
- To contribute money (under certain circumstances) to political campaigns.  
*Buckley v. Valeo*, 424 U.S. 1 (1976); *Citizens United v. Fed. Election Comm'n*, 558 U.S. 310 (2010).

**Freedom of speech does not include the right:**

- To incite others to engage in immediate violence or lawless action, in situations where that action is reasonably likely to occur.  
*Brandenburg v. Ohio*, 395 U.S. 444 (1969); *Hess v. Indiana*, 414 US 105 (1973)
- To make or distribute obscene materials (essentially, hardcore or child pornography).  
*Miller v. California*, 413 U.S. 15 (1973)
- To make noises that are so loud that they prevent others from speaking or exercising their First Amendment rights.  
*Kovacs v. Cooper*, 336 U.S. 77, 87–88 (1949)
- To make threats of harm that are either true or that would reasonably be seen as sincere, as opposed to hyperbolic or exaggerated.  
*Virginia v. Black*, 538 U.S. 343, 359 (2003)
- To burn draft cards as an anti-war protest.  
*United States v. O'Brien*, 391 U.S. 367 (1968)<sup>4</sup>

4 For more detail, see "Unprotected Speech Synopsis" on FIRE's website at <https://www.thefire.org/research-learn/unprotected-speech-synopsis>.

# Ten Terms To Know

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**1. Civil discourse:** Civil discourse involves a mutual airing of views without spite. It is not a contest, but it is intended to promote greater understanding.

**2. Good faith argument:** A “Good Faith” argument or discussion is one in which both parties agree on the terms on which they engage, are honest and respectful of the other person’s dignity, follow generally-accepted norms of social interaction, and genuinely want to hear what the other person thinks and has to say. In many cases, they are working together towards a resolution that will be mutually satisfying. “Good faith” is similar to “good will,” in that you wish the other party well and do not intend harm.

**3. Bad faith argument:** A “Bad Faith” discussion is one in which one or both of the parties has a hidden, unrevealed agenda or lacks basic respect for the rights, dignity, or autonomy of the other party. Disrespect for the other party may include dishonesty.

**4. Emotional temperature:** When people feel emotionally threatened, they can become resistant and their defense mechanisms can kick in. This can happen in a heated intellectual discussion if one person feels outmatched, embarrassed, or unable to defend themselves. As a Let’s Talk leader, it’s important to remain attentive to students’ emotional temperatures and to actively intervene when a controversial discussion heats up, if necessary.

**5. Pluralism:** It’s important to appreciate what Isaiah Berlin termed “value pluralism,” which is the idea that human values are diverse, conflicting, and cannot be reduced to a single principle. Sometimes, values may conflict with one another, but if we recognize the reality and legitimacy of our differing priorities, respect between value systems is possible. Different viewpoints often stem from different value systems, and by recognizing this, we may be able to simultaneously maintain our position on an issue while accepting an opposing view as equally valid, but simply demonstrative of a different ordering of moral priorities.

# Ten Terms To Know



**6. Nuance:** Grappling with difficult topics will often involve embracing ambiguity and engaging with competing arguments. Avoid simplistic, black-and-white thinking in tough moments. Allow yourself to be confronted with different perspectives and embrace the complexity of the issue at hand. You may come away with a more nuanced position which integrates an understanding of both sides of the issue. This may involve moderating the position you had when you first entered the conversation.

**7. Cognitive distortions:** These are bad mental habits which can be gently challenged and can be disproved factually. Check out [our Let's Talk resource, "Cognitive Behavioral Insights in Group Discussions"](#) for better conversations.

**8. Principle of charity:** Following the principle of charity means interpreting others' comments in the best or kindest way possible.<sup>5</sup> This principle should undergird all discussions in your discourse group. Those who disagree with you will appreciate your willingness to strengthen and appreciate the merits of their argument, and thus interpret your disagreements more charitably, too.

**9. Intellectual humility:** "Practice the virtue of 'intellectual humility.' Intellectual humility is the recognition that our reasoning is so flawed, so prone to bias, that we can rarely be certain that we are right."<sup>6</sup>

**10. Dialectic reasoning:** According to [OxfordLanguages](#), dialectic is "the art of investigating or discussing the truth of opinions." Every Let's Talk Civil Discourse group will practice dialectical reasoning above all. Dialectical reasoning is collaborative, not competitive, and open, not obstinate. Feel free to conduct debates or informal discussions as desired, and always draw the group's purpose back to the ideal of dialectic.

<sup>5</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 243.

<sup>6</sup> Lukianoff and Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind*, 244.

# Terms of Engagement: Ask Yourself These Questions Before Beginning

## 1. How many times can a student pose a rebuttal before the group leader should change the subject?

- Establish a number and stick to it. For example, allow two rebuttals per side per argument.
- Ask the opposed parties this question: “What might be the compromise or middle ground between these two views?”
- Consider using the format of an [Oxford Style Debate](#).

## 2. How do you manage members who dominate the discourse?

- Consider setting this rule: “Each audience member may speak only once until all interested participants have spoken.”<sup>7</sup>
- Tell your members this: “Please follow the direction of the discussion. Don’t repeat what has already been said. Relate your comments to those of previous speakers.”<sup>8</sup>

## 3. How can a group leader bring everyone into the conversation?

- Initiate shy people with an easy question: “What do you think are the opportunities or challenges of this conversation which we’ve overlooked?”
- Try a ‘one-minute paper.’ Ask your members to write down which side of the topic is most interesting to them or what is still unclear. Ask them to do so on a post-it and in one sentence. Collect them anonymously and discuss some of those post-its afterwards.<sup>9</sup>
- Try ‘where do you stand?’ Give participants two or more options related to the argument, corresponding to sides of the room. Upon hearing each side, participants go to the “side” of the room that they most agree with. In each small group, participants can discuss why they chose that side, and physically see how common or uncommon their viewpoint is.

<sup>7</sup> “Oxford Style Debate,” *United States Courts*, <https://www.uscourts.gov/about-federal-courts/educational-resources/about-educational-outreach/activity-resources/oxford>.

<sup>8</sup> “Setting Ground Rules - Civil Discourse and Difficult Decisions,” *United States Courts*, <https://www.uscourts.gov/educational-resources/educational-activities/setting-ground-rules-civil-discourse-and-difficult>.

<sup>9</sup> “Moderating Class Discussions,” *Ghent University*, <https://onderwijstips.ugent.be/en/tips/discussie-modereren-de-klas-en-online/>.



# Terms of Engagement: Ask Yourself These Questions Before Beginning

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## 3. How can a group leader bring everyone into the conversation? (continued)

- Try “Around the World”. Before playing, choose four questions from our Topic Escalation Guide, one from each heat level. Players who intend to ask the questions should bring their phones to use as timers. Divide your group into pairs and arrange the pairs into a circle so that there is an inner circle and an outer circle. Ask your heat level zero question and give each pair 5 minutes to discuss. When the 5 minutes are over, ask the players in the inner circle to rotate to the outer-circle player to their right. Then ask your heat level 1 question and give each pair 5 minutes to discuss. Repeat this process until all questions are asked. When finished, sit down with your group and have everyone talk about their experience. Great questions for the group to think about and discuss are: Did things get heated? Why did they get to that point? What did you do to de-escalate the conversation?
- To engage shy participants in the discussions, use these phrases and tips:
  - “I appreciate your comments, but I also would like to hear the opinions of others.”
  - “I’m going to listen to \_\_\_\_\_, and then I’ll come back to you.”<sup>10</sup>
  - “Give some students explicit opportunities to speak.”<sup>11</sup> Ask quiet students “closed questions” in order to lead them into the discussion and towards “more questions/contributions.”<sup>12</sup>
- Pay attention to non-verbal cues. For instance, if you see someone nodding, say: “I see you agree. Would you like to explain your opinion?” Or the other way around, “Am I right that you disagree with this statement? Why?”<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*

# What is a Heated Discussion Like?

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Often, heated discussion occurs because someone is reacting, not responding, to what's happening. It can be tough or ineffective to reason with a person who is reacting. A person with a high emotional temperature can disrupt a setting and derail the entire discussion.

If this happens in your organization, it is your responsibility as a leader to be equipped with the tools to calm a situation should this occur.

In individual encounters, the way to lower emotional temperatures is to respond directly to the emotion that the person is expressing and ask them to dig a little deeper into why they are feeling so intensely about the topic. You can pause discussion and ask those whose emotional temperatures are running particularly high why that might be and ask them to unpack their feelings a little bit more. This can help to return the focus to the topic and away from the intense emotional experience of those heating up the conversation. Unfortunately, this is difficult to manage in a group setting, so it is much better practice to continually monitor the discussion and to step in to modulate the proceedings at the first sign of rising temperatures.

## Signs that the emotional temperature of a discussion is heating up:

- Students begin to look uncomfortable when others are speaking.
- Discussants begin employing emotional argument strategies, such as *ad hominem* attacks or insults. For definitions and examples of logical fallacies to avoid in Let's Talk discussions, like *ad hominem*, see our [“Think Clearly, Speak Clearly” guide](#).
- Arguments become aggressive or defensive.
- Students attempt to speak over each other.
- Discussants begin to raise their voices.
- The room begins to feel combative, as though there are two “teams” engaging in discussion with the goal of “defeating” the other side.
- Evidence of failure to maintain “good faith” discussion and a growth of “bad faith” tactics.

## MANAGING EMOTIONAL TEMPERATURE

When people feel threatened, their defense mechanisms kick in and they may become resistant to civil discourse. This often happens in heated conversation if one person feels outmatched, embarrassed, or unable to defend themselves. When people become frustrated and upset, they may lash out at others. A spike in emotional temperature draws out irrational passions rather than reason.

**Let's Talk leaders are responsible for maintaining a speech climate conducive to productive discourse.** Overheated emotions can undermine effective discussion in your group. As a discourse group leader, it's important to remain attentive to students' emotional temperatures and to actively intervene when a controversial discussion heats up, if necessary.

Members must avoid launching personal attacks during a debate; however, it can still be hard not to take some things personally. Sometimes, even though the group may be engaged in a civil discussion without inappropriate personal attacks, a group member may still take things personally. This is why it's important to monitor the group climate for signs that an emotionally-reactive member or several are becoming heated.

Not all group members will be ready for the same topics. Each member has their own readiness level and there are some "hot" topics that are sensitive even for the most mature members. Some individuals might have personal backgrounds that make certain topics very uncomfortable for them. A group leader's goal should be to provide appropriate challenges with appropriate levels of support.

**In order to help manage the emotional temperature, here are some open-ended questions and turns of phrase that may help drive the conversation in a different direction:**

- "Why do you think that?"
- "Have you considered...?"
- "Do you have a source that will teach me more about that perspective?"
- "I wonder what you think about the idea that..."
- "I read an article with a different view. The author said..." "I read an article with a different view. The author said..."
- "Not everyone agrees; for instance, so-and-so thinks..."



***A group leader's goal should be to provide appropriate challenges with appropriate levels of support.***



**You can also make these neutral statements to help cool the emotional temperature in the room:**

- “Hmm...that's an interesting idea.”
- “That’s been getting a lot of attention lately, huh?”
- “I might have to give that some thought.”
- “I hear you.”
- “I never heard that before”
- “I’m not sure I agree with you, but you’ve given me something to think about.”

Remember that you and those around you are engaging in an opportunity to understand each other better. Sometimes all it takes is a few words to remind everyone of that fact.

**Facilitators can intervene when members are being uncivil by altering the conversation:**

- “I’m sensing a lot of tension in the room. Is there a better way we can address the question at hand?”
- “Though it is important to be able to convey emotion in our arguments, we should remain conscious of the ways in which we address other members of the room.”
- “Let’s remember that it is not our goal to target any members of the discussion. Disagreement does not require alienation.”
- Pausing the discussion and saying, “Everyone will get a chance to speak” or “let’s let everyone offer their view” because students may get frustrated by a dominant speaker.
- If the conversation becomes tense, the facilitator can ask members to take a 5 minute water break. This allows for participants to calm their minds.
- At any point when discussion is losing its civility, facilitators can reiterate the commitment to productive and healthy discourse found in the “Expectations Sheet for Members,” section of the [Let’s Talk: Start Up Guide](#).

# Hot or Not: Is Your Conversation Heating Up?

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## LEVEL MARKERS:

### Heat Level 0

Topic questions designed to encourage participants in a Discourse Group meeting to get to know each other and to learn why their peers decided to attend a discourse meeting. This level of questions allows participants to reach a comfort level with each other before diving into potentially controversial and tense topics of discussion.

- *Examples: share goals for the discourse meeting and reasons for attending the meeting, discuss feelings about the state of civil discourse at your school.*

### Heat Level 🍊

A topic that causes minimal sensitivity but still provokes debate.

- *Examples: pop culture, the definition of freedom, meeting attendees' thoughts about the importance of civil discourse.*

### Heat Level 🍊🍊

A topic that invokes slight sensitivity and emotional investment.

- *Examples: university fund allocations, environmental issues, hate speech, privacy and the government, healthcare.*

### Heat Level 🍊🍊🍊

A topic that causes great sensitivity, possible emotional discomfort through disagreement

- *Examples: immigration, racial injustice, criminal justice.*

# Hot or Not: Is Your Conversation Heating Up?

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## Checklist for moving the heat level

If the students in your discourse group appear to consistently maintain a “good faith” attitude, it’s time to advance to the next heat level! If the discussion devolves from a “good faith argument” to a “bad faith argument,” it is time to reduce the heat level and diffuse some of that hostile energy. Remember to pay attention to the participants’ emotional temperatures.

## Signs your group is ready to move up a heat level:

- Discussion is civil, remaining in bounds of “Good Faith Argument” criteria.
- Differing opinions are being shared.

## Signs your group needs to go back a heat level:

- Your group needs to go back a level if you sense emotional temperatures spiking and civil discourse devolving. When you see this happening, the group could be heading into a “Bad Faith Argument” situation which will likely degrade the discussion and make the experience very unpleasant for everyone.

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***Remember to pay attention to the participants’ emotional temperatures.***

”

## EXAMPLE TOPIC QUESTIONS:

### Heat Level 0

1. Why are you at this civil discourse group meeting? What do you hope to gain by participating? Discuss your goals.
2. Are you generally happy with the current state of civil discourse at your school? If you are happy, how do you think the value of civil discourse is most effectively maintained on your campus? If not, how do you think the state of civil discourse could improve?
3. Can you think of one issue on which your views have significantly changed over time? What was that? Why did your views change?

### Heat Level 🌶️

1. In what situations do you feel as though you are exercising “freedom?” What does freedom mean to you?
2. Should the United Nations have more power to enforce its policy?
3. Should the government institute a “carbon tax?”
4. Should beverages be taxed based on sugar content?
5. Is civil discourse vital to democracy?
6. Does voting make a difference? What criteria do you consider when you vote?
7. Is Taylor Swift’s *Red*, a pop or a country album?

### Heat Level 🌶️🌶️

1. How does a leader most effectively achieve political reform? If you were President of the United States, for example, what issue would be first on your agenda? And how would you go about achieving your goals in that area?
2. Describe a moment in this country's history in which you believe it lived up to its best ideals. What are those ideals, in your opinion?
3. Describe a moment in this country's history in which you do not believe it lived up to its best values. How do you think the country could have succeeded at this moment?
4. What does it mean to be a good leader? How do you know when a leader is effective and deserving of respect?
5. Should the U.S. offer free public university education?
6. Are there cultural customs that we should preserve?
7. Should the U.S. adopt English as its official language?
8. How paternalistic should the U.S. government be? Why? When should the U.S. government intervene in the daily lives of Americans? Why? Is the government solely tasked with preserving the life, liberty, and property of its citizens — or is it tasked with something more? Why?
9. Should states fund “school-choice” programs? If so, why?
10. Are wealthy people morally obligated to participate in philanthropy? Should the government tell the wealthy how to spend their money?
11. Is there a tension between personal freedoms and equality?
12. Should illegal drugs be legalized? If so, which ones should be legalized and which, if any, should remain illegal?
13. Has journalism in the 21st century lost sight of tolerant, constructive discussion of controversial issues? And if it has, how might the industry return to the value of civil discourse, if indeed, you agree that it should?
14. Should the United States build ties with countries like China and Russia or break them down?
15. Should the U.S. eliminate mandatory minimum sentences?
16. Do you feel clearly aligned with a particular political party? Or are you more conflicted? Why do you think you align or do not align? Discuss.



### Heat Level 🌶️🌶️🌶️

1. Are racial jokes acceptable in comedy?
2. Is the nuclear family a thing of the past? Should it be?
3. Is healthcare a universal human right?
4. Is the death penalty ever an appropriate punishment?
5. Should nations build walls or barriers along their borders? Or should the world progress towards a future of open borders?
6. Should hate speech be considered free speech?
7. Is a two-state solution a reasonable resolution to the Israel-Palestine conflict?
8. Does “cancel culture” exist? Is it good or bad?
9. Should the U.S. end qualified immunity?
10. Should sex work be legalized?
11. Is owning an automatic weapon morally justifiable?
12. Do the harms of patriotism outweigh the benefits?
13. Is the Paris Agreement relevant anymore? Did the U.S. make the right or wrong decision in leaving the Agreement?
14. Should Critical Race Theory be mandatory teaching in U.S. public high schools?
15. Can police officers using deadly force ever be justified? Why or why not?
16. Should the U.S. abolish the electoral college? If so, what would the ideal replacement be? Should there be a replacement at all?

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## How FIRE can help

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We are counting on you to help cultivate a culture of free speech on your campus! FIRE is here to provide guidance and resources. We have a team of experts at your disposal who can help decode and demystify your school's policies, help you talk to administrators, and offer advice on tricky free speech questions. Additionally, we can send guides, literature, speakers, and FIRE materials. Please do not hesitate to contact us with questions. We are here to help!