

Quick Guide: Inclusive Online Discussions

Whether sharing ideas in a comment thread, an online forum, or an email chain, it is important to communicate inclusively. Following the inclusive guidelines below helps people to hear your ideas more clearly and allows them to feel comfortable responding.

Abide by Common Commenting Standards. Commenting standards allow people to engage in informed debate on difficult topics, without creating hostility. Typical standards include no name calling, no personal attacks, no obscenity, no vulgarity, and no SHOUTINGⁱ.

Stay on Topic. When engaging in online discussion, be sure to focus on the issue at hand. Staying on topic helps us avoid insulting others or bringing up past issues that aren't relevant to the current one. Staying on topic allows everyone to focus and understand the issue at hand.

Using the best practices of professional writing can help you stay on topic: use topic sentences, only include as much detail as necessary, and be succinct.

Provide Evidence. Back statements with evidence and sources, this will help others understand your thought processⁱⁱ.

Express Yourself without Blaming. When we have a personal or emotional connection to a topic, it is especially important to express ourselves in a way that works toward *mutual understanding*. One technique is to use non-violent communication (NVC), which emphasizes our own responsibility for our feelings rather than placing blame. To practice NVC:

1. **State Observations:** Without any judgment, observe what is happening that you like or dislike. These observations should include only what you can see or hear, not how you interpret it (“When I saw...”).
2. **State Feelings:** Say how you feel when you observe this action (“I felt...”).
3. **State Needs:** State the important needs you have that are connected to those feelings (“because my need for X isn't met”).
4. **Make Requests:** Make a specific request that might help attend to those needs (“Would you be willing to...”)ⁱⁱⁱ.

(Modified slightly from [Non-violent Communication: How to Use it at Work](#), 2021, which is a good place to go if you want to see some examples)

Push Back Politely. When a statement is made that lacks evidence or seems inconsistent, be open to understanding and politely ask for more evidence or point out inconsistencies that you see.^{iv} Example sentence starters include^v:

- “I'm curious and I want some clarity on X.”
- “Could you share what led to this conclusion to help me understand your perspective?”
- “I'd like to see the data to understand . . .”
- “Could you point to a specific example or occasion?”
- “Let's clarify expectations so we can get on the same page.”
- “I hear your concerns on X. Perhaps we could find a compromise with Y?”

(Sentence starters from [Non-violent Communication: How to Use it at Work](#), 2021)

Acknowledge Mistakes. If you failed to abide by the guidelines or believe that you have caused damage unintentionally, acknowledge your mistakes. This is a brave practice that promotes civil discourse and accountability.

Speak up for Civility. Pledge to speak up when you read or hear name-calling or stereotyping. As leaders in our fields and role models to our students, it's important that we model good citizenship^{vi}.

References

ⁱ "Comments," Help, accessed August 22, 2021, <https://help.nytimes.com/hc/en-us/articles/115014792387-Comments>.

ⁱⁱ Katherine Schulten, Michael Gonchar, and Caroline Crosson Gilpin, "Ideas for Productive Discussion: Reflections on Our Civil Conversation Challenge," *The New York Times*, December 15, 2016, sec. The Learning Network, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/15/learning/lesson-plans/ideas-for-productive-discussion-reflections-on-our-civil-conversation-challenge.html>.

ⁱⁱⁱ "What Is Nonviolent Communication and How Can It Benefit You at Work?," Nonviolent Communication: How to Use it at Work | Grammarly Blog, March 17, 2021, <https://www.grammarly.com/blog/nonviolent-communication/>.

^{iv} Schulten, Gonchar, and Gilpin, "Ideas for Productive Discussion."

^v "What Is Nonviolent Communication and How Can It Benefit You at Work?," Nonviolent Communication: How to Use it at Work | Grammarly Blog, March 17, 2021, <https://www.grammarly.com/blog/nonviolent-communication/>.

^{vi} Katherine Schulten, "Talking Across Divides: 10 Ways to Encourage Civil Classroom Conversation On Difficult Issues," *The New York Times*, September 29, 2016, sec. The Learning Network, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/28/learning/lesson-plans/talking-across-divides-10-ways-to-encourage-civil-classroom-conversation-on-difficult-issues.html>.