

Helpful phrases to use in practicing civil discussions

Polite ways to introduce a different idea into a conversation:

- “Have you considered...?”
- “It’s been suggested that...”
- “Some people say...”
- “What do you think about the view that...?”
- “Not everyone agrees; for instance, so-and-so thinks...”
- “I read an article with a different view. The author said...”
- “I wonder what you think about the idea that....”
- “It seems to me that....”
- “I may not be right, but what about the possibility that...”

These are polite ways of introducing a different or controversial view without openly disagreeing.

Noncommittal comments when you don't agree with the other person but don't want to argue:

- “I’m not sure.”
- “Hmm...that’s interesting idea.”
- “Why do you think that?”
- “That’s been getting a lot of attention lately, huh?”
- “I might have to give that some thought.”
- “Gee, I don’t know.”
- Nod your head
- “Ahh. Hmmm. Uh huh.”
- “I see.”
- “I see what you’re saying.”
- “Yes. Yes.” (This does not mean you agree.)
- “I hear you.”
- “My!”
- “You don’t say.”
- “Indeed.”
- “Got it.”
- “Oh really?”
- Just nod a lot.
- “OK.”

- “Mmm. Good point.”
- “Oh.”
- “Oh?”
- “You may have a point there.”
- “I didn’t know that.”
- “That’s interesting.”
- “Ah.”
- “That’s an interesting point.”
- “I never heard that before”
- “I’m not sure I agree with you, but you’ve given me something to think about.”
- “Thank you for telling me that.”
- Silence

These neutral non-statements are vague with a purpose. None of them constitute actual agreement, but they are generally perceived like agreement, so the other party is unlikely to be offended.

If a conversation becomes emotional, heated or aggressive, you could try:

Ways to politely handle a conversation turning un-civil:

- Stay calm and look for a chance to change the subject.
- Say, “Oh, I’m sorry, but I don’t like talking about [politics, religion, whatever...]”
- Say, “This seems like a tender subject. We don’t have to talk about it.”
- “I don’t know much about this. I should read more about it.”
- “I don’t really have a strong opinion on that.”
- “I can see you’re really concerned about this issue.”
- “Not that again! We just discussed this yesterday/ in class, [wherever].”
- Try to make a light joke of it, to defuse the tension. Introduce a new topic.

Examples of rudeness that should be considered Instant Conversation-Enders:

- Personal Insults

- Name calling, including any that end in -ist or -phobe
- Acts of Condescension
- Derision
- Shouting and other aggressive acts of intimidation
- Disdainful Remarks
- Cursing at you
- Loaded Sarcasm
- Personal Ridicule
- Personal attacks
- Telling you to “Be Quiet!” or, worse, “Shut up!”
- Eye rolling or other degrading expressions
- Rude noises or scoffing sounds aimed at you or your comments
- Attempts at intimidation, such as ganging up on you, raising their voice, shouting at you, crowding you, towering over you, or pointing their finger aggressively in your face.

How to Confront un-civil conversational behavior.

Stay calm and stay classy; DO NOT—repeat—DO NOT yield to the strong temptation to insult them back.

When you adopt their bad behavior, they’ve just dragged you down to their level, which implies that you were at a higher level before, but now you’re not.

Confronting means to name precisely the behavior they just did that you find unacceptable. That’s all. They get to choose how to respond to this information. I don’t really recommend this with a highly aggressive person, because they could fly off the handle completely and it’s hard to predict what such a person might do, but if you want to confront, here is what it would sound like,

Examples of ways to confront bad conversational behavior:

- “I see no need to raise your voice.”
- “Please stop yelling at me.
- “I don’t like being called names. There. You did it again.”
- “You’re insulting me. I wouldn’t treat you that way.”
- “You’re making fun of me. That’s very unkind.”

- “You’re rolling your eyes at me when I speak. I don’t appreciate that.”
- “You seem a little upset right now.”

Did they apologize or at least adjust their tone? If yes, then this conversation may yet survive. If not, then they have violated Good Faith and you should feel justified in terminating the discussion swiftly, as it has become unproductive and uncivil.

Some ways to Halt an unpleasant conversation:

- Just turn and walk away without saying anything (Best used with strangers.)
- Say “Excuse Me” and turn and walk away with no other explanation.
- Make up a phony excuse to leave.
- Say, “Great talking with you. Thanks! I learned a lot.” Leave.
- Simply say, “I’ve gotta go” and walk away.
- Look at the time and say, “I’m late. Bye” and walk away.
- Point to someone else and say, “Oh Look! It’s [whoever!]” and head in their direction.
- Say, “OK. Time to go! Have a nice day.”
- Say, “Whoops! My phone is ringing! I gotta take this”
- “I have to run. I’m late for [class. the dentist. a test. *anything.*]”

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 manners and respect, even if they don’t respond in kind, you increase the odds of having a positive encounter with them in the future.