Classroom discourse and discussion are crucial sites for student development: they can help students develop the ability to be critical thinkers. Discussion can also help build students’ confidence in their own abilities to construct arguments and to understand the arguments of others.

Nevertheless, classroom talk and discussion can be challenging. Teachers who tend to have success with classroom discourse and discussion usually have worked out dependable ways to make sure that the discourse is respectful, equitable, and focused on reasoning. Some teachers also say that it’s useful to set up explicit norms for making sure that everyone can see and hear what is being discussed.

Teachers who have success with classroom discussion and debate say that it’s important to start early. They make sure to set up norms for productive discussion within the first week or so of school.

What is included in setting up norms for discussion?

In setting up norms, you will be letting your students know about how talk and discussion will play a role in their learning during the coming year. You are setting up expectations, so your students need to understand those expectations.

Depending on the ages and stages of your students, it is most helpful if you can enlist their participation in co-constructing those expectations. So, the discussions you have about these four kinds of norms may be spread out over the first three or four weeks of school.

This document was prepared by Cathy O’Connor (Boston University), Erin Ruegg, Cara Cassell. Adapted from materials originally prepared for SERP.
Talk that is focused on student **reasoning**

For many students, talking about their own reasoning is not a familiar and comfortable activity. Every day, you will be asking them why they made a particular claim or how they came up with a particular answer. For many students, such questions may be a signal that they have given a wrong answer.

So it takes intentional work to set up a classroom culture where talk is about reasoning, and wrong answers are a welcome opportunity for exploration.

Have a discussion with your students in which you explain your expectations for talk about reasoning and invite their questions.

Prepare them by telling them the kinds of talk moves you may use. For example, you might say to them, “I might ask you, ‘Why do you think that?’” You might even try it out and ask them how it makes them feel. Do they feel like you are telling them they are wrong? This gives you a chance to explain why this is a useful and positive kind of interaction—not a sign that they are wrong. You can explain why it’s important to share their reasoning.

You might say, “If I don’t understand you, I might say, ‘Can you say more about that?’” Explain that they are welcome to use these same questions. Help them practice how they might ask for clarification or ask for more information. Many students are not used to doing this, and explicit talk about it can help.

It can help to talk about why you will be asking them to say more or to rephrase what someone else has said. (“Sometimes, if you say something interesting and useful, I might ask other students if they can put it into their own words. This will help us make sure that everyone heard it and understood it.”) Talk about the benefits for their own learning and understanding. Ask them if they can think of benefits for the talk moves you are introducing. Remind them that other students can learn from what they say. In these discussions, you are building a culture of reasoning that will motivate your students.

Talk that is **respectful**

As students are learning about and discussing new ideas and material, they will use everyday, informal language. That is fine. But they may also slip into joking, aggressive or disrespectful language as they talk informally. This is not okay: if other students fear that their contributions will be mocked, even in subtle ways, they will not participate. So, how do you get all of your students to be aware of this complex issue?

Have a discussion with your students in which you ask them about what might keep a student from participating in a discussion. Explore with them the ways that people can feel put down or negatively challenged when they express an idea. They may or may not feel comfortable talking about what bothers them, so you can put it in terms of what others might feel. What are some things that other people might be bothered by? How can we avoid those? And what do we do if someone makes a critical remark or says something disrespectful?

Explain that, when we talk about complex issues, people can disagree. Disagreements can be a source of conflict, even when we are simply talking about our reasoning about a math problem. When students may be discussing important and even contentious issues, it is critical to anticipate what we should do when we disagree.

Explore with them ways that people can feel positively engaged, even when they disagree. Ask them to help you come up with rules that you can all agree to that will keep the talk respectful, productive, and welcoming.

It is often helpful to brainstorm ways that class members can actively disagree without using inflammatory language. One teacher told us that her 4th grade students came up with the phrase “I respectfully challenge what Kayla said” as an alternative to “I disagree with Kayla.” This enabled them to continue talking about academic content in an engaged way without triggering conflict. You may be able to come up with even better ways, working with your students to find the language that suits them.
Talk that is **equitable**

Every classroom has at least a few students who are academically oriented and who like to respond to teacher questions. It can be tempting to rely on these students: they want to respond to your questions! If you do this consistently though, these students may start to expect that they should be the ones you call on first. Also, every other student may infer that classroom discussion is ‘not about them.’ They may even conclude that they are ‘off duty’ during discussions. Over time, this will have a negative impact on your ability to orchestrate productive discussion and debate.

While not every student has to talk during every discussion, it should be clear to your students that you welcome and expect participation from everyone. As you introduce your norms, have a discussion with your students about this issue. Ask them about ways to make sure that everyone feels welcome in the conversation. As you talk about this, you are building a classroom culture of inclusion.

As you build inclusion and equitable participation, your norms about student reasoning can help. If you succeed in getting students to see that productive talk is not about getting the right answer or guessing what the teacher is thinking, you will be building a classroom where wrong answers are viewed as potentially productive. Wrong answers or doubts or puzzlement are all part of productive discussions. As your discussions shift from “getting the right answer” to “thinking more deeply about the question,” more students will see a place for themselves as participants.

There are a variety of ways that teachers try to include a wide range of students, not just sticking to the few students who always have their hands up. Some teachers alternate calling on boys and girls. Others allow students who have made a contribution to a conversation to call on the next speaker themselves. Some believe that it is helpful to sometimes use popsicle sticks or strips of paper with student names to bring a random factor into play. (Relying on these random devices during substantive discussions is not always helpful, however, because students who want to contribute and who may have useful things to add may not have any way to get into the conversation.)

Expectations as part of the **environment**

Students must understand the expectations you have of them in order to interact productively in a discussion. Many teachers develop consensus statements that reflect respectful discourse and equitable participation. As discussion skills are developed throughout the year, the classroom norms we’ve talked about here can be used as reflection tools.

Below is an example of materials made by teachers in collaboration with their students, co-creating discussion norms for their classrooms.

One way to introduce your own “Green Sheet” into your classroom is to have a discussion about the rights and obligations listed here or any others you prefer. You and your students may agree that these are a good starting point but may want to add more rights and/or more obligations. You may want to change the wording or add examples. A key part of using these norms involves getting students to feel ownership of them.

After you begin having regular academic conversations, you can use whatever norms materials you have agreed upon to reflect on your conversations. At the end of a discussion, even if it is just 5 or 10 minutes, take a minute to reflect. “How did we do today in this conversation? Did we make good use of our rights? Did we honor our responsibilities? What change, if any, might we want to make to our norms?”

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**Student Rights:**

1. You have the right to ask questions.
2. You have the right to be treated respectfully.
3. You have the right to have your ideas discussed, not you personally.

**Student Responsibilities:**

1. You must speak loudly enough for others to hear.
2. If you cannot hear or understand what someone says, you must ask him or her to say it again.
3. You are expected to agree or disagree (and explain why) in response to other people’s ideas.

The “green sheet” is a set of norms created by Gina Lally and her sixth grade students in Chelsea, MA. It includes both rights and responsibilities of students in classroom discussion.